

*Bloom's  
Shakespeare Through the Ages*



Hamlet

*Edited and with an introduction by  
Harold Bloom*

*Volume Editor: Brett Foster*

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*Bloom's Shakespeare Through the Ages*

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# HAMLET

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*Edited and with an introduction by*  
**Harold Bloom**  
Sterling Professor of the Humanities  
Yale University

*Volume Editor*  
Brett Foster

## **Bloom's Shakespeare Through the Ages: Hamlet**

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Bloom's Literary Criticism  
An imprint of Infobase Publishing  
132 West 31st Street  
New York NY 10001

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Hamlet / edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom.

p. cm. — (Bloom's Shakespeare through the ages)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7910-9592-8 (hc : alk. paper) 1. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616. Hamlet. 2. Hamlet (Legendary character) 3. Tragedy. I. Bloom, Harold.

PR2807.H2623725 2008

822.3'3—dc22

2007050853

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You can find Bloom's Literary Criticism on the World Wide Web at <http://www.chelseahouse.com>.

Series design by Erika K. Arroyo  
Cover design by Ben Peterson  
Cover photo © The Granger Collection, New York

Printed in the United States of America

Bang EJB 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

All links and Web addresses were checked and verified to be correct at the time of publication. Because of the dynamic nature of the Web, some addresses and links may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid.

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# SERIES INTRODUCTION



Shakespeare Through the Ages presents not the most current of Shakespeare criticism, but the best of Shakespeare criticism, from the seventeenth century to today. In the process, each volume also charts the flow over time of critical discussion of a particular play. Other useful and fascinating collections of historical Shakespearean criticism exist, but no collection that we know of contains such a range of commentary on each of Shakespeare's greatest plays and at the same time emphasizes the greatest critics in our literary tradition: from John Dryden in the seventeenth century, to Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century, to William Hazlitt and Samuel Coleridge in the nineteenth century, to A.C. Bradley and William Empson in the twentieth century, to the most perceptive critics of our own day. This canon of Shakespearean criticism emphasizes aesthetic rather than political or social analysis.

Some of the pieces included here are full-length essays; others are excerpts designed to present a key point. Much (but not all) of the earliest criticism consists only of brief mentions of specific plays. In addition to the classics of criticism, some pieces of mainly historical importance have been included, often to provide background for important reactions from future critics.

These volumes are intended for students, particularly those just beginning their explorations of Shakespeare. We have therefore also included basic materials designed to provide a solid grounding in each play: a biography of Shakespeare, a synopsis of the play, a list of characters, and an explication of key passages. In addition, each selection of the criticism of a particular century begins with an introductory essay discussing the general nature of that century's commentary and the particular issues and controversies addressed by critics presented in the volume.

Shakespeare was "not of an age, but for all time," but much Shakespeare criticism is decidedly for its own age, of lasting importance only to the scholar who wrote it. Students today read the criticism most readily available to them, which means essays printed in recent books and journals, especially those journals made available on the Internet. Older criticism is too often buried in out-of-print books on forgotten shelves of libraries or in defunct periodicals. Therefore, many

students, particularly younger students, have no way of knowing that some of the most profound criticism of Shakespeare's plays was written decades or centuries ago. We hope this series remedies that problem, and more importantly, we hope it infuses students with the enthusiasm of the critics in these volumes for the beauty and power of Shakespeare's plays.

# INTRODUCTION BY HAROLD BLOOM



## 1

We read to reflect, and to be reflected. Many, if not most of us, can see something of the self reflected in the mirror that Shakespeare supposedly holds up to nature. Oscar Wilde rightly rejected that notion, wittily asserting that it proved Hamlet's madness as a critic. As Wilde knew well, Hamlet is only mad north-northwest; the wind that blows upon him is mostly from the south.

Having written a rather long book on *Genius*, followed by a short one on *Hamlet*, I intend here to work through some of the relations between reading and reflection by invoking the genius of Hamlet, meaning both prince and play. I mean "reflection" in Dr. Johnson's double sense of the word: a mirror is held up to nature, and then the image in the mirror returns us to the mind's meditation upon itself in relation to that image. Johnson gives us a paradigm for self-consciousness, for critical thinking about the thinking that takes place in a play, poem, novel or story.

Genius, for Johnson, manifests itself by invention, and the test for authentic genius becomes the power of original invention. Johnson praised the tragedy of Hamlet for its "variety," but otherwise he did not single it out for its uniqueness. Something about it, I surmise, made the great critic uneasy. Unlike so many of us, he did not fall in love with Prince Hamlet.

The Tragedy of the Prince of Denmark did not assume its centrality in Shakespeare's work until the Age of Romanticism, first in Britain, then in Germany, belatedly in France. To a remarkable degree, the Romantic image of Hamlet in the graveyard contemplating the skull of Yorick fostered the revival of the cult of Genius in the later Eighteenth century. When the critic William Hazlitt remarked: "It is we who are Hamlet," he completed a movement of sensibility that already had centered upon Shakespeare's most enigmatic protagonist. The Hazlittian contention that Hamlet is Everyman is dialectical, since the Black Prince's enormous consciousness, the widest in literature, also makes him the antithesis of everyman, just as Don Quixote is at once universal and extraordinarily idiosyncratic.

If Dr. Johnson granted to Hamlet's play the praise of variety, August von Schlegel in 1809 first noted that: "Hamlet has no firm belief either in himself or in anything else." Even Coleridge was mystified by the play, which is of no genre, and which breaks all the fundamental rules of stage presentation. We ought to give Victor Hugo the credit for first saying how unbounded the play is. The general judgment is that Victor Hugo's book on Shakespeare is primarily about Victor Hugo, but let us recall Oscar Wilde's observation that criticism is the only civilized form of autobiography. How accurate Hugo is when he writes of "Hamlet, the appalling, the unaccountable, complete in incompleteness: all, in order to be nothing." Swinburne went beyond Hugo in his own study of Shakespeare by finding in Prince Hamlet "the strong conflux of contending forces." For once, Freud regressed in attempting to fasten the Oedipus Complex upon Hamlet: it will not stick, and merely showed that Freud did better than T. S. Eliot, who preferred *Coriolanus* to *Hamlet*, or so he said. Who can believe Eliot, when he exposes his own Hamlet Complex by declaring the play to be an aesthetic failure? James Joyce did far better in the Library Scene of *Ulysses*, where Stephen marvelously credits Shakespeare, in this play, with universal fatherhood while accurately implying that Hamlet is fatherless, thus opening a pragmatic gap between Shakespeare and Hamlet.

Hamlet is unfathered because his play is of no genre, and as a drama rebels against Shakespeare himself. Doubtless, Shakespeare invested much of his pride and affection in Hamlet, but the Prince is ungrateful, resents the play he dominates, and has no particular affection for Shakespeare. Though we see Hamlet attired in the black of mourning, it is wholly questionable whether his grief is ever for his father, or whether his jealousy has much to do with his mother. The play's subject massively is neither mourning for the dead nor revenge upon the living. All that matters is Hamlet's consciousness: infinite, unlimited, and at war with itself. Something crucial in Hamlet has died well before the play opens. Foregrounding the play and its protagonist will take us back to the only vital relationship that Hamlet has had or could have, with the foster fatherhood of Yorick, King Hamlet's jester, who died when the Prince was seven. The grief the child then felt we can only surmise, but the play's most important scene, Hamlet's battle-of-wits with the Gravedigger, allows such surmise most of the *materia poetica* it requires.

The enormous subject of the play is the meaning of self-consciousness, and the transcendence of play-acting that produced the Hamlet of Act V, whose consciousness is so drastically purged of self. More even than *King Lear*, Hamlet's play turns into a cosmological drama, which is what the Prince demands and requires, but which Shakespeare is reluctant to grant him. Hamlet is not the only Shakespearean protagonist who dwarfs his own role in the play: Shylock, Falstaff, Malvolio, Iago, and Cleopatra all are hobgoblins who run off with the garland of Apollo. Though I love Falstaff best, I acknowledge, with some

melancholy, that even Falstaff is not quite as transcendent as Hamlet, but then I cheer up when I remember that Falstaff is immanence itself, pure being. Moved into the same drama, Falstaff would have tried to replace Hal with Hamlet, to little avail. In the combat of wit, Falstaff would have held his own, but there is no love left in Hamlet, once Yorick is dead.

Both Old Formalists and New Resenters are glad to run me out of the academy for judging Hamlet and Falstaff to be more real than they are, but I intend a precise distinction by that. None of us embodies how meaning gets started, rather than repeated. Hamlet and Falstaff are instances of how fresh meaning gets started, through excess, overflow, and florabundance. Stated more bluntly, Hamlet and Falstaff are geniuses. By “genius” I mean what I have surveyed recently in a large book, *Genius: A Mosaic of 100 Exemplary Creative Minds*. A literary genius is tested by her or his ability to expand our consciousness without deforming it. Falstaff’s genius is in the Oral Tradition: he is the ribald Socrates of Eastcheap. Hamlet’s genius is yet more unique: he is the only literary-dramatic character who can be said to possess and manifest an authorial consciousness all his own, one not to be confused with Shakespeare’s. Perhaps all that Hamlet truly has in common with Shakespeare is that their mutually scandalous intellectual brilliance is so obscured by their deviousness.

Hamlet, character and play, has so many literary descendants, from Goethe through Samuel Beckett, that the choice of what came after always has a touch of the arbitrary. It is best to employ the most magnificent, Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost*, a Shakespearean figure who at first seems more clearly to come out of Iago and Macbeth than to be quarried from Hamlet. To Iago, Satan owes his starting point, the Sense of Injured Merit of having been passed over, whether for Cassio or for the Son of God. Macbeth sets the pattern for Satan’s trafficking with the abyss of the night-world. A boy of eight when Shakespeare died, Milton as a young man actually contemplated writing another *Macbeth*, but then thought better of it. In the Satan of *Paradise Lost*, Milton (knowingly, I would think) portrayed a second Hamlet, a very dangerous enterprise even for the strongest poet in the language, after Shakespeare and Chaucer.

In the tentative overtures of the Trinity manuscript, Milton sketches a tragedy, not an epic: *Adam Unparadised*, not *Paradise Lost*. At what is now the start of Book IV of the epic, Satan stands on Mount Niphates and speaks his last greatness in the poem. Milton’s nephew, who worked with him, tells us that his speech would have begun *Adam Unparadised*. Neil Forsyth, in his just-published *The Satanic Epic*, emphasizes Shakespeare’s ambivalence towards Brutus in *Julius Caesar* as an influence upon Milton’s ambivalence towards Satan. Forsyth thinks that Shakespeare was similarly ambivalent towards Hamlet, but Brutus is a dwarf of disintegration when compared to the brilliance and charisma of Hamlet. If *Paradise Lost*, from Satan’s perspective, is revenge tragedy, then the play of *Hamlet* is not, since inwardness is far deeper in the Prince of Denmark

than it is in Satan. The non-genre of “poem unlimited” renders Hamlet an even more cosmological agonist than Satan ever can be. Hamlet is not a Satan: damnation is not his fate. He is neither Lutheran nor Calvinist (nor Catholic for that matter) even though he attends the Lutheran university of Wittenberg. His infinite inwardness is more radical than is the Augustinian self as preached by Luther and Calvin. Satan’s wounded consciousness is more Hamletian than Protestant, and Hamlet is his own theologian as he is his own psychologist.

Satan’s soliloquies would not be possible without Hamlet’s innovations in his seven soliloquies. And yet Milton uneasily pulls back from his paradigm: we are never given the crucial moment of transition when Lucifer, the morning-star, fades into Satan. Hamlet, far more radically self-reliant than Luther or Calvin, transcends Augustinianism and leaps past his Romantic inheritors, Goethe and Emerson, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. The genius of Hamlet perhaps gets away from Shakespeare, as even Falstaff could not. Complete genius may be beyond representation, but unless Hamlet incarnates it, there could be no play. One can doubt that Shakespeare intended Hamlet to be unbound, and yet Hamlet breaks loose. The Prince does not want to be the protagonist of a revenge tragedy: he wants and needs to be in the cosmological openness of the drama *King Lear* or the play *Macbeth*, rather than the rotten miasma of Claudius’s Elsinore. Shakespeare will not grant Hamlet what he desires, and yet cannot control this most temperamentally capricious and preternaturally intelligent of all his creations.

Satan is not Milton’s own genius, though he would like to be, and Hamlet similarly is not Shakespeare’s genius. I cannot say whether Hamlet would wish such an identity. Shakespeare is in Hamlet’s drama as the father’s ghost and probably doubles as the Player King. In my short book, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, I proposed that a kind of civil war goes on in the text between Hamlet and his maker. Milton notoriously editorializes against his Satan, an authorial intervention that is a blot upon *Paradise Lost*. Shakespeare, perhaps dazzled by what he has wrought, reacts to Hamlet’s aggressivity by smashing the mimetic covenant in this most experimental of all plays, ever. From Act II, Scene 2 through Act III, Scene 2 there is no play but only a whirling dance of plays within plays, theatrical gossip, admonitions to the players, and the blandishments of non-existent plays, including the untitled one of the death of Priam and the weird play-in-progress *The Murder of Gonzago*, which Hamlet revives into his own *Mousetrap*, an outrageous skit. Hamlet’s revenge is upon Shakespeare, and Shakespeare buoyantly accepts the threat. Prince and play-botcher conduct a familiar quarrel, intimate and not wholly accessible to us.

I am aware how odd this sounds, but *Hamlet* the play is nothing but paradox. We rarely know when Hamlet is not acting-out a part he has devised for himself: if your intellect is limitless, how can you know when you are being sincere? In addition to all his other bewildering aspects, Hamlet knowingly is his own

best audience. He is dramatist, player, and auditor; Shakespeare is only the first two, and reasserts his dominance as author-director-stage designer in Act V, when Hamlet, after a sea-change, matures as death's ambassador to us. When Hamlet emerges as disinterested, Shakespeare resurrects as master in what again becomes his domain.

## 2

*Hamlet* and *Don Quixote*, play and novel, both carry Western representation to limits not since surpassed. And no other literary works themselves violate their own limits, as these two persist in doing. *Don Quixote* and Sancho Panza, in Part II of their saga are highly aware of being characters in Part I, and also of feeling slandered by the rival Part II written by an anonymous impostor. Hamlet does not experience freedom until he can separate his extraordinary self-consciousness, his status as the Western hero of consciousness, from his own passion for theatricality. Theatricalism and inwardness break from one another as Hamlet stands in the snow and watches the army of Fortinbras march off to an absurd battle for a plot of ground not large enough to bury all who will die disputing it.

Of Shakespeare's own inwardness we know absolutely nothing. Even in the Sonnets, he is careful to detach himself from his own sufferings and humiliations. Of Hamlet's inward self, we know as much as we are capable of absorbing. Freud said that all thinking needs to be emancipated from its sexual past. Obsessive thinking is what cannot be freed. Though Milton's Satan takes Hamlet for precursor, Hamlet is not an obsessive thinker, as Satan is. It may be that had Milton foregrounded Satan for us as the unfallen Lucifer, we would understand better the Satanic predicament.

Shakespeare is the greatest master of foregrounding or inference in Western literature. Hamlet is given a long foreground, as are Falstaff and Cleopatra, but Hamlet's is more solitary, and astonishingly divided against itself. Like Shakespeare, Hamlet seems informed by Montaigne. One might expect Hamlet to write essays in Montaigne's mode, instead of being an amateur dramatist, but Hamlet's genius is that of an improviser. Since Shakespeare is the most notorious of improvisers, as Ben Jonson tells us, this is one instance, at least, where Shakespeare risks some degree of self-portraiture. Like Shakespeare, Hamlet is copious and rapid in thought and in speech. Unlike Shakespeare, Hamlet is altogether too interested in death, which returns me to his foreground.

A central argument of my *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* was that we need to discard the common notion that the play is "about" Prince Hamlet's mourning for his dead father, or his outrage at his mother's lively sexuality. He may speak, at times, as though the double shock of his father's sudden death and his mother's remarriage has inaugurated as a radical change in him, but foregrounding allows us to infer that something central in Hamlet has died before the play opens. The



authentic originality of Shakespeare's play, its inventive genius, is that its prime subject is Hamlet's consciousness of his own consciousness, unlimited yet at war with itself. It makes sense to me to say that my friends and I are self-conscious, but I find it misleading to say that of Hamlet, because his consciousness always intends an object.

T. S. Eliot, in his unfortunate essay on *Hamlet*, allowed himself to sneer: "We should be thankful that Walter Pater did not fix his attention on this play." I myself have never found a better essay on *Measure for Measure* than Pater's and I wish that the marvelous "aesthetic critic" had left us something on *Hamlet*. Eliot, like his abhorred Freud, had a Hamlet Complex and so decided that: "The essential emotion of the play is the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother." Pater would not have made so feeble an interpretation, and I am happy to quote here his contrast between *Measure for Measure* and *Hamlet*:

*Measure for Measure* . . . is hardly less indicative than *Hamlet* of Shakespeare's reason, of his power of moral interpretation. It deals, not like *Hamlet* with the problems that beset one of exceptional temperament, but with mere human nature.

We, Pater included, are mere human nature: Hamlet's temperament is certainly exceptional, since its power of negation is overwhelming. Pater, who believed only in perception and sensation, is very close to Hamlet's skepticism, and to Montaigne's. Eliot, Christian long before he converted to the Church of England, was offended by Hamlet to the point where he described the Prince of Denmark as an adolescent. I have loathed Eliot's criticism my whole life long, but sympathize with him because his fear of Hamlet is accurate: Hamlet is more intelligent than we are, and very dangerous to know. The Hamlet Complex is a great burden: Oedipus is victimized by dramatic irony, but not Hamlet, who knows more than we do, his psychological acuity remains devastating. And, together with Falstaff, Hamlet pragmatically is Shakespeare's celebration of his own genius, of his emancipation from the influence of Marlowe. To phrase this differently, Hamlet's influence upon Shakespeare made everything possible in the plays to come. Shakespeare lavished all his intelligence upon Hamlet, and received as recompense the realization that his capacity for representation was unlimited. After Hamlet, inwardness could go no farther except into the madness of solipsism.

Hamlet taught Shakespeare what he also teaches us, which is that consciousness defines genius. Like Hamlet, Shakespeare exceeds us in consciousness, and where consciousness is unlimited, it grows impatient with mimesis. If we had adequate productions and performances of *Hamlet* (I myself have never seen one) we might understand better that the play transcends the imitation of an action and finds ways of representing thinking as such, thus inducting us into the possibilities of a

theater of the mind. Whether Ibsen and Chekhov, Pirandello and Beckett, have been adequate to the challenge of *Hamlet* remains uncertain.

### 3

You can make of the play, *Hamlet*, and of the protagonist pretty much what you will, whether you are playgoer or reader, critic or director, actor of ideologue. Push any stance or quest into it, and the drama will illuminate what you have brought with you, even if the work itself remains in darkness. The most accomplished actor I have attended in it was John Gielgud, scores of years ago, and I remember mostly how beautifully he articulated the hero's astonishing linguistic range, while slighting (perhaps the director's fault) the equally astonishing intelligence.

I have not given up all hope that a grand presentation of *Hamlet* will come along in my lifetime. The grandeur of *King Lear* seems to me to be unplayable in our cultural climate, yet *Hamlet* seems less unattainable. That may be because almost all of us seem to have an intimate relationship, if not with the play or the Prince, yet with our own idea of both, however unformed or mistaken as that idea may be. We need genius, in whatever form we can get it, and the play *Hamlet* frequently is what first comes to mind when we go searching to fulfill our need.

What is it that makes *Hamlet* the most central and universal of all Shakespeare's plays? I can get some help from A. C. Bradley's conclusion:

It was not that *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's greatest tragedy or most perfect work of art: it was that *Hamlet* most brings home to use at once the sense of the soul's infinity, and the sense of the doom which not only circumscribes that infinity but appears to be its offspring.

That is poignant, but a touch diffuse. I turn to my favorite Twentieth-century critic of Shakespeare, Harold Goddard:

If a Falstaffian Hal could have taught England to play in the common acceptation of the term, Hamlet could have taught Denmark to play in a deeper creative sense.

I am always moved by Goddard's Romantic idealism, but I am also aware that this neglects the dangerous element in Hamlet that makes him a killer. So I turn instead to Anne Barton, an admirably reliable critic:

Only in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* does the audience retain sympathy for the hero from beginning to end.

Pragmatically, she is accurate, but I wonder how else we could respond, since Hamlet speaks almost forty percent of the lines in the play, and is always the concern of everyone, even when he is offstage. He is antithetical to every man and every woman, since his charisma puts him beyond us, and yet he is a figure of dream and desire for many, if not most among us. I will attempt my own summing-up of our relation to Hamlet, to conclude this Introduction.

#### 4

Angus Fletcher, my favorite critic in my own generation, asks us to conjecture, with him, on the difficult subject of thinking in literature. For Fletcher, representing the thought in literary language involves an iconography of thinking, and not a theory of textuality or of linguistic adequacy. Refreshingly, Fletcher reminds us “that great works of literature require style and intelligence, which belong to an author.” Here is Fletcher on Shakespeare’s mastery of figurative language:

To the extent that ... Shakespeare speaks with streams and cataracts of poetic figures, the assumption seems to arise that thought is whatever can be put into language *somehow*.

No one else in Shakespeare speaks with streams and cataracts of poetic figures more strikingly than Hamlet does, and there does not appear to be anything whatsoever that Hamlet cannot put into language. And yet what is strangest in *Hamlet*, and so in Shakespeare, are the implicit and unanswered questions that remain superbly elliptical. Why does Hamlet return to Elsinore after the aborted sea voyage to England? Why does Shakespeare so insouciantly risk the dramatic continuity of his play by cutting so extraordinary a gap into mimesis from Act II, scene 2 through Act III, scene 2? Why does he provide the formidable Hamlet so mere an opponent as Claudius, hardly the “mighty opposite” the Prince of Denmark requires and wants? The answer is that Shakespeare after all, grudgingly does give Hamlet the cosmological drama that the protagonist demands of him. The play is sublimely large in its hero’s spirit, and the ellipses testify to the eminence of the work. Of Hamlet himself we must finally observe that his deepest desire is to come to an end of play acting, and to seek annihilation as the only way out of his labyrinth of inwardness.

The enigma of Hamlet is that so many of us are moved to identify with him, when he does not want or need such identification. And yet he urges Horatio to stay alive to tell the play’s story, lest the Prince bear a wounded name forever. Why does Hamlet still care? Why, after all, do we care whether our name will be remembered, and how? Hamlet, who questions everything, perhaps reminds us of the enormous cost were we to join him in his project.

# BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE was born in Stratford-on-Avon in April 1564 into a family of some prominence. His father, John Shakespeare, was a glover and merchant of leather goods who earned enough to marry Mary Arden, the daughter of his father's landlord, in 1557. John Shakespeare was a prominent citizen in Stratford, and at one point, he served as an alderman and bailiff.

Shakespeare presumably attended the Stratford grammar school, where he would have received an education in Latin, but he did not go on to either Oxford or Cambridge universities. Little is recorded about Shakespeare's early life; indeed, the first record of his life after his christening is of his marriage to Anne Hathaway in 1582 in the church at Temple Grafton, near Stratford. He would have been required to obtain a special license from the bishop as security that there was no impediment to the marriage. Peter Alexander states in his book *Shakespeare's Life and Art* that marriage at this time in England required neither a church nor a priest or, for that matter, even a document—only a declaration of the contracting parties in the presence of witnesses. Thus, it was customary, though not mandatory, to follow the marriage with a church ceremony.

Little is known about William and Anne Shakespeare's marriage. Their first child, Susanna, was born in May 1583 and twins, Hamnet and Judith, in 1585. Later on, Susanna married Dr. John Hall, but the younger daughter, Judith, remained unmarried. When Hamnet died in Stratford in 1596, the boy was only 11 years old.

We have no record of Shakespeare's activities for the seven years after the birth of his twins, but by 1592 he was in London working as an actor. He was also apparently well known as a playwright, for reference is made of him by his contemporary Robert Greene in *A Groatsworth of Wit*, as "an upstart crow."

Several companies of actors were in London at this time. Shakespeare may have had connection with one or more of them before 1592, but we have no record that tells us definitely. However, we do know of his long association with the most famous and successful troupe, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. (When James I came to the throne in 1603, after Elizabeth's death, the troupe's name

changed to the King's Men.) In 1599 the Lord Chamberlain's Men provided the financial backing for the construction of their own theater, the Globe.

The Globe was begun by a carpenter named James Burbage and finished by his two sons, Cuthbert and Robert. To escape the jurisdiction of the Corporation of London, which was composed of conservative Puritans who opposed the theater's "licentiousness," James Burbage built the Globe just outside London, in the Liberty of Holywell, beside Finsbury Fields. This also meant that the Globe was safer from the threats that lurked in London's crowded streets, like plague and other diseases, as well as rioting mobs. When James Burbage died in 1597, his sons completed the Globe's construction. Shakespeare played a vital role, financially and otherwise, in the construction of the theater, which was finally occupied sometime before May 16, 1599.

Shakespeare not only acted with the Globe's company of actors; he was also a shareholder and eventually became the troupe's most important playwright. The company included London's most famous actors, who inspired the creation of some of Shakespeare's best-known characters, such as Hamlet and Lear, as well as his clowns and fools.

In his early years, however, Shakespeare did not confine himself to the theater. He also composed some mythological-erotic poetry, such as *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, both of which were dedicated to the earl of Southampton. Shakespeare was successful enough that in 1597 he was able to purchase his own home in Stratford, which he called New Place. He could even call himself a gentleman, for his father had been granted a coat of arms.

By 1598 Shakespeare had written some of his most famous works, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *Love's Labour's Lost*, as well as his historical plays *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *Henry IV*, and *King John*. Somewhere around the turn of the century, Shakespeare wrote his romantic comedies *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, as well as *Henry V*, the last of his history plays in the Prince Hal series. During the next 10 years he wrote his great tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

At this time, the theater was burgeoning in London; the public took an avid interest in drama, the audiences were large, the plays demonstrated an enormous range of subjects, and playwrights competed for approval. By 1613, however, the rising tide of Puritanism had changed the theater. With the desertion of the theaters by the middle classes, the acting companies were compelled to depend more on the aristocracy, which also meant that they now had to cater to a more sophisticated audience.

Perhaps this change in London's artistic atmosphere contributed to Shakespeare's reasons for leaving London after 1612. His retirement from the theater is sometimes thought to be evidence that his artistic skills were waning. During this time, however, he wrote *The Tempest* and *Henry VIII*. He also

wrote the “tragicomedies,” *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter’s Tale*. These were thought to be inspired by Shakespeare’s personal problems and have sometimes been considered proof of his greatly diminished abilities.

However, so far as biographical facts indicate, the circumstances of his life at this time do not imply any personal problems. He was in good health and financially secure, and he enjoyed an excellent reputation. Indeed, although he was settled in Stratford at this time, he made frequent visits to London, enjoying and participating in events at the royal court, directing rehearsals, and attending to other business matters.

In addition to his brilliant and enormous contributions to the theater, Shakespeare remained a poetic genius throughout the years, publishing a renowned and critically acclaimed sonnet cycle in 1609 (most of the sonnets were written many years earlier). Shakespeare’s contribution to this popular poetic genre are all the more amazing in his break with contemporary notions of subject matter. Shakespeare idealized the beauty of man as an object of praise and devotion (rather than the Petrarchan tradition of the idealized, unattainable woman). In the same spirit of breaking with tradition, Shakespeare also treated themes previously considered off limits—the dark, sexual side of a woman as opposed to the Petrarchan ideal of a chaste and remote love object. He also expanded the sonnet’s emotional range, including such emotions as delight, pride, shame, disgust, sadness, and fear.

When Shakespeare died in 1616, no collected edition of his works had ever been published, although some of his plays had been printed in separate unauthorized editions. (Some of these were taken from his manuscripts, some from the actors’ prompt books, and others were reconstructed from memory by actors or spectators.) In 1623 two members of the King’s Men, John Hemings and Henry Condell, published a collection of all the plays they considered to be authentic, the First Folio.

Included in the First Folio is a poem by Shakespeare’s contemporary Ben Jonson, an outstanding playwright and critic in his own right. Jonson paid tribute to Shakespeare’s genius, proclaiming his superiority to what previously had been held as the models for literary excellence—the Greek and Latin writers. “Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show / To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe. / He was not of an age, but for all time!”

Jonson was the first to state what has been said so many times since. Having captured what is permanent and universal to all human beings at all times, Shakespeare’s genius continues to inspire us—and the critical debate about his works never ceases.



# SUMMARY OF *HAMLET*



## Act I

“Who’s there?” asks the sentinel Barnardo as scene 1 opens. There is a practical reason for these opening words, spoken in darkness just after the stroke of midnight: Barnardo is there to relieve another sentinel, Francisco, and men must confirm each other’s identity in the course of duty. But symbolically, this question creates a fitting opening for Shakespeare’s great tragedy.

Causes for nervousness about who is there soon become apparent. To begin with, a ghost is haunting Elsinore, the royal seat of Denmark. This “dreaded sight” has been twice witnessed by Barnardo and his partner in the watch, Marcellus, who arrives accompanied by the skeptical Horatio. Even as Barnardo, Marcellus, and Horatio discuss the ghost, it appears and “spreads his arms.” Horatio urges this apparition to stay and speak, but it goes away. Horatio is forced to admit its likeness to the recently deceased King Hamlet.

Another cause for anxiety is the condition of the nation. Denmark’s great king, Old Hamlet, has recently died, and the kingdom is now vulnerable to an aggressive young Norwegian prince, Fortinbras. This Fortinbras, “pricked on by a most emulate pride,” has personal reasons for attacking the Danes. Old Hamlet conquered his father, Old Fortinbras, and seized lands that Fortinbras now wants back. He is the subject of the first extended dialogue between Barnardo, Marcellus, and Horatio.

As the men talk, the ghost appears a second time. Determined to make it speak, the men block the ghost’s way and even brandish a weapon. Just as the ghost seems about to speak, a rooster crows and the ghost departs “like a guilty thing / Upon a fearful summons.” Horatio, young Hamlet’s only close friend in the play, resolves to tell Hamlet what he and Marcellus have witnessed. By starting *in medias res*, the play indicates the unsettled state of Denmark and prepares for arguably the most important encounter in the play—that between Hamlet and his father’s ghost.

Aside from the reasons of plot already described, Barnardo’s opening question resonates with the play’s broader meanings. For 400 years, audiences, readers, critics, actors, and directors have been asking, “Who’s there?” when trying to



identify the protagonist and title character. Who is Hamlet, really? Son, prince, student at Wittenberg, avenger, playwright, Renaissance Everyman, soldier? If observers do not agree on the answer to this central question, so they certainly will not agree on Hamlet's motivations for acting (cleverness, revenge, political ambition) or failing to act (fear, melancholy, uncertainty, sensitivity, or—a new option in the early twentieth century—an Oedipal complex).

Questions abound in *Hamlet*: How did Hamlet's father die? Who killed him? What did Queen Gertrude know? Of what substance or nature is the ghost? Is it trustworthy? In Shakespeare's customary way, this play also asks more demanding, exploratory questions about obligation, knowledge, love, justice, identity, performance, ritual, death, and the "undiscovered country" that follows. *Hamlet* investigates the nature of tragic drama, even as it seeks to render it onstage. *Hamlet* has often dared to ask, "Who's there?" Barnardo can thus be regarded as a spokesperson for the play itself to readers and spectators across the centuries. As this volume of criticism will show, the play has asked entire cultures to stand forth and identify themselves. Such an invitation is apparently perennial, or at least it shows no signs of being retracted anytime soon.

Scene 2 begins with a courtly, crowded flourish, creating a memorable contrast with the first scene. The interior setting is as bright and festive as the opening scene was dark and pensive. Claudius—Hamlet's uncle, as well as his new stepfather and king—pours out a polished, oily speech declaring both his sorrow at the death of his brother, King Hamlet, and his joy at his own marriage to the late king's widow, Queen Gertrude. Claudius means to convince Hamlet and the court that all is well, that Denmark is not "disjoint and out of frame," although young Fortinbras thinks so. Claudius sends forth the nobles Cornelius and Voltemand as ambassadors of peace to the current king of Norway, the uncle of Fortinbras.

Claudius then summons Laertes, the son of his minister Polonius. Laertes, who is a student in France, asks the king's permission to return to school now that Claudius' coronation is past. Laertes has the blessing of his father, and the king permits him to resume his studies.

The king and queen now turn to Hamlet. His appearance and demeanor show his discontent, and they admonish him for his funereal looks. He replies to the royal couple's questions with terse, bitter pun. When Hamlet's mother observes that the death of his father seems "particular" (especially personal) to him, Hamlet objects in his first significant speech of the play: "'Seems,' madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.'" Neither his "inky cloak" (a sign of his mourning) nor sighs nor tears can truly reflect Hamlet's inner grief: "But I have that within that passes show, / These but the trappings and the suits of woe." Already Hamlet sounds some of the play's major preoccupations—what one knows and how one knows it, and how external signs deceive.

Claudius argues that Hamlet's ongoing grief is unmanly and unnatural. In an ominous development, Claudius makes it clear that he does not wish Hamlet to return to school in Wittenberg. (Wittenberg was the city of Martin Luther, a key architect of the Protestant Reformation in the early sixteenth century, and this fact would have resonated with Shakespeare's early audiences.) Rather, he wants Hamlet to remain at Elsinore as "our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son." Claudius seems suspicious of his nephew.

The king and queen exit with their retinue, leaving Hamlet alone onstage. He speaks his first great soliloquy—"O that this too, too sullied flesh would melt . . ." (See the "Key Passages" section for the full speech and detailed commentary.) Hamlet expresses his deep disappointment with his mother for her hasty marriage to Claudius—"frailty, thy name is woman!" There is at least a hint of sexual disgust in his attack. Finally, he imparts a sense of his difficult, almost claustrophobic circumstances: "But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue." Hamlet ends his speech as Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo enter. They tell him about seeing his father's ghost. Hamlet learns that the ghost appeared to them armed in full battle gear, and he immediately makes plans to see for himself. Hamlet will speak to this ghost "though hell itself should gape / And bid me hold my peace." The tone here is one of insistence, but readers may be troubled by the extremity of Hamlet's words.

Scene 3 serves as an interlude of sorts. It is the kind of domestic scene that will be forever barred to Hamlet. Laertes prepares for his departure, and his sister, Ophelia, is introduced. In response to her brother's all too fatherly warnings about Hamlet's interest in her, she reveals wit and a spirit that elsewhere is silenced. Their father, Polonius, enters and offers no shortage of advice to his son. Polonius is often portrayed as an officious blowhard, but here Shakespeare gives him a sensible wisdom and one of the play's most famous lines: "This above all: to thine own self be true." But when Laertes departs and Polonius turns to his daughter, he becomes less sympathetic, criticizing Ophelia for seeing Hamlet and expecting the worst in the prince. Polonius at times seems to bully his daughter, urging her here to "Be something scanted of your maiden presence." Ophelia promises to obey; it soon becomes clear that she always does obey.

In scene 4, Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus stand before the castle, watching for the ghost. As they wait, Hamlet complains to Horatio about the "swagg'ring" king. Despite the proper speeches Claudius made earlier, his nights are apparently filled with drinking, loud music, dancing, and merriment. (In an influential passage found only in the second quarto version of *Hamlet*, the prince says enigmatically that men sometimes suffer from a "vicious mole of nature" or the "stamp of one defect." For more than four centuries critics have been trying to figure out what Hamlet's defect is, if he indeed has one.) Suddenly everything changes: The ghost enters. "Angels and ministers of grace, defend us!" Hamlet cries out. Immediately he wonders about its nature: Is the ghost

the benign spirit of his father or a “goblin damned”? When Hamlet speaks of its “questionable shape,” he means both that he means to ask it questions and that he finds it suspicious. The ghost beckons for Hamlet to come forward. Horatio fears for Hamlet’s safety and tries to hold his friend back, but Hamlet, not much valuing his life, will not be denied this meeting. As the pair exit, Marcellus says darkly, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” This encounter between Hamlet and the ghost of his father is the early highlight of this play. James Boswell reported that Samuel Johnson, the greatest of Shakespeare’s critics and the subject of Boswell’s great biography, as a boy would read the ghost’s scenes in *Hamlet* to frighten himself.

In the next scene (scene 5), the ghost speaks. It insinuates to Hamlet that it has come forth from a realm resembling the Roman Catholic notion of the state of purgatory, where the “foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purged away.” The ghost reveals that he, Hamlet’s father, was murdered, and he commands Hamlet to seek revenge—against the king. His brother Claudius, the ghost says, poured poison in his ear as he slept in his garden. The spirit’s pronouncement has validated Hamlet’s general suspicions: “O my prophetic soul!” Significantly, the ghost prohibits Hamlet from taking revenge on his mother, who is to be left “to heaven” and her own remorse. If she is guilty, the extent of her guilt seems qualitatively different from that of Claudius.

Certainly Hamlet takes the ghost’s charge seriously, but already there are hints that he may not be the most fitting avenger; for instance, he promises to seek revenge “with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love”—a strange comparison. Perhaps it is not entirely surprising that this lover and scholar will delay in the brutal task demanded of him.

Marcellus and Horatio catch up to Hamlet and ask him, “What news?” The scene becomes histrionic: The ghost moans, “Swear!” under the floorboards of the stage as Hamlet repeatedly instructs Marcellus and Horatio to swear themselves to secrecy. But he does not tell them that the spirit commanded him to avenge his father’s death upon his uncle, the murderer. Rather, he obliquely refers to the spirit, calling it “truepenny” and “old mole.” It is as if Hamlet is already trying out the “antic disposition” (crazed but feigned behavior) that he describes to Horatio. Hamlet seems to affirm the supernatural world that was so vivid to his ancient ancestors: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” He conspiratorially leads Marcellus and Horatio into the castle. “The time is out of joint,” says Hamlet, as he begins to realize the heavy duty he has been called, from beyond the grave, to perform.

## Act II

Scene 1 opens with Polonius, who now seems more sinister: He is instructing Reynaldo to spy on Laertes in Paris. Polonius thus introduces the recurring activity of surveillance in *Hamlet*. His spying will eventually lead to his death.

The most important development in this scene involves Ophelia, who soon enters “affrighted.” The cause of her fright was Hamlet, who, she says, burst into her private room, seized her by the wrist, studied her face intently, and three times “raised a sigh so piteous and profound / As it did seem to shatter all his bulk / And end his being.” Ophelia concludes with an intense image of Hamlet dragging himself away from her: “[W]ith his head over his shoulder turned, / He seemed to find his way without his eyes. . . .” Shakespeare chose to convey this emotion-laden encounter here as third-person report merely, and it says much about the consistent power of *Hamlet* that critics rarely comment on this fact.

Why does Hamlet peruse Ophelia’s face so? Is he trying to decide if he can trust her, if she can join him in his indirect strategies? Is he weighing whether she will even believe what he has seen, and what he has been commanded? The divide between these two young people, which feels huge even though Hamlet is gripping Ophelia, evokes much pity, but often this pity is directed solely toward Hamlet. Ophelia, however, has cause for fright at the prince’s behavior. It is also unclear how she, knowing so little, would even help Hamlet. In any case, Ophelia immediately becomes a piece of evidence in her father’s efforts to explain Hamlet’s behavior to a concerned king and queen.

The next scene (scene 2) comprises a long sequence of events. It begins with Claudius and Gertrude welcoming Hamlet’s school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to Elsinore. The king and queen are concerned about Hamlet’s behavior, and Gertrude bids the young pair to visit her “too much changed son.” They immediately oblige.

The ambassador Voltmand next provides an update on his diplomatic mission to Norway: Fortinbras has yielded to the command of his uncle, the king of Norway, to stop preparing for war with Denmark. Yet Fortinbras craves permission to march through Denmark to battle a Polish army.

Polonius appears, too, and offers his bombastic, highly wordy theory about Hamlet’s “hot love on the wing.” This is one of the play’s funniest moments, but it also tries the reader’s patience—as it does the queen’s: “More matter with less art,” she demands. Polonius quotes from Hamlet’s love letters and poetry, which he has confiscated from his daughter. Polonius promises the royal couple to “find / Where truth is hid.” He plans, in rather mercenary fashion, to “loose my daughter to him” while he and the king observe Hamlet from behind an arras (a hanging tapestry or screen) in the court’s gallery. At that very moment Hamlet enters, reading a book. Through the end of this long scene, he engages in a series of dialogues that feature some of the richest verbal play in the entire text.

The king and queen depart with their retinue, leaving Polonius alone with the prince. Hamlet feigns madness, all at the older man’s expense. He calls Polonius a “fishmonger,” mockingly alludes to his daughter, and insults “old men” in general. Polonius suspects something is going on beneath the apparent

nonsense: “Though this be madness, yet there is method in ’t.” As he exits, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter and reunite with their friend.

The three young men exchange schoolboy jokes about Fortune’s private parts, and Hamlet airs a few complaints (“Denmark’s a prison,” he says). Then Hamlet cuts right to the point: “Were you not sent for?” His friends are caught off-guard, and rather awkwardly they admit that they are in the service of the king and queen. Hamlet, decisively seizing control of the conversation, tells his friends exactly why they have been sent: The prince has lost all of his mirth. In a gorgeous piece of Renaissance talk, Hamlet broods on the nature of this world and marvels, “What a piece of work is a man,” thus giving his companions a plausible explanation for his melancholy. The friends mercifully change the subject by announcing to Hamlet that “tragedians of the city” have arrived at Elsinore. The young men discuss theater in general (in a dialogue of much interest to theater historians because it is purportedly about the contemporary theater) until Polonius reenters the scene, and Hamlet resumes his mockery.

The players enter and are greeted. Hamlet asks them to recite a specific speech about Priam’s slaughter (from Virgil’s *Aeneid*) that he says he is struggling to remember. The choice is an especially meaningful one. Any Renaissance student might be inclined to hear an actor recite a narrative about the Trojan War, but Hamlet focuses on the death of the Trojan king Priam and specifically on the king’s killer, Pyrrhus, who also happens to be the avenging son of his fallen father, Achilles. The player soon crystallizes the very delay Hamlet himself is facing: “For lo, his sword, / Which was declining on the milky head / Of reverend Priam, seemed i’ th’ air to stick.” Yet this pause in the action, with its terrible suspension of scene and its suspense for the audience, soon gives way to furious violence:

Aroused vengeance sets him new to a-work,  
And never did the Cyclops’ hammers fall  
On Mars’s armor, forged for proof eterne,  
With less remorse than Pyrrhus’ bleeding sword  
Now falls on Priam.

If the language here sounds a little different from Shakespeare’s verse elsewhere in the play—more elevated, formal, and even stilted—it should. Shakespeare here provides a pastiche of the heroic style of dramatic verse popular in his day; he has parodied his fellow playwrights with their more pompous, less sophisticated styles of stage representation. Shakespearean critics, however, have not always seen it this way. (John Dryden, for example, felt these overly rhetorical lines were an expected lapse of any Elizabethan playwright; at best, they were written by another hand and inserted into Shakespeare’s play. By the time of Algernon Swinburne in the nineteenth century, however, critics gave

Shakespeare the virtuoso the benefit of the doubt concerning this change of style: “The minor transformation of style in the inner play, made solely with the evident view of marking the distinction between its duly artificial forms of speech and the duly natural forms of speech passing between the spectators” suggests for Swinburne the “exceptional pains” that Shakespeare took on *Hamlet*, the favorite of his plays.)

This lengthy scene concludes with Hamlet once again alone. In his second great soliloquy (“O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!”; see the “Key Passages” section), he chastises himself for showing no passion compared with the player’s emotional performance. What is worse, the player’s show of emotion is based on nothing but a “fiction, in a dream of passion.” He is appalled by his own inaction, because there are several reasons why he should display great emotion. He tries briefly to sound like Pyrrhus—“O vengeance!”—but he is so ill-suited to the role that it embarrasses him. He fears that a demon, in the form of his father’s ghost, may be trying to damn him by urging the wrongful killing of Hamlet’s king and kinsman. He decides instead to confirm his suspicions about the king by using the players.

### Act III

Scene 1 begins with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern reporting their observations of Hamlet to the king and queen as Polonius and Ophelia stand by; Claudius and Gertrude are pleased to hear of Hamlet’s delight in the players. All withdraw except Claudius and Polonius, who further plot to spy on Hamlet, and Ophelia.

Polonius plants his daughter in the court lobby to intercept the prince and incisively describes his own exploitative, duplicitous behavior—“We are oft to blame in this / . . . that with devotion’s visage / And pious action we do sugar o’er / the devil himself.” Polonius does not seem to realize the indictment in his own words, but the king does, and in a significant aside to the audience, Claudius gives the first confirmation of his wickedness: “How smart a lash the speech doth give my conscience. / . . . O heavy burden!” The pair withdraw, and Hamlet enters.

The text does not indicate whether Ophelia is visible. Does he notice her, perhaps even direct his next speech, the most famous in all of dramatic literature, to her? The decision belongs to a director and to the reader’s personal vision. “To be, or not to be, that is the question,” Hamlet says. Although the specifics are difficult to determine, Hamlet seems to be brooding on either suicide, which would mean he has reverted to his depressed state at the play’s outset, or on the moral consequences of taking revenge on Claudius. Whatever his action—killing himself or killing the king—what will happen to him in the afterlife? Pondering this, he concludes that “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,” and the prospect has caused Hamlet to “lose the name of action.”

He now acknowledges Ophelia, and the two have an awkward, post-breakup talk. Ophelia, initiating the confrontation, wishes to return letters and other “remembrances” from Hamlet, given during their more amorous days. Suddenly Hamlet turns on Ophelia, questioning her chastity (“honesty”) and her fairness. Hamlet may be playing the madcap, first saying he once loved Ophelia, then immediately denying it. Ophelia, wounded but noble, replies simply, “I was the more deceived.” Hamlet, to his credit, seems as repulsed with his own, male “old stock,” or sinful state, as with Ophelia, who should “Go thy ways to a nunnery.”

Abruptly Hamlet demands of her, “Where’s your father?” It is unclear whether this is a typically impulsive change of subject or if instead he has noticed activity behind the arras (tapestry). Does he now know that Ophelia has been reduced to the pawn of Polonius and Claudius? Again the interpretation is up to the reader or director. Hamlet’s outburst reaches its height here; he curses Ophelia with a “plague for thy dowry.” When he cries, “It hath made me mad” before exiting, does he genuinely mean it this time, or is it part of his act? Ophelia certainly has an opinion. Abandoned onstage, she laments, “O what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!” The two noble spies now reveal themselves, and the king has seen enough: He shall dispatch Hamlet to England, for his stepson may threaten “some danger.” But the king is persuaded to let Polonius spy on Hamlet once more, in the queen’s chamber, before carrying out this plan.

In scene 2, Hamlet enters with the players and shows himself to be quite knowledgeable about actors’ habits and their tendency to infuriate playwrights. Shakespeare must have endured their mishandling of his lines many times. Actors speak the lines too tamely, Hamlet says, or else “tear a passion to tatters, to very rags.” Acting, when done well and in a way that honors the playwright’s words, should hold the “mirror up to nature.”

Dismissing the actors and then deflecting Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, Hamlet greets Horatio and declares his deep friendship:

Give me that man

That is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him

In my heart’s core, ay, in my heart of heart,

As I do thee.

Hamlet takes Horatio into his confidence, asking him to watch Claudius’s reaction to the play, which “comes near the circumstance” of King Hamlet’s death. If Claudius’s guilt does not reveal itself, Hamlet determines they have seen a “damned ghost” and not his father’s spirit.

The royal court enters with a flourish. As final preparations are made, Hamlet baits Ophelia with off-color puns; for centuries these quips have earned the disapproval of critics who think of Hamlet as a noble prince above such

gutter humor. The players perform a dumb show, followed by the play proper, in which the Player Queen makes Gertrude decidedly uncomfortable. “The lady doth protest too much, methinks,” she tersely tells her son. The king, too, seems uncomfortable. Hamlet tells him that the play is (aptly) titled *The Mousetrap*. The staging of the king’s poisoning indeed sets off Claudius, who rises abruptly and departs, bringing the play to a sudden halt. As the lords and ladies of the court scramble off, Hamlet confirms Claudius’s guilt with Horatio and declares his trust in the ghost’s message (and, presumably, his acceptance of the ghost’s command to revenge as well).

Hamlet’s theatrical triumph is short-lived, however. Immediately Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive to summon Hamlet to his displeased mother. The pair seem genuinely confused by Hamlet’s unpredictable, manic behavior; they find his speech “unframed” and are hurt by his animosity—“My Lord, you once did love me,” says Rosencrantz. Hamlet, though, refuses to back down. He grabs the recorder of a passing player and repeatedly demands that Guildenstern play upon it. Guildenstern’s refusal further angers Hamlet: “You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery. . . .” (This is a captivating phrase: Four centuries of critics who have attempted similar inquiries into Hamlet’s character could easily imagine that he addressed them. As with his school friends, Hamlet defies that scholarly procession from the future.) He next encounters Polonius, who repeats the queen’s demand to see her son. As Hamlet leaves, he sounds (perhaps more convincingly) like a true avenger, speaking of drinking hot blood and doing bitter business. As he prepares to confront his mother, he fears the unnatural deed of matricide, which the ghost has expressly prohibited. He does not wish to resemble Nero, the debauched Roman emperor with a penchant for killing family members. Always obsessed with the spoken word, Hamlet vows instead to “speak daggers to her” but leave the queen physically unharmed.

In scene 3 a distempered Claudius resolves to send his mad stepson to England; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will accompany him there. Polonius, still spying, announces his plan to stand behind the arras in Gertrude’s chamber; apparently Claudius does not trust Gertrude to convey an impartial account of her meeting with Hamlet. The conclusion to this scene is a powerful piece of stagecraft. Alone, Claudius sets to his prayers, and he freely admits his guilt and unwillingness to relinquish his ill-gotten crown, ambition, and queen. His realization that true contrition is thus inaccessible to him is strangely moving. Suddenly Hamlet enters, often behind the kneeling king and, in some performances, with sword raised to achieve his revenge. Again the prince delays, this time saying that the deed now would be no revenge but would basically send the praying king to heaven “fit and seasoned for his passage.” Hamlet’s father was killed suddenly and now must purge his “crimes broad blown” in the afterlife; Hamlet will strike down Claudius when salvation is likewise far



from his mind. His motivation here sounds both evasive and radically more sinister in spiritual terms, and Hamlet's desire to be no mere avenger but rather a theologian of damnation has troubled critics of every century.

Hamlet's showdown with Gertrude in scene 4 is one of the most emotionally explosive scenes in the play. Immediately mother and son accuse each other of offending the dead king's memory. Hamlet forces Gertrude to sit; her fear that he will murder her suggests his frenzy. At this, Polonius cries out from his place of concealment, and Hamlet, thinking it is the king, thrusts his dagger through the arras. The queen, shocked and outraged, asks why Hamlet "dar'st wag thy tongue" against her, and her son fully answers. The queen has disgraced herself, Hamlet argues, and he cannot believe she would mar the memory of his father by marrying Claudius. Hamlet contrasts his father and uncle, much as he does in his first soliloquy. "Have you eyes?" he demands of her, and she eventually begins to feel shame—"Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul." The son next fulminates upon his mother's sexual relationship with Claudius, which repulses him and which has spurred many a Freudian critic and the actor Laurence Olivier to believe Hamlet suffers from an Oedipal complex.

His obsession is degrading, and perhaps for this reason the ghost suddenly reappears—although, significantly, only Hamlet can see it. Gertrude sees nothing, so is he indeed mad? The ghost criticizes Hamlet's "almost blunted purpose," and ultimately his appearance does defuse the son's accusations. He simply asks Gertrude to "live the purer" and "refrain" from Claudius's bed, a further attention to the queen's sexual life. He exits dragging the body of Polonius. Hamlet authentically regrets the older man's death. Yet he also sees it as a necessary part of his larger destiny as heaven's "scourge and minister."

## Act IV

In scene 1, Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet, in his madness, has killed Polonius in his hiding place. Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to bring Polonius's body to the chapel.

In the equally brief scene 2, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ask Hamlet for the body and receive taunts and a game of chase in reply.

By scene 3, the court has finally cornered Hamlet, who recites some of the wittiest, most morbid quips of the play at the expense of Polonius's corpse. Once Hamlet is apprehended and carried offstage en route to England, Claudius confides to the audience that he has devised in England the "present death of Hamlet." He is sending a request to the English king via Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to have Hamlet killed.

On Denmark's plain, in scene 4, Hamlet sees Fortinbras's army marching to meet a Polish army in battle. "How all occasions do inform against me," the prince remarks, but, always the satirist, he is also quick to understand the worthless loss of life—the land the Norwegians and Poles will fight and die for

is a “little patch of ground,” an “eggshell” only. Even as he ponders the absurdity of honor and action, he chastises his cowardice and resolves himself, despite his less-than-promising circumstances, to carry out his order for revenge: “O, from this time forth, / my thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!” (In the eighteenth century David Garrick would delete this entire soliloquy in order to avoid Hamlet’s vacillation, which he considered unbecoming. Also left out was Hamlet’s noticeable resignation when he returns from England later in this act. Garrick moved almost immediately to the killing of the king and excised some of Hamlet’s perhaps most inspiring lines about human will and destiny, divine providence, and fate.)

Scene 5 presents the consequences of Polonius’s death. Ophelia is visibly unsettled by the news, singing sad songs (“He is dead and gone”), and, in her oncoming madness, speaking with a license always denied her at Elsinore. Claudius is concerned with the political unrest arising from Polonius’s death, and soon Laertes, led by a “riotous head” declaring him king, bursts into the court to demand an explanation. He sounds like someone prepared to avenge a dead father: “To hell allegiance, vows to the blackest devil, / Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit! I dare damnation.” For all his bluster, though, Laertes is quickly disarmed, first by Ophelia’s reappearance, which seems to him a lesson in madness, and second by Claudius’s promise to satisfy Laertes’ answers. The king’s strategy is to redirect the young man’s rage by involving him in a conspiracy against Hamlet.

In scene 6, Horatio learns the surprising news that Hamlet has returned.

In scene 7, Claudius learns that Hamlet has returned to Denmark. Claudius and Laertes plan Hamlet’s death: A fencing match between the young men shall be arranged, but Laertes’s foil (fencing sword) will be deadly sharp; furthermore, Laertes will dip his blade in poison he has acquired. Claudius, offering a “back or second” to Laertes’ suggestion, and true to his villainy, proposes to offer Hamlet a poisoned chalice when he becomes thirsty from the match. Gertrude returns with further bad news—the drowning of Ophelia, which she describes in a beautifully haunting passage.

## Act V

The final act of *Hamlet* begins (scene 1) with the sort of low, clownish comedy, in the persons of two gravediggers, of which the more strict, neoclassical tastes for tragedy in later ages generally disapproved. The audience quickly discovers that this pair is preparing the grave for Ophelia’s funeral. Full of scholarly malapropisms, they debate whether or not her death was a suicide and praise their ancient task of grave making, “Adam’s profession.” Reunited, Hamlet and Horatio happen upon them and see one gravedigger throwing skulls from a grave which spurs Hamlet’s meditation on the inevitability and universality of death. Hamlet reveals himself, and after some oral sparring (in which the clown

performs ably, much to Hamlet's delight), the prince discovers that one skull belonged to Yorick, King Hamlet's jester, on whose back the young Hamlet once played. Hamlet picks up the skull and ponders it: "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of most infinite jest, most excellent fancy." Hamlet has used the word "infinite" more positively in two previous speeches—he remarks on man being "infinite in faculties" and argues he can be "king of infinite space" by thinking himself so—but this memory of Yorick's infinite jesting puts a retrospective chill upon those prior uses. Such claims to infinity begin to feel rather hollow. Now Yorick's skull possesses not even a jawbone, and Hamlet marvels that the most powerful of kings, such as Alexander, cannot escape these "base uses" of dead bodies.

Ophelia's funeral procession enters, and Hamlet, hidden again, eventually realizes she has died. Gertrude touchingly says she had hoped the dead girl would have been Hamlet's wife, and her brother, Laertes, speaks of her "unpolluted" flesh; it is a key term in a play most characterized by images of disease. Overcome with grief, Laertes jumps into her grave. This theatrical show offends Hamlet, who boldly enters and grapples with Laertes. He declares his love for Ophelia to have been much greater than Laertes's brotherly love. The two men are separated, and the king urges Laertes to look forward to the revenge they have planned.

Scene 2, the play's final scene, begins on a reflective note, quite opposed to its violent, tragic ending. Hamlet recounts Claudius's treachery in sending him to England with Hamlet's death warrant in the hands of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet considers how "Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well"; by escaping from and framing his former friends, he believes he has fulfilled some sort of divine destiny. He asserts that the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not weigh upon him: They enjoyed their work too much, and they were bit players in this clash of "mighty opposites," namely himself and his nemesis, Claudius. Next the stereotypical courtier Osric enters to call Hamlet to his match with Laertes. Hamlet is finally prepared to accept fate and encounter his enemies—"The readiness is all."

The court enters with a flourish, and Hamlet offers Laertes an apology. Laertes accepts it but declares that his honor demands combat. The pair begin fighting. Gertrude comments that Hamlet is "fat and scant of breath," but he performs well enough; he gets two hits on his more vigorous opponent. Gertrude drinks to her son—from the poisoned chalice. Claudius recognizes her lethal act immediately. Laertes strikes Hamlet with his poisoned blade, and in a subsequent scuffle, the two men exchange blades. Then Hamlet strikes Laertes. Both men are mortally wounded, announces Laertes, who feels remorse for his treachery even as he accomplishes it. Gertrude, too, falls and cries out that she has been poisoned. The news of his imminent death seems to liberate Hamlet further; finally, his revenge against the king is at hand, and in effect he achieves

it twice: He wounds Claudius with the blade and forces him to drink his own deadly “potion” too.

Almost immediately Hamlet achieves a nobility in his dying that eluded him in life. Laertes begs forgiveness from the “noble Hamlet,” and the prince delivers a memorably understated farewell: “The rest is silence.” Horatio gives Hamlet a final goodbye—“Good night, sweet Prince.”

Hamlet’s awareness of his own afterlife, so to speak, has always intrigued critics: He asks Horatio to remain alive in order to tell his story. As Hamlet and Horatio exchange their final words, a march is heard offstage, and the play concludes with Fortinbras entering the court and the English ambassador present as well. (Often this entrance is very dramatic; Fortinbras is more or less invading the court of Denmark.) Horatio promises to tell all about Elsinore’s “carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts.” Fortinbras expresses his intention of making a claim upon Denmark’s throne, but first he commands that Hamlet be carried off “like a soldier.” The ceremonial rifle shot that accompanies the exit of Hamlet’s body may seem ironic for a character first associated with his studies in Wittenberg, but Fortinbras’s interpretive investment is the first of many occasions denoting Hamlet’s amazing shape-shifting ability. The scholar Harold Jenkins in his survey of criticism, *“Hamlet” Then Till Now*, discussed how through the past four centuries the prince of Denmark, rather like an avenger’s version of St. Paul, “became many things to many men.” Scholar, avenger, and soldier were only the first. As Hamlet himself says,

... they are actions that a man might play,  
But I have that within that passes show; ...



# KEY PASSAGES IN *HAMLET*



## Act I, ii, 133–163

*Hamlet*: O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,  
Thaw and resolve it selfe into a dewe,  
Or that the everlasting had not fixt  
His canon 'gainst Self-slaughter, O God,  
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
Seeme to me all the uses of this world?  
Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden  
That growes to seede, things rancke and grose in nature,  
Possesse it merely. That it should come to this:  
But two months dead, nay not so much, not two,  
So excellent a King, that was to this  
Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother,  
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven  
Visite her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,  
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him  
As if increase of appetite had growne  
By what it fed on, and yet within a month  
(Let me not thinke on't; frailty thy name is woman),  
A little month or ere those shooes were old  
With which she followed my poore father's bodie  
Like *Niobe* all teares, why she, even she—  
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason  
Would have mourn'd longer—married with my Uncle,  
My father's brother, but no more like my father  
Than I to *Hercules*. Within a month  
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous teares  
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes  
She married. O most wicked speede; to post  
With such dexteritie to incestuous sheets.

It is not, nor it cannot come to good,  
 But breake my hart, for I must hold my tongue.

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Here the Danish king and queen have just departed, leaving Hamlet alone onstage. There have been signs of his discontent: Though festivity reigns at the court and his mother and uncle have just married, Hamlet is dressed in mourning, and his few words reveal a bitter humor. In this lengthy speech, his first soliloquy, Hamlet is free to reveal more fully the extent of his grief and disappointment.

The speech begins with a wish for annihilation, though its wording is a matter of dispute among editors. “Sullied” is the reading of the second quarto, and this suggests a young man disgusted with the taint of human sinfulness and imperfection—his own, but also humanity’s in general. Subsequent lines confirm this attitude. The very reliable folio edition, however, has the more material word “solid,” which clearly communicates Hamlet’s wish for dissolution. Further complicating matters, the actual spelling of “sullied” in the quarto is “sallied.” This word may sound odd to modern ears, but in Shakespeare’s era it was a common military term for the besieging of a town. The implied military metaphor is consistent with other figurative language in the play and makes narrative sense: Hamlet has just been hearing the king discuss diplomatic and martial matters with his men, and the play itself opens on the ramparts.

Regardless of word choice, Hamlet wishes simply to dissolve. This wish may have reminded early audiences of *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (1592), a popular play whose title character, in the harrowing final scene, wishes to become senseless “water drops” rather than face damnation. His first wish being impossible, Hamlet next considers suicide, but he regretfully acknowledges that God’s law forbids the action. This theme of self-extinction and its consequences recurs throughout the play. Hamlet’s interjection (“O God . . .”) explains these opening wishes: The world seems stale; it is worthless to someone as despondent as he. The image he next uses to describe the world—an unweeded garden overrun by “things rancke and grose in nature”—reflects his disgust with the natural world, with its penchant for rampant fruitfulness, with the human body, and specifically with his mother’s newly married body. Notice how, after this image, Hamlet reflects first on his dead father and then on the obscenity of his uncle’s marrying his mother. To him this marriage is another case of a rank, gross thing possessing something “merely,” which does not mean “only” as it does today, but rather its opposite—“entirely.” Claudius fully possesses Gertrude as her king and husband, and Hamlet cannot fathom the fact.

As Hamlet laments his father’s death, he criticizes Claudius and Gertrude. The new king is dismissed by comparison: Hamlet’s father was like Hyperion—a sun god of Greek mythology—beside Claudius, who resembles a “satyr,” a lecherous, goat-footed creature of the woods. (Later in this passage Hamlet

includes himself in a similar comparison: Claudius is no more like Hamlet's father than Hamlet himself is like Hercules.) He castigates his mother, remembering her affection for his father (which verged on the indiscriminate, "As if increase of appetite had growne / By what it fed on") and recoiling from her brief mourning and quick second marriage. How could she have felt such grief initially yet recover so quickly? Her haste, Hamlet thinks, is irrational and thoughtless; Gertrude is like a beast with no true emotional capacity. By identifying her with an animal, Hamlet also reveals his revulsion toward his mother's physical, clearly sexual nature.

Hamlet quickly turns into accusation: Perhaps Gertrude was merely performing an exaggerated grief, as the comparison with the mythical figure Niobe insinuates. With tears still in her eyes, he says, she rushed with "wicked speede" and "such dexterity to incestuous sheets" in Claudius's bed. The *t* and *x* sounds in that last phrase memorably capture Hamlet's volatile spite—as do the many outbursts ("Fie!", "O God," and so on) and rhetorical questions in the passage. The nineteenth-century French critic Hippolyte Taine memorably observed the "terrible tension in the whole nervous machine" evident in this speech. In Taine's opinion, Hamlet was here already halfway to madness.

The penultimate line ("It is not, nor it cannot come to good") ominously reminds the audience that they are watching a tragedy. But moments of tenderness ennoble the passage: Hamlet's memory of his father's care of his mother, who would not let the winds "Visite her face too roughly"; the exquisite focus on the shoes of the mourning Gertrude; and Hamlet's final line, like a helpless cry: "But breake my hart, for I must hold my tongue." Realizing he must remain silent, Hamlet reveals an awareness of the sinister goings-on at Elsinore.

### Act I, iii, 55–81

*Polonius:* Yet heere *Laertes*? aboard, aboard for shame,  
 The wind sits in the shoulder of your saile,  
 And you are stayed for; there, my blessing with thee,  
 And these fewe precepts in thy memory  
 Looke thou character, give thy thoughts no tongue,  
 Nor any unproportion'd thought his act,  
 Be thou familiar, but by no meanes vulgar,  
 Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,  
 Grapple them unto thy soule with hoopes of steele,  
 But doe not dull thy palme with entertainment  
 Of each new hatched, unfledg'd Comrade. Beware  
 Of entrance to a quarrell, but being in,  
 Bear't that th'opposed may beware of thee,  
 Give every man thy eare, but fewe thy voyce,  
 Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgement,



Costly thy habite as thy purse can buy,  
 But not exprest in fancy; rich not gaudy,  
 For the apparrell oft proclaimes the man  
 And they in France of the best rank and station,  
 Are of a most select and generous, chiefe in that:  
 Neither a borrower nor a lender be,  
 For lone oft looses both it selfe, and friend,  
 And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry;  
 This above all, to thine owne selfe be true  
 And it must followe as the night the day  
 Thou canst not then be false to any man:  
 Farewell, my blessing season this in thee.

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The interlude with Polonius and his family presents a domestic atmosphere that is relatively normal. It is thus a foil for the broken ties of Hamlet's royal family, in which the king is dead but reportedly haunts the castle, the queen has married hastily, and the prince is despondent. In Polonius's room all seems well enough, if somewhat tiresome for his children, Laertes and Ophelia. Laertes has just delivered a tedious speech of warning to his sister when their father arrives. In fitting comeuppance, Laertes now finds himself as auditor to a lengthy advisory speech.

Polonius urges Laertes to his ship, which will return him to his studies in Paris, and gives his paternal blessing. He also offers a "fewe precepts." Polonius entreats his son to show the qualities that may have earned his own enviable, influential situation as the king's adviser (though his buffoonish behavior casts doubt on this conclusion). Overall, he instructs Laertes in the discretion and poise essential to a successful young gentleman and courtier.

What are readers to make of Polonius's precepts? The very length of his speech is comical. It suggests that Polonius, like most parents, is prone to excessive concern—the kind of preaching that makes adolescent children roll their eyes. Polonius invokes conventional wisdom throughout this speech, and the speech's strongly proverbial nature allows Shakespeare to maintain a tonal openness here, as if he is inviting the actor or reader to conceive of Polonius more or less sympathetically. Proverbs may imply experience and wisdom, but they may also imply that these virtues are shallowly held or even poorly understood. Someone who speaks only in proverbs does not seem to have his own voice but rather speaks in the dusty language of clichés. This is the traditional view of Polonius in this speech.

Nonetheless, some of his lines possess a vigor and polish that should not be overlooked, such as his advice to grapple friends "unto thy soule with hoopes of steele," and yet not to overdo it—not to "dull" one's palm in glad-handing mere acquaintances. He advises prudence ("reserve thy judgment"), sensitivity

to context (avoid quarrels, but once involved in one, be impressive), and a careful moderation (clothes should be “costly” but not “gaudy”). Polonius tells his son neither to borrow nor lend money; the former may cause financial loss or loss of friendship, while the latter encourages fiscal irresponsibility.

The final four lines rise in diction, making for a touching conclusion (“This above all, to thine owne selfe be true . . .”). That said, one might read Polonius’s lines with more suspicion. After all, any speech giver ends on a high note. How genuine are the father’s words, really?

Polonius’s own behavior invites a strongly ironic reading: Is this yes man of the king ever really true to himself? That question aside, Polonius certainly plays false with others. At the beginning of the next act, for example, Polonius bids Reynaldo to spy on his son, undermining his credibility in the current scene. Still, perhaps these later actions cannot fully invalidate a father’s tender blessing—the wish that the virtues cataloged here may grow fruitful in his son.

### Act II, ii, 576–633

*Hamlet*: O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!  
 Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
 But in a fiction, in a dreame of passion,  
 Could force his soule so to his own conceit  
 That from her working all his visage wanned,  
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,  
 A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
 With formes to his conceit; and all for nothing,  
 For *Hecuba*!

What’s *Hecuba* to him, or he to her,  
 That he should weepe for her? What would he doe  
 Had he the Motive and the Cue for passion  
 That I have? He would drowne the stage with teares,  
 And cleave the generall eare with horrid speech,  
 Make mad the guilty, and appale the free,  
 Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeede  
 The very faculties of eyes and eares; yet I,  
 A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak  
 Like John-a-dreames, unpregnant of my cause,  
 And can say nothing; no not for a King,  
 Upon whose property and most deare life  
 A damnd defeate was made. Am I a coward?  
 Who calls me “villaine”? Breakes my pate acrossse?  
 Pluckes off my beard, and blowes it in my face?  
 Tweeks me by the nose? Gives me the lie in the throate  
 As deepe as to the lunges? Who does me this?

Hah, 'Swounds, I should take it: for it cannot be  
 But I am pigeon-livered, and lack gall  
 To make oppression bitter, or ere this  
 I should have fatted all the region kites  
 With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!  
 Remorsesse, trecherous, lecherous, kindlesse villain!  
 Oh Vengeance!  
 Why what an Asse am I. This is most brave,  
 That I the sonne of a dear father murdered,  
 Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,  
 Must like a whore unpacke my heart with words,  
 And fall acursing like a very drabbe,  
 a Scullion—fie upon't! Foh!  
 About my braines; hum. . . . I have heard,  
 That guilty creatures sitting at a play,  
 Have by the very cunning of the scene,  
 Beene struck so to the soule, that presently  
 They have proclaim'd their malefactions:  
 For murder, though it have no tongue, will speake  
 With most miraculous organ. I'll have these Players  
 Play something like the murder of my father  
 Before mine Uncle. I'll observe his lookes,  
 I'll tent him to the quicke. If he but blench,  
 I know my course. The spirit that I have seene  
 May be a devil, and the devil hath power  
 T'assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,  
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
 As he is very potent with such spirits,  
 Abuses me to damne me. I'll have grounds  
 More relative than this. The play's the thing  
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

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Hamlet the character, as well as *Hamlet* the play, is obsessed with acting—its concealment of reality, its moving expression of emotion, the skills it requires, its ability to bring forth something so seemingly genuine in the absence of actual interior motivation. This is the topic that amazes Hamlet in his soliloquy concluding the long second scene of Act II.

The players have just performed a scene at Hamlet's request, "Aeneas' tale to Dido when he speaks of Priam's slaughter." Hamlet's choice of scene is significant: In it Pyrrhus prepares to avenge his dead father, Achilles, by slaying the Trojan king, Priam. His task clearly parallels the filial duty of Hamlet (and later, that of Laertes and of Fortinbras). Even more specifically, Pyrrhus's

pause as he stands over the fallen Priam, before “Aroused vengeance sets him new a-work,” mirrors Hamlet’s own delayed duty. Was he, by requesting this scene, trying to find in Pyrrhus his own model for furious action? Alternatively, Hamlet’s goal may have been to witness a kind of reenactment of his uncle Claudius (a killer like Pyrrhus) murdering his father, who, like Priam, was a true king. In this respect the scene of Pyrrhus and Priam is quite similar to *The Murder of Gonzago*, the play that Hamlet envisions in the second half of this soliloquy.

Hamlet is already in a scolding mood as the players are dismissed. “My lord,” says Polonius, “I will use them according to their desert.” (He will treat them as visitors of their social stature deserve.) “Much better!” Hamlet exclaims. “Use every man after his desert and who shall ’scape whipping?” In this soliloquy, which immediately follows, Hamlet berates himself, calling himself a “rogue and peasant slave,” and the fact that his punishment is only spoken fills him with further self-loathing. He feels chastened by the players’ exquisite control over their whole persons—all despite having no actual motivation. Thinking of the situations of the characters they represent, the players feign emotions, and these thoughts affect their very souls, causing physical transformations: a broken voice, tears, a face that grows pale. All this, Hamlet bitterly reflects, is “. . . for nothing, / For Hecuba!” He contrasts the players’ motiveless activity with his lack of action despite great motive. If a player were in his situation, says Hamlet, he would weep uncontrollably and “cleave the generall eare with horrid speech, / Make mad the guiltie,” and so forth. Imagining the performer’s great, revealing effects on an audience, Hamlet plants the first seed of his plan later in the soliloquy.

But first he berates himself further, using a colorful array of vulgar insults. He pains himself by remembering his father, the wrongly deposed king. And he imagines himself being abjectly humiliated. His imaginary tormentors hit him, pluck his beard, and thump his nose. Even if Hamlet were mocked in all possible ways, he admits he “should take it” and not react to the abuse. He fears he lacks something constitutionally that would make such oppression unendurable, that would stir him to action. Otherwise he would already have killed his uncle and fed his corpse to the “kites” (carrion birds).

The second half of the soliloquy emphasizes the language of performance. The climax of Hamlet’s curse—“O vengeance!”—appears only in the folio text, but its presence is perfectly sensible. It is the cry of the conventional avenger. “Vindicta mihi!” (“Vengeance is mine!”) cries a character in Thomas Kyd’s contemporaneous play *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592). Elizabethan audiences would have enjoyed Hamlet’s less-than-convincing effort to parrot this declaration; he fails to convince even himself. Hamlet knows he is not that powerful avenger, and so he feels foolish having merely played the role. “What an Asse am I,” he says with disgust.

Hamlet says he is prompted to revenge “by heaven and hell.” Critics often blame him for his continued procrastination, all the more shameless because he has just condemned it. Yet the same statement explains his delay: Hamlet associates the ghost with hell. The ghost that visited him may be diabolical, merely in the “pleasing shape” of his father. Hamlet worries that it is actually a demon intent on tricking him into an unjust regicide of Claudius, an act by which Hamlet would damn himself. Hamlet thinks that his weakness and melancholy would make him an attractive target for such a devil.

In the soliloquy’s final few lines, Hamlet escapes this cycle of self-condemnation and concocts his plan. He suddenly recalls stories of criminals cut to the core by the vivid events of a play they were watching, such that they “proclaim’d their malefactions.” He resolves to have the players enact his father’s murder in front of Claudius; all the while Hamlet will watch his uncle’s reaction for signs of guilt: “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King.”

### Act III, i, 64–98

*Hamlet:* To be, or not to be, that is the question,  
 Whether ’tis nobler in the minde to suffer  
 The slings and arrowes of outrageous fortune,  
 Or to take Armes against a sea of troubles,  
 And by opposing, end them. To die, to sleepe,  
 No more, and by a sleepe, to say we end  
 The heartache and the thousand naturall shocks  
 That flesh is heire to; ’tis a consummation  
 Devoutly to be wisht. To die to sleepe,  
 To sleepe, perchance to dreame, aye there’s the rub,  
 For in that sleepe of death what dreames may come  
 When we have shuffled off this mortall coil  
 Must give us pause. There’s the respect  
 That makes calamitie of so long life:  
 For who would beare the whips and scornes of time,  
 Th’oppressor’s wrong, the proude man’s contumely,  
 The pangs of dispriz’d love, the law’s delay,  
 The insolence of office, and the spurnes  
 That patient merit of th’unworthy takes,  
 When he himselfe might his *quietus* make  
 With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,  
 To grunt and sweat under a wearie life,  
 But that the dread of something after death,  
 The undiscover’d country from whose bourn  
 No traveler returnes, puzzles the will,

And makes us rather beare 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 hew of resolution  
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
 And enterprises of great pitch and moment  
 With this regard their currents turne awry,  
 And lose the name of action. Soft you now,  
 The faire *Ophelia*, Nymph in thy orisons  
 Be all my sinnes remembered.

Hamlet's "to be or not to be" speech is among the most famous passages of Western literature. It has been endlessly analyzed and parodied. "To be or not to be—" recited the comedian Milton Berle, "and that's a question?" For centuries playgoers have recited the speech along with the actor, causing Peter O'Toole to say that playhouses should put the "old number" on a song sheet, so audiences can at least get the words right. Nevertheless Hamlet's best-known soliloquy retains its mystery, in part because certain questions—about Hamlet's motivation and meaning, and about the speech's position in the play and which other characters hear the speech—have never been sufficiently answered.

So what *is* the question, exactly? Although countless explanations have been given, most readers and critics think that Hamlet is here contemplating suicide. In introducing his two stark options, Hamlet employs language and imagery that suggests a speaker for whom life itself has become a very demanding, hostile state indeed. Is it preferable to continue living, which for Hamlet feels merely like impassive suffering of the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"? Or shall he be more active—though ironically so, since his "action" would be self-annihilation? Hamlet now regards suicide as a noble resistance, a defiant brandishing of arms against the many difficulties of life ("sea of troubles"). Of course, the success of this second option ("and by opposing, end them") is subjective: The suicide would end life's problems not by solving them; rather the problems would end *for him*, because he would no longer exist to face them. Hamlet's use of the phrase "in the mind" is important, because it suggests that he knows this attitude toward life is only his and that it is caused by his weakness and melancholy—those "spirits" he acknowledged in the previous soliloquy.

Hamlet's outlook has dramatically shifted since the last soliloquy. Then he regarded his ability to endure the situation as a shortcoming: To his shame, he lacked the gall to become sufficiently embittered to react against it. Yet in this soliloquy Hamlet says that suffering the "outrageous fortune" of life is one possible way to act nobly, and his language and imagery further ennoble the sentiment. Moreover, this is not the biggest inconsistency between the two soliloquies. At the end of the previous speech, Hamlet seemingly had turned

the corner of his inaction and self-pity and was planning to develop his course of revenge by determining, with certainty, if Claudius was guilty. So why, less than a hundred lines later, is he more melancholy than ever, making no mention of his plan or his uncle and contemplating suicide? Hamlet's expression here is much closer in spirit to his opening soliloquy, in which he wishes that God did not forbid "self-slaughter." This similarity may not be coincidental. In the less authoritative first quarto of *Hamlet* (1603), this speech occurs early in the second scene of act two—just after Polonius has told the king and queen about Hamlet's strange behavior toward Ophelia—when Hamlet enters "reading on a book." Hamlet's desperate meditation at this point in the play would confirm Polonius's report, and it would also shift easily into Hamlet's feigned madness in the following "fishmonger" scene. The difference in position between the two versions may be a sign of Shakespeare the playwright at work, weighing plotting options and their effects on action and characterization. That said, one modern editor of *Hamlet*, Philip Edwards, argues that the current position of the speech is of "profound importance for the ultimate meaning of the play." Hamlet has not forgotten his plan and uncle so quickly but has gained a deeper awareness of life, says Edwards; he realizes that simply killing Claudius and restoring order to Elsinore will not end the "heartache" of living. Accomplishing these daunting tasks will solve only two of the "thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to." To Edwards, the speech's traditional placement in Act III demonstrates that Hamlet is no traditional avenger, but a Renaissance philosopher confronting the bleak truths of human existence.

Other readings are possible, and the very disagreement about the most general decisions presented by Hamlet helps to explain why this speech continues to fascinate. For example, Samuel Johnson interpreted the taking up of arms as highly relevant to Hamlet's situation. The "sea of troubles" may refer directly to Claudius's usurpation of the Danish crown, and Hamlet's possible opposition to these troubles means exactly what it says: The prince can either endure the injustice further or actively attempt to end it, "though perhaps with a loss of life." Claudius will have to die, and maybe Hamlet will die, too. For Johnson, then, the danger and death of the second, more aggressive option is what makes Hamlet pensive. Johnson has thus more or less cleansed the opening of its suicidal element, and he has treated the taking up of arms at face value—as literally taking up arms against an oppressor—at the expense of the more paradoxical, metaphorical meaning (that to defy the misfortunes of life requires one to lay down one's life). Writing around the same time as Johnson, playwright Oliver Goldsmith argued that Hamlet is clearly contemplating suicide in this passage, yet the speech is overall a "heap of absurdities"—Hamlet has absolutely no reason to contemplate the taking of his life (he seeks revenge, he loves Ophelia, he has royal ambitions, and so on). In any case, the drift of Hamlet's speech suggests that suicide may be the harder, more counterintuitive

act, especially when his thoughts turn to the uncertainties of the afterlife and of eternal judgment.

“To die, to sleep,” muses Hamlet in an incantatory fashion. At first his consideration of death sounds like a resolution to be welcomed; his heartache will necessarily end. But soon he recognizes that there is a “rub” (an obstacle) to this wish for death. If death is like a more permanent sleep—and the preachers of Shakespeare’s era were fond of this analogy—then will one dream in death? That is, will one have one’s senses and be in a state that resembles consciousness in this world? This possibility, Hamlet says solemnly, “Must give us pause.” Being unknown, “what dreams may come” in the afterlife are potentially terrifying, and such uncertainty is why living beings tolerate for so long the calamities of this world.

Hamlet next catalogs various examples of earthly misfortunes—and one could simply abolish all these miseries by plunging a knife (“bare bodkin”) into one’s chest! (Hamlet’s use of the legal term *quietus* means the “settling of an account,” but he surely means to suggest the “quiet” he longs for amid this troubled sea of life.) What “puzzles the will” to undertake an extreme act such as suicide is the “undiscovered country” of the afterlife.

Hamlet says conscience makes every person cowardly. By speaking of “conscience,” he introduces a new complexity to this great speech. Some modern editions cast the word as “consciousness,” which would make the statement merely a summing up of prior reservations. But his next remark, that the “native hue of resolution” is “sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,” suggests that Hamlet means thinking itself. (As he earlier told Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.”) In this way, the uniquely rational abilities of humans create unique anxieties about the afterlife. The word “conscience” also had (and has) religious connotations: Conscience was thought to be God’s gift to help humanity understand right and wrong. Therefore Hamlet may be acknowledging two things near the end of this speech: First, he has been charged with the significant task of killing the king. Second, he fears that taking Claudius’s life may nevertheless bring upon him eternal judgment. And so he does nothing.

In “Letters to an Actor Playing Hamlet,” the English playwright Christopher Fry commented that this “best-remembered” soliloquy “has nothing to do with Claudius at all.” This is not entirely true. Claudius is not named in this speech, but Hamlet appears to be wrestling with the consequences of assuming the role of the avenger. In fact, if Samuel Johnson is correct, the famous opening line may simply be an abbreviated statement: “To be [an avenger], or not to be [an avenger], that is the question.”

The dramatic context of Hamlet’s speech also encourages one to read it less as a separate, purely private meditation and more as a meditation deeply integrated with the play’s ongoing action. When Hamlet cuts off his thought to



acknowledge the “faire Ophelia,” it reminds readers (or viewers) of the element of surveillance in this section of the play: Claudius and Polonius arranged this encounter and are now watching from a distance. The staging presents any director with a host of questions. Do Claudius and Polonius hear Hamlet’s speech? Does Ophelia? Does Hamlet discover the presence of the two men? When? Does he notice Ophelia only at the end of his speech, or is he then simply acknowledging formally her onstage presence? In one production, in which Derek Jacobi directed Kenneth Branagh in the title role, Branagh actually spoke the entire speech to Ophelia directly. Whatever a director decides or a reader determines, this famous speech remains a thought-provoking text whose implications and possibilities are in no danger of being soon exhausted.

### Act IV, iv, 34–67

*Hamlet:* How all occasions doe informe against me,  
 And spur my dull revenge. What is a man  
 If his chiefe good and market of his time  
 Be but to sleepe and feede, a beast, no more:  
 Sure He that made us with such large discourse,  
 Looking before and after, gave us not  
 That capabilitie and god-like reason  
 To fust in us unus’d. Now whether it be  
 Bestiall oblivion, or some craven scruple  
 Of thinking too precisely on th’event  
 (A thought which quarter’d hath but one part wisdom,  
 And ever three parts coward), I doe not know  
 Why yet I live to say this thing’s to do,  
 Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and meanes  
 To do’t. Examples grosse as earth exhort me:  
 Witness this Army of such masse and charge,  
 Led by a delicate and tender Prince,  
 Whose spirit with divine ambition puffed  
 Makes mouthes at the invisible event,  
 Exposing what is mortall, and unsure,  
 To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,  
 Even for an Eggshell. Rightly to be great  
 Is not to stirre without great argument,  
 But greatly to find quarrell in a straw  
 When honour’s at the stake. How stand I, then,  
 That have a father killed, a mother stained,  
 Excitements of my reason and my blood,  
 And let all sleepe, while to my shame I see  
 The imminent death of twenty thousand men,

That for a fantasie and tricke of fame  
 Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot  
 Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,  
 Which is not tomb enough and continent  
 To hide the slaine? O from this time forth,  
 My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth.

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Hamlet is being dispatched to England, a consequence of having incidentally killed Polonius. Gertrude says her son is “Mad as the sea and wind when both contend / Which is the mightier,” and the king has lost all patience, declaring “His liberty is full of threats to all.”

Here, as Hamlet is escorted out of his homeland, he encounters Fortinbras’s army. He quickly learns from a captain that the Norwegians are bound for a battle against Poland “to gain a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name.” Hamlet fully understands the absurdity of the situation: This dispute over a worthless piece of land will incur a heavy cost, both to the nations’ treasuries and in human life. The soldiers will die for no visible cause. Hamlet’s discovery of their hollow mission is important to recall when one considers this soliloquy.

Traditionally this speech is interpreted as presenting yet another model of action, embodied by Fortinbras and his army, that serves to chastise Hamlet and the less-than-promising circumstances he is presently facing. The opening sentence suggests as much: Fortinbras’s martial activity seems a fitting tribute to his own dead father, the more so by contrast with Hamlet’s own “dull revenge.” Hamlet’s stated goal is to let such models spur him to perform likewise. Yet there is an awareness and judgmental spirit to this speech that complicates it. Does Hamlet really believe Fortinbras is a fitting model at this point in his own experience and given what he knows about the Norwegian’s absurd mission? One cannot be sure whether to trust Hamlet’s self-incitements any longer, because he has grown in complexity so much over the course of the play. And his current train of thought has an evasive quality.

Having aired this mock denouncement at the sight of Fortinbras’s army, Hamlet turns to an existential investigation: What is the chief purpose of a human? Perhaps the killing of Polonius has changed Hamlet. Overall, he seems less squeamish about the avenger’s task ahead of him and less tolerant of his own overthinking earlier. Here, in fact, he equates the mindlessness of animals with the cerebral paralysis that afflicted him (which he admits was three parts cowardice to one part prudent wisdom): Neither permits the proper use of human capability and reason. Though unsure of his exact shortcoming, Hamlet is frankly puzzled. Why has he not yet been able to carry out his revenge? He has a reason, the desire, and the physical ability to do so.

Now, as he encounters yet another spurring example, his description of the scene is a little satirical at Fortinbras's expense. Being called an example "grosse as earth" is hardly complimentary; and since when has Fortinbras appeared anywhere in the play as a "delicate and tender prince"? Hamlet credits him with "divine" ambition, which seems to recall the "god-like reason" praised earlier in this speech, but this characterization actually sets up a deflating series of contrasts. Fortinbras seems far less than divine when he "makes mouths at the invisible event." (The enigmatic phrase "this invisible event" probably means the actual significance or worthiness of an action, which Hamlet has been so willing to analyze throughout this play.) Furthermore, Fortinbras's "divine" ambition drives him to expose what is "mortal, and unsure" for the sake of gaining a worthless patch of soil. So far Hamlet seems less than impressed with his Norwegian counterpart.

Hamlet's attitude, however, becomes more complex when his reflections turn to the question of honor. One cannot be great simply by fighting for nothing ("without great argument"), but Hamlet seems to concede that part of greatness is to risk everything, even for the barest benefit, when honor is at stake—perhaps including the honor of a dead father. In a by-now-familiar gesture, Hamlet rehearses his far more serious motivations for risking everything. But almost immediately he returns to the army marching before him. He may be put to "shame" by its activity, yet Hamlet is fully aware of, and disdainful for, the present situation: Twenty thousand men will soon die for a "fantasie and trickes of fame." The plot of land is so small that it will accommodate neither all those who will fight over it nor all those who will soon need to be buried. Hamlet sounds as if he has successfully punctured the heroic dimensions of the scene before him. But even this scene, he hopes, will motivate him: "O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!"

Hamlet's supposed change of personality upon his return from England in the next act has been a longstanding point of critical contention. The earlier fretting seems far behind this "new" Hamlet, who (in Act V, scene 1) can exclaim unflinchingly when beholding Yorick's skull, "To what base uses we may thus return, Horatio!" The Hamlet who tells his friend (in Act V, scene 2), "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" no longer sounds like a metaphysician in crisis. Readers and critics wonder what has occurred to instill in Hamlet his haunting resignation to his tragic fate. Arguably, this new spirit is heard much earlier, even before Hamlet departs for England, in his speech as he witnesses Fortinbras's army marching across the plain.

#### Act IV, vii, 163–184

*Queen:* One woe doth tread upon another's heele,  
So fast they follow; your sister's drown'd, Laertes.

*Laertes:* Drown'd, oh where?

*Queen:* There is a willow growes aslant a brooke  
 That shoves his horry leaves in the glassy streame:  
 Therewith fantastique garlands did she make,  
 Of Crowflowers, Nettles, Daises, and long Purples  
 That liberall Shepheards give a grosser name,  
 But our cold maids do dead mens' fingers call them.  
 There on the pendant boughes her coronet weedes  
 Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,  
 When downe her weedy trophies and her selfe  
 Fell in the weeping brooke. Her clothes spread wide,  
 And Mermaide-like awhile they bore her up,  
 Which time she chanted snatches of old laudes,  
 As one incapable of her owne distresse,  
 Or like a creature native and indewed  
 Unto that element. But long it could not be  
 Till that her garments heavy with their drinke,  
 Pull'd the poore wretch from her melodious lay  
 To muddy death.

*Laertes:* Alas, then is she drown'd?

*Queen:* Drown'd, drown'd.

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Claudius has just spent considerable time calming Laertes, enraged at his father's death, and has entangled the impulsive son in a murderous plot against Hamlet. The queen's entrance and her haunting report of Ophelia's death heighten the tension at this late point in the play. The violent death of Polonius is the first woe Gertrude speaks of, upon whose heel news of this second woe, Ophelia's drowning, proceeds too quickly.

Gertrude's speech on Ophelia's death, because of the mournful subject and her weary, slow narration, feels much more haunting and tragic than anything directly before or after it. The speech begins with natural imagery from the scene of Ophelia's drowning: a willow that grows crookedly at the bank's edge so that its silver-gray leaves appear in the water. In a play such as *Hamlet*, this imagery emphasizing reflection—of what appears real, true, and visible yet is fictional—is suggestive. Ophelia was making a coronet of flowers, thus continuing to express her grief indirectly, in a “floral” language. Gertrude's catalog of flowers is vigorous, but the descriptive dilation of one type of flower—the blandly named “long purples”—is also telling. The queen says that shepherds call them by a “grosser name,” but “cold maids” (like the drowned Ophelia) more chastely call them “dead men's fingers.” The figurative connection of the multiple names for this single flower powerfully associates Ophelia with sex and death; indeed, in her previous appearance, these were the two topics that obsessed Ophelia. Her earlier songs were about a fickle “truelove” and a “tumbled” (deflowered)

maid—perhaps referring to her relationship with Hamlet—and the loss of loved ones to death, clearly a sign of her grief for Polonius.

Apparently Ophelia climbed out onto an overhanging branch, which snapped and deposited her in the brook. There she continued to sing “snatches of old laudes” (hymns). Her song is both a metaphor of living and a means of enduring the trials of life. The tableau created by Gertrude’s words is mesmerizing, strangely restful, and deadly. The image of the singing Ophelia, her dress spreading out in the water, is visually arresting, but it also signals a growing danger: Eventually full of water, Ophelia’s heavy garments pull her from her “melodious lay” to “muddy death” in the brook. Everything in the scene becomes animated: the coronet itself “clamb’ring” to hang on the bough, her garments “drink” the water and “pull” their wearer underwater. Only Ophelia, it seems, is inactive, “incapable of her own distress.”

In the ongoing frame of the simile, Gertrude says Ophelia is like a living creature, but one meant for the water, not the earth. (Some editions have “indued / Unto that element,” meaning Ophelia is in harmony with the water. But surely the original spelling, “indewed,” provides a devastating pun that qualifies the more optimistic simile: Ophelia’s clothes literally become full of dew, or water, and she dies.) This incident, though spoken of indirectly rather than shown onstage, is nevertheless one of the most famous moments in *Hamlet*. It inspires a powerful visual life in the imagination, thanks largely to the famous paintings of the scene by Eugene Delacroix and John Everett Millais.

Upon hearing Gertrude’s speech, Laertes weeps. In a rather artificial manner, he defends his tears and promises he will soon show no tender, supposedly feminine behavior. Already he ponders the avenger’s “speech o’ fire, that fain would blaze” for his father were he not shaken at news of his sister’s death. Claudius also hates to learn of this news, but for selfish reasons. Instead of truly mourning for Ophelia, the king regrets that all of his efforts at calming Laertes and directing his rage at Hamlet (rather than himself) have been wasted: “Now fear I this will give it start again.” In some productions this comment marks the moment when Gertrude has a kind of epiphany—when, for the first time, she sees Claudius as a calculating villain. The fourth act ends on notes of both emotional outburst and cold-blooded cunning.

# LIST OF CHARACTERS IN HAMLET



**Hamlet**, prince of Denmark, is the principal character of the play. Though a speech by the gravedigger (Act V, scene 1) puts Hamlet's age at 30, other information suggests that he is younger: He is a student (his classmates at Wittenberg include Horatio, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern), and he is among a trio of young men (with Laertes and Fortinbras) who are only beginning to come into their own. Returning to Denmark, Hamlet attends the funeral of his father, the king, followed hastily by the remarriage of his mother to Claudius, his uncle. Hamlet soon receives a visit by the ghost of his father, who says he was murdered by Claudius. The ghost commands Hamlet to seek revenge, and Hamlet vows to do so. Through his soliloquies, the play showcases Hamlet's philosophical frame of mind, and he does many things—makes fun of Polonius, directs a play, confronts his mother and Ophelia, travels to England, and fights a duel with Laertes—in the time between his promise to the ghost and his actually killing of Claudius in the play's final scene.

**Old Hamlet** is Hamlet's father, who was king of Denmark until being murdered by Claudius in the prehistory of the play. His ghost haunts the play, commanding Hamlet to avenge the murder. Old Hamlet was apparently a powerful warrior in his day, having both defeated Poland and triumphed over the king of Norway in single combat. The ghost of Old Hamlet typically appears to his son in military gear. He occupies a special place in his son's imagination: Hamlet repeatedly describes his father as an ideal of manhood. Yet Hamlet fears that the ghost is not truly the spirit of his father but rather a demon tempting him to kill unjustly and thus damn himself.

**Gertrude** is Hamlet's mother, the widow of Old Hamlet, and the wife of Claudius. She dotes upon her son, but it is unclear how she feels about her first husband or how she relates to her second husband's guilt or her son's accusations. Though presented only sketchily, Gertrude plays a major role in Hamlet's inner life: On several occasions he bitterly complains of her failure to honor Old Hamlet's memory, and his ambivalence about her sexuality seems to affect his

response to Ophelia. Gertrude is killed accidentally at the end of the play, when she drinks poison intended for her son.

**Claudius**, Hamlet's uncle, becomes king of Denmark by killing Old Hamlet and marrying his widow. Though troubled by a guilty conscience and provoked to further villainy by Hamlet's antisocial behavior, Claudius attempts throughout to maintain public order in Denmark. Nonetheless, drunkenness and revelry seem to characterize his court. Claudius orders surveillance of Hamlet and tries, unsuccessfully, to send Hamlet to his death in England. He plots with Laertes to poison Hamlet during a fencing match, then is killed by the poison intended for the prince.

**Horatio** is Hamlet's friend and confidant. Like Hamlet, he has studied at Wittenberg, and he is presented as learned and reliable, though lacking the prince's imaginative brilliance. It is Horatio who first tells Hamlet about the ghost of his father, and he assists Hamlet throughout the play. As Hamlet dies, he makes Horatio promise to report truly on all that has taken place.

**Polonius** is adviser to Claudius and father of Laertes and Ophelia. He is represented as a comically nosy old man who dispenses long-winded and clichéd advice. More darkly, he spies on both of his children and uses Ophelia as a pawn, the latter with disastrous consequences. His snooping is his undoing as well. As he hides behind a tapestry to eavesdrop on Hamlet and his mother, in service to King Claudius, Polonius is killed by Hamlet, who takes him for the king. Polonius's death convinces Claudius that Hamlet must be sent to England and quietly be executed. It also contributes to both Ophelia's madness and Laertes's thirst for vengeance.

**Ophelia** is the daughter of Polonius and sister of Laertes. Though Hamlet has been courting her, Ophelia willingly obeys her father when he tells her to discourage the prince's advances. Later, on more than one occasion, she must endure Hamlet's acerbic remarks. When Polonius is killed, Ophelia loses her sanity; she appears at the court disheveled and singing songs and eventually drowns herself. Ophelia is presented throughout the play as loving, innocent, and obedient, yet her responses to her brother and to Hamlet reveal an underappreciated mental quickness. She is victimized by the rotten state of Denmark and the tragic course of the play.

**Laertes** is the son of Polonius and brother of Ophelia. At the start of the play, Laertes leaves Denmark to resume his studies in France, but he later returns in a rage at the news of his father's death. Laertes is presented throughout the play as Hamlet's peer, rival, and more active, incendiary counterpart. His passionate

desire to avenge his father's murder stands in marked contrast to Hamlet's inaction. In the carnage of the final scene, Laertes kills—and is killed by—Hamlet, but not before he gains Hamlet's forgiveness for his treacherous partnership with Claudius.

**Fortinbras** is the son of the late king of Norway. He is also the leader of an army of "lawless resolute" with which, as the play begins, he plans to recapture the lands that Old Hamlet won from his father in single combat. When the king of Norway forbids the attack, Fortinbras leads his troops into Poland instead. Fortinbras's desire to attack Denmark is an attempt to avenge his father's death; in this regard, Fortinbras, like Laertes, functions in the play as a more aggressive counterpart to Hamlet. During the play's final scene, Fortinbras and his army enter the Danish court just as Hamlet, Laertes, Claudius, and Gertrude are dying. With the support of the dying prince, Fortinbras assumes the mantle of authority in Denmark. He commands that Hamlet be honored as a soldier.

**Rosencrantz and Guildenstern**, old school friends of Hamlet's, are would-be courtiers summoned by Claudius and Gertrude to discover the root of Hamlet's melancholy. Hamlet's treatment of them goes from friendly to scornful as it becomes increasingly clear that they are spying on their friend for the sake of the king's favor. Claudius sends them with Hamlet to England and directs them to deliver his letters to the English king. These letters contain orders for Hamlet's execution, though it is not clear that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern know this. Hamlet steals the letters and replaces them with a forged letter ordering their own execution instead. Later, Hamlet shows no remorse at his lethal trickery. As the play ends, ambassadors from England arrive with news that the pair have been killed.





CRITICISM  
THROUGH THE AGES





# HAMLET

## IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY



In the late 1580s, long before Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was first produced at the Globe Theatre (probably 1600–1601), a play featuring the character of Hamlet appeared on the Elizabethan stage. In 1589 the writer Thomas Nashe alluded to this earlier production in his preface to *Menaphon* by Robert Greene, in which he dismissed the popularity and bombastic style of revenge tragedies. (This was a type of play influenced by the Roman poet Seneca and known for its supernatural elements, extreme violence, and highly rhetorical speeches.) Nashe's attack included wordplay on the emblematic avenger Hamlet: "Yet English Seneca read by candlelight yields many good sentences, as 'Blood is a beggar,' and so forth; and if you entreat him fair in a frosty morning, he will afford you whole Hamlets, I should say handfuls, of tragical speeches." Nearly all performance records for this prior play have vanished, although the theater manager Philip Henslowe recorded in his diary a 1594 performance of *Hamlet*. Thomas Lodge described in *Wits Miserie* (1596) a character as "pale of the Visard of the Ghost which cried so miserably at the Theatre, like an oyster wife, '*Hamlet revenge*,'" and this phrase also appears in Thomas Dekker's *Satiromastix* (1601).

The existence of a precursor to Shakespeare's makes it considerably more difficult to evaluate the immediate influence of Shakespeare's play. The earlier *Hamlet* was popular, and Shakespeare clearly had to acknowledge it when composing his own *Hamlet* years later. This earlier version has traditionally been identified with playwright Thomas Kyd (1558–1594); yet at least a few critics, including Peter Alexander and Harold Bloom, believe Shakespeare was the author of both. If this is so, his first attempt was among the earliest of Shakespeare's works. (On a literary level, perhaps the famous surviving play known as *Hamlet* features two "ghosts": The awkward, older Senecan text "haunts" its more accomplished author even as the ghost of Old Hamlet confronts his son.) The earlier, lost play was clearly a vital source—especially if *Hamlet* was Shakespeare's conscious rewriting of his own immature effort. Noting that the whole story likely seemed "shopworn" to Elizabethan audiences familiar with it for more than a decade, the present-day critic James Shapiro wrote, "In terms of plot *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's least original play."

Literary criticism as it exists today did not develop until the eighteenth century. Therefore the majority of evidence regarding *Hamlet's* influence throughout the seventeenth century takes the form of one-liners, parodies, allusions, diary entries, or eyewitness accounts of the play in performance. These references are by their nature brief. Although they do not warrant individual inclusion, some general account of them is essential if one is to trace the influence of *Hamlet* “through the ages,” so this introduction to criticism in the seventeenth century provides a brief overview.

Despite the textual complexities, one can reasonably infer that a cluster of references in the early seventeenth century react to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. First, they quickly follow the performance and publication (in the so-called first quarto) of Shakespeare's play, which appeared to be a hit: Anthony Scoloker in *Diaphantus, or the Passions of Love* (1604) observed that tragedy “should please all, like Prince Hamlet,” and the first quarto announces that “it hath bene diverse times acted by his highnesse Servants in the cittie of London: as also in the two Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, and elsewhere.” The swift appearance of another published version, the second quarto—“Newlie imprinted and enlarged to almost as much againe as it was”—suggests an eager market for the play.

Some references to the play are satirical: *Eastward Ho* (1605), a work by rival playwrights Ben Jonson, George Chapman, and John Marston, features an oversexed Gertrude, probably named after Hamlet's mother, and her footman—Hamlet. “Hamlet, are you mad?” asks one of the servants upon his first appearance. In addition to Hamlet's feigned insanity, the scene speaks of his youth, echoes Shakespeare's lines about the queen's overhasty marriage, and rather astonishingly parodies the Oedipal subtext (a son's desire for his mother), a subject that would not receive critical attention until the psychoanalytical readings of the twentieth century. *Eastward Ho* also provides a pastiche of one of Ophelia's songs. The authors took part in London's “poets' war” a few years earlier (1599–1602), which comprised attacks, in at least five plays, among three major playwrights—Ben Jonson, John Marston, and Thomas Dekker. Shakespeare seems to have keenly followed this battle, based on references in his plays, including *As You Like It* (c. 1599) and *Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1601). In *Hamlet*, too, Shakespeare alludes to another dimension of the conflict, a “war of the theatres” between the adult actors of London's open-air playhouses and the child actors of indoor theaters. Rosencrantz speaks of upstart actors as “little eyases who berattle the common stages” (II.ii.343), and thus *Eastward Ho's* sendup of Shakespeare's creation may be a form of payback.

More frequently these earlier references are positive, such as a marginal note by the man of letters Gabriel Harvey, which represents the first clear written reference (c. 1600) to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: “The younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeare's Venus & Adonis: but his *Lucrece*, & his tragedie of

*Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke*, have it in them, to please the wiser sort.” Other plays compliment by imitation, whether of dramatic situation or precise phrases and speeches. For example, analogues of Hamlet’s hovering behind a praying Claudius exist in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1607) and John Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* (c. 1629). The playwright Shakerley Marmion and the collaborators Beaumont and Fletcher recast Hamlet’s rancid speeches to his mother, while Robert Armin, Beaumont and Fletcher, Thomas Dekker, and John Heminge all eventually echoed Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy. Numerous passages in Jacobean drama recall Hamlet’s encounter with the ghost, as well as Hamlet’s soliloquy with Yorick’s skull. (This latter scene, however, itself enacts common iconic poses of melancholy and *memento mori*; thus *Hamlet*’s direct influence is again more difficult to determine.) In particular the works of John Marston, including *Antonio’s Revenge* (1601), *The Malcontent* (1604), and *The Insatiate Countess* (1610), reflect a playwright deeply influenced by Shakespeare’s revenge tragedy.

Other references well beyond Shakespeare’s professional theatrical environment soon emerged. In *Sir Thomas Smithes Voyage and Entertainment in Rusbia* (1605), the author described a Russian family’s usurpation of power as “a first, not no second to any Hamlet; and that now Revenge, just Revenge was comming with his Sworde drawne against him [the family’s son], his royall Mother, and dearest Sister, to fill up those Murdering Sceanes. . . .” Here the highly rhetorical warnings of vengeance evoke revenge tragedy generally but more particularly seem to echo the player’s recitation of Pyrrhus’ slaying of Priam in *Hamlet*. There is also reference to the performance of Shakespeare’s play in exotic locales in September 1607, in the diary of William Keeling, captain of the East India Company’s ship *Red Dragon*. Keeling recorded that he hosted a Portuguese official near Sierra Leone: “he broke fast [ate breakfast], and after came aboard me, where we gave the tragedy of Hamlet; and in the afternoon we went all together ashore, to see if we could shoot an elephant. . . .” The captain ordered the performance of *Hamlet* at least one other time, when he explained that it kept his men from sleep and idleness—a practical testament to the theater’s power to entertain.

A more local sign of the play’s initial popularity may be the 1608 publication in London of *The Hystorie of Hamblet*, an English translation of what was likely Shakespeare’s primary source, François de Belleforest’s *Histoires Tragiques* (1570). Derived from a twelfth-century chronicle by Saxo Grammaticus, Belleforest’s narrative about a Danish prince is roughly recognizable, though significant differences abound: The usurping Claudius is called “Fengon”; the character of Gertrude plays a more active role against her new husband; and Hamlet returns from England for a different funeral—his own. For some early readers of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, this translation would have made comparative reading possible. A few chapters from this prose translation are included here

for the insight it provides on Shakespeare's method of composition. Although Shakespeare himself probably used Belleforest's French work, Samuel Johnson (the towering literary figure of eighteenth-century Britain) believed this English version had been available in the 1590s; the nineteenth-century scholar and forger John Payne Collier went so far as to present an "account of expenses, books, &c," presumably from 1595, that listed "Hamblett's historie," thus "proving" Shakespeare had access to it.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* had faced such questionable textual practices far earlier. Although the theaters were shut down in 1642, following the Puritan revolution, traces of *Hamlet* existed in a short piece called "The Gravedigger," which occasionally was performed. The ghost's appearances and the graveyard scene were clearly very popular in the seventeenth century. Similarly, an elegy (c. 1619) written upon the death of Richard Burbage, the lead actor in Shakespeare's major tragedies, describes "young Hamlet" jumping into a grave. (The first quarto features the stage direction that Hamlet jump into Ophelia's grave when confronting Laertes.) As Paul Conklin argued in *A History of "Hamlet" Criticism, 1601–1821* (1947), early audiences regarded the Danish prince as "masculine and primitive," a malcontent avenger far removed from later centuries' more cerebral hero. Perhaps this is why the notorious highwayman Gamaliel Ratsey, after robbing a theater troupe in the early 1600s, encouraged the lead actor to go to London and compete for one role—Hamlet! This aggressive, histrionic emphasis may help explain Robert Gould's puzzling experience of reading Shakespeare in 1685: "Whenever I *Hamlet* or *Othello* read, / My hair starts up, and my Nerves shrink with dread!"

Poet laureate and playwright William Davenant (1606–1668) managed the Duke of York's Players when the theaters reopened soon after the restoration of the monarchy in 1658, and he quickly secured rights to Shakespeare's works. *Hamlet* was among the first plays performed, and the illegal production of it by Davenant's rival playing company attests to a continuing popularity. Samuel Pepys recorded in his diary his attendance at four performances of *Hamlet* throughout the 1660s. Each time he singled out the powerful lead acting of John Betterton, whose long run as Hamlet is probably most responsible for the play's increasing reputation into the eighteenth century. Davenant did not radically alter *Hamlet*, as he did other Shakespearean plays, but he made more than 300 word-choice changes: "To grunt and sweat under a weary life" became "to *groan* and sweat"; "The Divell take thy soule" was transformed into the more Latinate, elegant "Perdition catch thee"; and Hamlet's outburst against that "smiling, damned villain" is completely deleted. In 1676 Davenant published his version of *Hamlet*, and in his brief preface he claimed to have made changes simply because Shakespeare's original play was too long to perform. This problem is true enough for all directors, yet Davenant also consciously "cleaned up" Shakespeare, removing offensive oaths and impious language.

Davenant's alterations were greeted with warm regard at the time, signaling the more sophisticated Restoration sensibility: Readers and theatergoers of the day were more sensitive to neoclassical proprieties. They tended to disapprove of the low characters and language in Shakespeare's plays, as well as the playwright's tendency to mix genres, and some considered the plays too coarse, old-fashioned, and inartistic. Thus John Evelyn, another diarist, wrote in 1661: "I saw *Hamlet* Prince of Denmark played: But now the olde play began to disgust this refined age: since his Majestie being so long abroad." Soon after, Abraham Wright complained in his commonplace book (a kind of diary) that the play's lines were "mean" (rough) and its gravedigger scene inferior to that in a similar work by Thomas Randolph (a decidedly minor writer).

These beliefs were not entirely consistent or universal, however. For instance, despite demands that tragedies maintain a constant high style and nobility of character, a 1674 performance of *Hamlet* featured the dancing of jigs between acts. In addition, the writer Margaret Cavendish memorably defended Shakespeare against his detractors in her *Sociable Letters* (1664) by asserting that his characters spoke appropriately for their station in life. Her well-known praise is not included here because she did not specifically mention characters from *Hamlet*. John Dryden took a similar position, though his relationship to Shakespeare is best characterized as ambivalent. Dryden's opinion was that Shakespeare displayed many shortcomings, "yet by the Genius of Poetry, in Writing he has succeeded." On the other hand, in the preface to his version of *Troilus and Cressida* (1679), Dryden disapproved of the overcharged speeches about Pyrrhus included in *Hamlet*. He felt they were another writer's lines, which had been improperly included in Shakespeare's play. (By contrast, critics today appreciate this passage as Shakespeare's conscious, accomplished pastiche of a popular style of Elizabethan verse.)

Certain critics would never be satisfied, such as the English bishop Jeremy Collier. In 1698 Collier condemned the corrupting nature of everything to do with the nation's theaters in *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*. Nonetheless, James Drake's defense (1699) of Shakespeare's artistry, against the harsh neoclassical attack of Thomas Rymer (1692) on *Othello*, pointed the way to the more sustained, substantive criticism that would follow in the eighteenth century.

### 1605—Ben Jonson, George Chapman, and John Marston. From *Eastward Ho*

Ben Jonson was a poet and playwright (1572–1637) whom many of his contemporaries regarded as England's greatest writer. George



Chapman (1559?-1634) and John Marston (1575-1634) also wrote for the London stage, and all three men excelled at satire. Chapman and Jonson were briefly imprisoned for producing the play *Eastward Ho*, which mocked the Scots who accompanied King James I to the court of England. This satirical play contains several references to *Hamlet*, indicating not only the play's popularity but also perhaps Shakespeare's participation in a rivalry among major playwrights of the time.

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### ACT III, SCENE II

[*An innyard.*]

*Enter a Coachman in haste, in 's frock, feeding.*

*Coach.* Here's a stir when citizens ride out of town, indeed, as if all the house were afire! 'Slight! they will not give a man leave to eat 's breakfast afore he rises.

*Enter HAMLET, a footman, in haste.*

*Ham.* What, coachman! My Lady's coach, for shame! Her Ladyship's ready to come down.

*Exit COACHMAN.*

*Enter POTKIN, a tankard-bearer.*

*Pot.* 'Sfoot, Hamlet, are you mad? Whither run you now? You should brush up my old mistress!

*Exit HAMLET.*

*Enter SINDEFY.*

*Sin.* What, Potkin! You must put off your tankard and put on your blue coat, and wait upon Mistress Touchstone into the country.

*Exit.*

*Pot.* I will, forsooth, presently.

*Exit.*

*Enter MISTRESS FOND and MISTRESS GAZER.*

*Fond.* Come, sweet Mistress Gazer, let's watch here, and see my Lady Flash take coach.

*Gaz.* O' my word, here's a most fine place to stand in; did you see the new ship launch'd last day, Mistress Fond?

*Fond.* O God! an we citizens should lose such a sight!

*Gaz.* I warrant here will be double as many people to see her take coach as there were to see it take water.

*Fond.* Oh, she's married to a most fine castle i' th' country, they say!

*Gaz.* But there are no giants in the castle, are there?

*Fond.* Oh, no; they say her knight kill'd 'em all; and therefore he was knighted.

*Gaz.* Would to God her Ladyship would come away!

*Enter* GERTRUDE, MISTRESS TOUCHSTONE, SINDEFY, HAMLET, *and* POTKIN.

*Fond.* She comes, she comes, she comes!

*Gaz. and Fond.* Pray Heaven bless your Ladyship!

*Ger.* Thank you, good people!—My coach, for the love of Heaven, my coach! In good truth I shall swoon else.

*Ham.* Coach, coach, my lady's coach!

*Exit.*

*Ger.* As I am a lady, I think I am with child already, I long for a coach so. May one be with child afore they are married, Mother?

*Mist. T.* Ay, by'r Lady, madam; a little thing does that: I have seen a little prick no bigger then a pin's head swell bigger and bigger, till it has come to an ancome; and e'en so 'tis in these cases.

*Re-enter* HAMLET.

*Ham.* Your coach is coming, madam.

*Ger.* That's well said. — Now, Heaven! methinks I am e'en up to the knees in preferment.

[*singing*]

But a little higher, but a little higher, but a little higher,  
There, there, there lies Cupid's fire!

*Mist. T.* But must this young man, an 't please you, madam, run by your coach all the way afoot?

*Ger.* Ay, by my faith, I warrant him; he gives no other milk, as I have another servant does.

*Mist. T.* Alas! 'tis e'en pity, methinks; for God's sake, madam, buy him but a hobby-horse; let the poor youth have something betwixt his legs to ease 'em. Alas! we must do as we would be done to.

*Ger.* Go to, hold your peace, dame; you talk like an old fool, I tell you!

*Enter* PETRONEL *and* QUICKSILVER.

*Pet.* Wilt thou be gone, sweet honeysuckle, before I can go with thee?

*Ger.* I pray thee, sweet knight, let me; I do so long to dress up thy castle afore thou com'st. But I mar'l how my modest sister occupies herself this morning, that she cannot wait on me to my coach, as well as her mother.

*Quick.* Marry, madam, she's married by this time to prentice Golding. Your father, and someone more, stole to church with 'em in all the haste, that the cold meat left at your wedding might serve to furnish their nuptial table.

*Ger.* There's no base fellow, my father, now; but he's e'en fit to father such a daughter. He must call me "daughter" no more now, but "madam," and "please you, madam"; and "please your Worship, madam," indeed. Out upon him! marry his daughter to a base prentice?

*Mist. T.* What should one do? Is there no law for one that marries a woman's daughter against her will? How shall we punish him, madam?

*Ger.* As I am a lady, an 't would snow, we'd so pebble 'em with snowballs as they come from church; but, sirrah, Frank Quicksilver —

*Quick.* Ay, madam.

*Ger.* Dost remember since thou and I clapp'd what-d'ye-call'ts in the garret?

*Quick.* I know not what you mean, madam.

*Ger.* [*singing*]

His head as white as milk,  
All flaxen was his hair;  
But now he is dead,  
And laid in his bed,  
And never will come again.  
God be at your labor!



## 1608—François de Belleforest. Chapters 2–5 from *The Hystorie of Hamblet*

François de Belleforest (1530–1583) was a French writer who collected dozens of tragic stories in *Le Cinquiesme Tome des Histoires Tragiques*, published in 1570. An anonymous translator produced an English version of this very popular work in 1608, of which chapters 2–5 tell the *Hystorie of Hamblet*. Belleforest's collection was one of the main sources for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

### Chapter II

How Hamblet counterfeited the mad man, to escape the tyrannie of his uncle, and how he was tempted by a woman (through his uncles procurement) who thereby thought to undermine the Prince, and by

that meanes to finde out whether he counterfeited madnesse or not: and how Hamblet would by no meanes bee brought to consent unto her, and what followed.

Geruth having (as I sayd before) so much forgotten herself, the prince Hamblet perceiving himself to bee in danger of his life, as beeing abandoned of his owne mother, and forsaken of all men, and assuring himselfe that Fengon would not detract the time to send him the same way his father Horvendile was gone, to beguile the tyrant in his subtilties (that esteemed him to bee of such a minde that if he once attained to mans estate he wold not long delay the time to revenge the death of his father) counterfeiting the mad man with such craft and subtility practises, that hee made shewe as if hee had utterly lost his wittes: and under that vayle hee covered his pretence, and defended his life from the treasons and practises of the tyrant his uncle. And all though hee had beene at the schoole of the Romane Prince, who, because hee counterfeited himselfe to bee a foole, was called Brutus, yet hee imitated his fashions, and his wisdom. For every day beeing in the queenes palace, (who as then was more carefull to please her whoremaster, then ready to revenge the cruell death of her husband, or to restore her sonne to his inheritance), hee rent and tore his clothes, wallowing and lying in the durt and mire, his face all filthy and blacke, running through the streets like a man distraught, not speaking one worde, but such as seemed to proceede of madnesse and meere frenzie; all his actions and jestures beeing no other than the right countenances of a man wholly deprived of all reason and understanding, in such sort, that as then hee seemed fitte for nothing but to make sport to the pages and ruffling courtiers that attended in the court of his uncle and father-in-law. But the yong prince noted them well enough, minding one day to bee revenged in such manner, that the memorie thereof should remaine perpetually to the world.

Beholde, I pray you, a great point of a wise and brave spirite in a yong prince, by so great a shewe of imperfection in his person for advancement, and his owne imbasing and despising, to worke the meanes and to prepare the way for himselfe to bee one of the happiest kings in his age. In like sort, never any man was reputed by any of his actions more wise and prudent then Brutus, dissembling a great alteration in his minde, for that the occasion of such his devise of foolishnesse proceeded onely of a good and mature counsell and deliberation, not onely to preserve his goods, and shunne the rage of the proude tyrant, but also to open a large way to procure the banishment and utter ruine of wicked Tarquinius, and to infranchise the people (which were before oppressed) from the yoake of a great and miserable servitude.

And so, not onely Brutus, but this man and worthy prince, to whom wee may also adde king David, that counterfeited the madde man among the petie kings of Palestina to preserve his life from the subtility practises of those kings.

I shew this example unto such, as beeing offended with any great personage, have not sufficient meanes to prevaile in their intents, or revenge the injurie by them receaved. But when I speake of revenging any injury received upon a great personage or superior, it must be understood by such an one as is not our soveraigne, againste whom wee maie by no meanes resiste, nor once practise anie treason nor conspiracie against his life: and hee that will followe this course must speake and do all things whatsoever that are pleasing and acceptable to him whom hee meaneth to deceive, practise his actions, and esteeme him above all men, cleane contrarye to his owne intent and meaning; for that is rightly to playe and counterfeite the foole, when a man is constrained to dissemble and kisse his hand, whome in hearte hee could wishe an hundred foote depth under the earth, so hee mighte never see him more, if it were not a thing wholly to bee disliked in a christian, who by no meanes ought to have a bitter gall, or desires infected with revenge. Hamblet, in this sorte counterfeiting the madde man, many times did divers actions of great and deepe consideration, and often made such and so fitte answeres, that a wise man would soone have judged from what spirite so fine an invention mighte proceede; for that standing by the fire and sharpening sticks like poyiards and prickes, one in smiling manner asked him wherefore he made those little staves so sharpe at the points? I prepare (saith he) piercing dartes and sharpe arrowes to revenge my fathers death. Fooles, as I said before, esteemed those his words as nothing; but men of quicke spirits, and such as hadde a deeper reache began to suspect somewhat, esteeming that under that kinde of folly there lay hidden a greate and rare subtilty, such as one day might bee prejudiciall to their prince, saying, that under colour of such rudenes he shadowed a crafty pollicy, and by his devised simplicitye, he concealed a sharp and pregnant spirit: for which cause they counselled the king to try and know, if it were possible, how to discover the intent and meaning of the yong prince; and they could find no better nor more fit invention to intrap him, then to set some faire and beawtiful woman in a secret place, that with flattering speeches and all the craftiest meanes she could use, should purposely seek to allure his mind to have his pleasure of her: for the nature of all young men, (especially such as are brought up wantonlie) is so transported with the desires of the flesh, and entreth so greedily into the pleasures therof, that it is almost impossible to cover the foul affection, neither yet to dissemble or hyde the same by art or industry, much lesse to shunne it. What cunning or subtilty so ever they use to cloak their pretence, seeing occasion offered, and that in secret, especially in the most inticing sinne that rayneth in man, they cannot chuse (being constraigned by voluptuousnesse) but fall to naturall effect and working. To this end certaine courtiers were appointed to leade Hamblet into a solitary place within the woods, whether they brought the woman, inciting him to take their pleasures together, and to imbrace one another, but the subtill practises used in these our daies, not to try if men of great account bee extract out of their wits, but rather to deprive

them of strength, vertue and wisdom, by meanes of such devilish practitioners, and infernall spirits, their domestical servants, and ministers of corruption. And surely the poore prince at this assault had bin in great danger, if a gentleman (that in Horvendiles time had been nourished with him) had not showne himselfe more affectioned to the bringing up he had received with Hamblet, then desirous to please the tirant, who by all meanes sought to intangle the sonne in the same nets wherein the father had ended his dayes. This gentleman bare the courtiers (appointed as aforesaide of this treason) company, more desiring to give the prince instruction what he should do, then to intrap him, making full account that the least shoue of perfect sence and wisdom that Hamblet should make would be sufficient to cause him to loose his life: and therefore by certain signes, he gave Hamblet intelligence in what danger hee was like to fall, it by any meanes hee seemed to obaye, or once like the wanton toys and vicious provocations of the gentlewoman sent thither by his uncle. Which much abashed the prince, as then wholly beeing in affection to the lady, but by her he was likewise informed of the treason, as being one that from her infancy loved and favoured him, and would have been exceeding sorrowfull for his misfortune, and much more to leave his companie without injoying the pleasure of his body, whome shee loved more than herselfe. The prince in this sort having both deceived the courtiers, and the ladies expectation, that affirmed and swore that hee never once offered to have his pleasure of the woman, although in subtilty hee affirmed the contrary, every man there upon assured themselves that without all doubt he was distraught of his senses, that his braynes were as then wholly void of force, and incapable of reasonable apprehension, so that as then Fengons practise took no effect: but for al that he left not off, still seeking by al meanes to finde out Hamblets subtilty, as in the next chapter you shall perceive.

### Chapter III

How Fengon, uncle to Hamblet, a second time to intrap him in his politick madnes, caused one of his counsellors to be secretly hidden in the queenes chamber, behind the arras, to heare what speeches passed between Hamblet and the Queen; and how Hamblet killed him, and escaped that danger, and what followed.

Among the friends of Fengon, there was one that above al the rest doubted of Hamblets practises in counterfeiting the madman, who for that cause said, that it was impossible that so craftie a gallant as Hamblet, that counterfeited the foole, should be discovered with so common and unskilfull practises, which might easily bee perceived, and that to finde out his politique pretence it were necessary to invent some subtile and crafty meanes, more attractive, whereby the gallant might not have the leysure to use his accustomed dissimulation; which to effect he said he knewe a fit waie, and a most convenient meane to effect the

kings desire, and thereby to intrap Hamblet in his subtilties, and cause him of his owne accord to fall into the net prepared for him, and thereby evidently shewe his secret meaning. His devise was thus, that King Fengon should make as though he were to goe some long voyage concerning affaires of great importance, and that in the meane time Hamblet should be shut up alone in a chamber with his mother, wherein some other should secretly be hidden behind the hangings, unknowne either to him or his mother, there to stand and heere their speeches, and the complots by them to bee taken concerning the accomplishment of the dissembling fooles pretence; assuring the king that if there were any point of wisdom and perfect sence in the gallants spirit, that without all doubt he would easily discover it to his mother, as being devoid of all feare that she would utter or make knowne his secret intent, beeing the woman that had borne him in her bodie, and nourished him so carefully; and withall offered himselfe to be the man that should stand to harken and beare witness of Hamblets speeches with his mother, that hee might not be esteemed a counsellor in such a case wherein he refused to be the executioner for the behoofe and service of his prince. This invention pleased the king exceeding well, esteeming it as the onelie and soveraigne remedie to heale the Prince of his lunacie; and to that ende making a long voyage, issued out of his pallace, and rode to hunt in the forrest. Meane time the counsellor entred secretly into the queenes chamber, and there hid himselfe behind the arras, not long before the queene and Hamblet came thither, who beeing craftie and pollitique, as soone as hee was within the chamber, doubting some treason, and fearing if he should speake severely and wisely to his mother touching his secret practises he should be understood, and by that meanes intercepted, used his ordinary manner of dissimulation, and began to crowe like a cocke beating with his armes, (in such manner as cockes use to strike with their wings) upon the hangings of the chamber: whereby, feeling something stirring under them, he cried, A rat, a rat! and presently drawing his sworde thrust it into the hangings, which done, pulled the counsellour (halfe dead) out by the heeles, made an end of killing him, and beeing slaine, cut his bodie in pieces, which he caused to be boyled, and then cast it into an open vaulte or privie, that so it mighte serve for foode to the hogges. By which meanes having discovered the ambushe, and given the inventer thereof his just rewarde, hee came againe to his mother, who in the meane time wepte and tormented her selfe to see all her hopes frustrate, for that what fault soever she had committed, yet was shее sore grieved to see her onely child made a meere mockery, every man reproaching her with his folly, one point whereof she had as then seene before her eyes, which was no small pricke to her conscience, esteeming that the gods sent her that punishment for joyning incestuously in marriage with the tyrannous murtherer of her husband, who like wise ceased not to invent all the means he could to bring his nephew to his ende, accusing his owne naturall indiscretion, as beeing the ordinary guide of those that so much desire the

pleasures of the bodie, who shutting up the waie to all reason, respect not what maie ensue of their lightnes and great inconstancy, and how a pleasure of small moment is sufficient to give them cause of repentance during their lives, and make them curse the daye and time that ever any such apprehensions entred into their mindes, or that they closed their eies to reject the honestie requisite in ladies of her qualitie, and to despise the holy institution of those dames that had gone before her, both in nobilitie and vertue, calling to mind the great prayses and commendations given by the danes to Rinde, daughter to king Rothere, the chastest lady in her time, and withall so shamefast that she would never consent to marriage with any prince or knight whatsoever; surpassing in vertue all the ladyes of her time, as shee herselfe surmounted them in beawtie, good behaviour, and comelines. And while in this sort she sate tormenting herselfe, Hamlet entred into the chamber, who having once againe searched every corner of the same, distrusting his mother as well as the rest, and perceiving himselfe to bee alone, began in sober and discreet manner to speak unto her, saying, What treason is this, O most infamous woman! of all that ever prostrated themselves to the will of an abhominable whore monger, who, under the vail of a dissembling creature, covereth the most wicked and detestable crime that man could ever imagine, or was committed. How may I be assured to trust you, that like a vile wanton adultresse, altogether impudent and given over to her pleasure, runnes spreading forth her armes joyfully to imbrace the trayterous villanous tyrant that murdered my father, and most incestuously receivest the villain into the lawfull bed of your loyall spouse, imprudently entertaining him in steede of the deare father of your miserable and discomforted sonne, if the gods grant him not the grace speedilie to escape from a captivity so unworthie the degree he holdeth, and the race and noble familie of his ancestors. Is this the part of a queene, and daughter to a king? to live like a brute beast (and like a mare that yieldeth her bodie to the horse that hath beaten hir companion awaye), to followe the pleasure of an abhominable king that hath murdered a farre more honeste and better man then himselfe in massacring Horvendile, the honor and glory of the Danes, who are now esteemed of no force nor valour at all, since the shining splendure of knighthood was brought to an end by the most wickedest and cruellest villaine living upon earth. I, for my part, will never account him for my kinsman, nor once knowe him for mine uncle, nor you my deer mother, for not having respect to the blud that ought to have united us so straightly together, and who neither with your honor nor without suspicion of consent to the death of your husband could ever have agreed to have marryed with his cruell enimie. O, queene Geruthe, it is the part of a bitch to couple with many, and desire acquaintance of divers mastiffes: it is licentiousnes only that hath made you deface out of your minde the memory of the valor and vertues of the good king your husband and my father: it was an unbrideled desire that guided the daughter of Roderick to imbrace the tyrant Fengon, and not to remember Horvendile



(unworthy of so strange intertainment), neither that he killed his brother traiterously, and that shee being his fathers wife betrayed him, although he so well favoured and loved her, that for her sake he utterly bereaved Norway of her riches and valiant souldiers to augment the treasures of Roderick, and make Geruthe wife to the hardyest prince in Europe: it is not the parte of a woman, much lesse of a princesse, in whome all modesty, curtesse, compassion, and love ought to abound, thus to leave her deare child to fortune in the bloody and murtherous hands of a villain and traytor. Bruite beasts do not so, for lyons, tygers, ounces and leopards fight for the safety and defence of their whelpes; and birds that have beakes, claws, and wings, resist such as would ravish them of their yong ones; but you, to the contrary, expose and deliver mee to death, whereas ye should defend me. Is not this as much as if you should betray me, when you knowing the perversenes of the tyrant and his intents, ful of deadly counsell as touching the race and image of his brother, have not once sought, nor desired to finde the meanes to save your child (and only son) by sending him into Swethland, Norway, or England, rather than to leave him as a prey to youre infamous adulterer? bee not offended, I praye you, Madame, if transported with dolour and griefe, I speake so boldely unto you, and that I respect you lesse then duetie requireth; for you, having forgotten mee, and wholly rejected the memorye of the deceased K, my father, must not bee abashed if I also surpasse the bounds and limits of due consideration. Beholde into what distresse I am now fallen, and to what mischiefe my fortune, and your over great lightnesse, and want of wisdome have induced mee, that I am constrained to playe the madde man to save my life, in steed of using and practising armes, following adventures, and seeking all meanes to make my selfe knowne to bee the true and undoubted heire of the valiant and vertuous king Horvendile. It was not without cause, and juste occasion, that my gestures, countenances, and words, seeme all to proceed from a madman, and that I desire to have all men esteeme mee wholly deprived of sence and reasonable understanding, bycause I am well assured, that he that hath made no conscience to kill his owne brother, (accustomed to murthers, and allured with desire of government without controll in his treasons), will not spare, to save himselfe with the like crueltie, in the blood and flesh of the loyns of his brother by him massacred: and, therefore, it is better for me to fayne madnesse, then to use my right sences as nature hath bestowed them upon me; the bright shining clearnes therof I am forced to hide under this shadow of dissimulation, as the sun doth hir beams under some great cloud, when the wether in sommer time overcasteth. The face of a mad man serveth to cover my gallant countenance, and the gestures of a fool are fit for me, to the end that guiding my self wisely therein, I may preserve my life for the Danes, and the memory of my late deceased father; for the desire of revenging his death is so engraven in my heart, that if I dye not shortly, I hope to take such and so great vengeance, that these countryes shall for ever speake thereof. Neverthesse, I

must stay the time, meanes, and occasion, lest by making over great hast, I be now the cause of mine owne sodaine ruine and overthrow, and by that meanes end before I beginne to effect my hearts desire. Hee that hath to doe with a wicked, disloyall, cruell, and discourteous man must use craft and politike inventions, such as a fine witte can best imagine, not to discover his interprise; for seeing that by force I cannot effect my desire, reason alloweth me by dissimulation, subtiltie, and secret practises to proceed therein. To conclude, weepe not (madame) to see my folly, but rather sigh and lament your owne offence, tormenting your conscience in regard of the infamie that hath so defiled the ancient renowne and glorie that (in times past) honoured queene Geruth; for wee are not to sorrowe and grieve at other mens vices, but for our owne misdeedes, and great follies. Desiring you, for the surplus of my proceedings, above all things (as you love your owne life and welfare) that neither the king nor any other may by any meanes know mine intent; and let me alone with the rest, for I hope in the ende to bring my purpose to effect.

Although the queene perceived herselfe neerly touched, and that Hamlet mooved her to the quicke, where she felt herselfe interested, neverthesse shee forgot all disdain and wrath, which thereby she might as then have had, hearing her selfe so sharply chiden and reprooved, for the joy she then conceived, to behold the gallant spirit of her sonne, and to thinke what she might hope, and the easier expect of his so great policie and wisdom. But on the one side she durst not lift up her eyes to beholde him, remembering her offence, and on the other side she would gladly have imbraced her son, in regard of the wise admonitions by him given unto her, which as then quenched the flames of unbridled desire that before had moved her to affect K. Fengon, to ingraff in her heart the vertuous actions of her lawfull spouse, whom inwardly she much lamented, when she beheld the lively image and portraiture of his vertue and great wisdom in her childe, representing his fathers haughtie and valiant heart: and so, overcome and vanquished with this honest passion, and weeping most bitterly, having long time fixed her eyes upon Hamlet, as beeing ravished into some great and deepe contemplation, and as it were wholly amazed, at the last imbracing him in her armes (with the like love that a vertuous mother may or can use to kisse and entertaine her owne childe), shee spake unto him in this manner.

I know well (my sonne) that I have done thee great wrong in marrying with Fengon, the cruell tyrant and murtherer of thy father, and my loyall spouse: but when thou shalt consider the small meanes of resistance, and the treason of the palace, with the little cause of confidence we are to expect or hope for of the courtiers, all wrought to his will, as also the power hee made ready, if I should have refused to like of him, thou wouldest rather excuse then accuse me of lasciviousnes or inconstancy, much lesse offer me that wrong to suspect that ever thy mother Geruthe once consented to the death and murther of her husband: swearing unto thee (by the majestie of the Gods) that if it had layne in my power

to have resisted the tyrant, although it had beene with the losse of my blood, yea and my life, I would surely have saved the life of my lord and husband, with as good a will and desire as, since that time, I have often beene a meanes to hinder and impeach the shortning of thy life, which being taken away, I will no longer live here upon earth. For seeing that thy sences are whole and round, I am in hope to see an easie meanes invented for the revenging of thy fathers death. Neverthesse, mine owne sweet sonne, if thou hast pittie of thy selfe, or care of the memorie of thy father (although thou wilt do nothing for her that deserveth not the name of a mother in this respect), I pray thee, carie thine affayres wisely: bee not hastie, nor over furious in thy interprises, neither yet advance thy selfe more then reason shall moove thee to effect thy purpose. Thou seest there is not almost any man wherein thou mayest put thy trust, nor any woman to whom I dare utter the least part of my secrets, that would not presently report it to thine adversarie, who, although in outward shew he dissembleth to love thee, the better to enjoy his pleasures of me, yet hee distrusteth and feareth mee for thy sake, and is not so simple to be easily perswaded that thou art a foole or mad; so that if thou chance to doe anything that seemeth to proceed of wisdom or policie (how secretly soever it be done) he will presently be informed thereof, and I am greatly afraide that the devils have shewed him what hath past at this present between us, (fortune so much pursueth and contrarieth our ease and welfare) or that this murther that now thou has committed be not the cause of both our destructions, which I by no meanes will seeme to know, but will keepe secret both thy wisdom and hardy interprise; beseeching the Gods (my good soone) that they, guiding thy heart, directing thy counsels, and prospering thy interprise, I may see thee possesse and enjoy that which is thy right, and weare the crowne of Denmarke, by the tyrant taken from thee; that I may rejoyce in thy prosperitie, and therewith content my self, seeing with what courage and boldnesse thou shalt take vengeance upon the murtherer of thy father, as also upon all those that have assisted and favoured him in his murtherous and bloody enterprise. Madame (sayd Hamlet) I will put my trust in you, and from henceforth meane not to meddle further with your affayres, beseeching you (as you love your owne flesh and blood) that you will from hence forth no more esteeme of the adulterer, mine enimie whom I wil surely kill, or cause to be put to death, in despite of all the devils in hel: and have he never so manie flattering courtezans to defend him, yet will I bring him to his death, and they themselves also shall beare him company therein, as they have bin his perverse counsellors in the action of killing my father, and his companions in his treason, massacre and cruell enterprise. And reason requireth that, even as trayterously they then caused their prince to be put to death, that with the like (nay well, much more) justice they should pay the interest of their felonious actions.

You know (Madame) how Hother your grandfather, and father to the good king Roderick, having vanquished Guimon, caused him to be burnt, for that

the cruell villain had done the like to his lord Gevare, whom he betrayed in the night time. And who knoweth not that traytors and perjured persons deserve no faith nor loyaltie to be observed towards them, and that conditions made with murtherers ought to bee esteemed as cobwebs, and accounted as if they were things never promised nor agreed upon: but if I lay handes upon Fengon, it will neither be fellonie nor treason, hee being neither my king nor my lord, but I shall justly punish him as my subject, that hath disloyaly behaved himselfe against his lord and soveraigne prince. And seeing that glory is the rewarde of the vertuous, and the honour and praise of those that do service to their naturall prince, why should not blame and dishonour accompany traytors, and ignominious death al those that dare be so bold as to lay violent hands upon sacred kings, that are friends and companions of the gods, as representing their majestie and persons. To conclude, glorie is the crown of vertue, and the price of constancie; and seeing that it never accompanieth with infelicitie, but shunneth cowardize and spirits of base and trayterous conditions, it must necessarily followe, that either a glorious death will be mine ende, or with my sword in hand, (laden with tryumph and victorie) I shall bereave them of their lives that made mine unfortunate, and darkened the beames of that vertue which I possessed from the blood and famous memory of my predecessors. For why should men desire to live, when shame and infamie are the executioners that torment their consciences, and villany is the cause that withholdeth the heart from valiant interprises, and diverteth the minde from honest desire of glorie and commendation, which indureth for ever? I know it is foolishly done to gather fruit before it is ripe, and to seeke to enjoy a benefit, not knowing whither it belong to us of right; but I hope to effect it so well, and have so great confidence in my fortune (that hitherto hath guided the action of my life) that I shall not dye without revenging my selfe upon mine enemie, and that himselfe shall be the instrument of his owne decay, and to execute that which of my selfe I durst not have enterprised.

After this, Fengon (as if hee had beene out some long journey) came to the court againe, and asked for him that had received the charge to play the intelligencer, to entrap Hamlet in his dissembled wisdom, was abashed to heare neither newes nor tydings of him, and for that cause asked Hamlet what was become of him, naming the man. The prince that never used lying, and who in all the answers that ever he made (during his counterfeit madnesse) never strayed from the trueth (as a generous minde is a mortal enemie to untruth) answered and sayd, that the counsellor he sought for was gone downe through the privie, where being choaked by the filthynesse of the place, the hogs meeting him had filled their bellyes.

### Chapter IIII

How Fengon the third time devised to send Hamblet to the king of England, with secret letters, to have him put to death: and how

Hamlet, when his companions slept, read the letters, and instead of them counterfeited others, willing the king of England to put the two messengers to death, and to marry his daughter to Hamlet, which was effected; and how Hamlet escaped out of England.

A man would have judged anything, rather than that Hamlet had committed that murder, nevertheless Fengon could not content himself, but still his minde gave him that the foole would play him some trick of liegerdemaine, and willingly would have killed him, but he feared king Rodericke, his grandfather, and further durst not offend the queene, mother to the foole whom she loved and much cherished, shewing great griefe and heavinesse to see him so transported out of his wits. And in that conceit, seeking to bee rid of him, determined to finde the meanes to doe it by the ayde of a stranger, making the king of England minister of his massacreing resolution, choosing rather that his friende should defile his renowne with so great a wickednesse, then himselfe to fall into perpetuall infamie by an exploit of so great crueltie, to whom hee purposed to send him, and by letters desire him to put him to death.

Hamlet, understanding that he should be sent into England, presently doubted the occasion of his voyage, and for that cause speaking to the queene, desired her not to make any shew of sorrow or griefe for his departure, but rather counterfeit a gladnesse, as being rid of his presence; whom, although she loved, yet she dayly grieved to see him in so pittifull estate, deprived of all sence and reason: desiring her further, that she should hang the hall with tapestrie, and make it fast with nayles upon the walles, and keepe the brands for him which hee had sharpened at the points, then, when as he said he made arrowes to revenge the death of his father: lastly, he counselled her, that the yeere after his departure being accomplished, she should celebrate his funerals; assuring her that at the same instant she should see him returne with great contentment and pleasure unto her for that his voyage. Now, to beare him company were assigned two of Fengons faithfull ministers, bearing letters ingraved in wood, that contained Hamlet's death, in such sort as he had advertised the king of England. But the subtile Danish prince (beeing at sea) whilst his companions slept, having read the letters, and knowne his uncles great treason, with the wicked and villainous mindes of the two courtiers that led him to the slaughter, rased out the letters that concerned his death, and in stead thereof graved others, with commission to the king of England to hang his two companions; and not content to turne the death they had devised against him upon their owne neckes, wrote further, that king Fengon willed him to give his daughter to Hamlet in marriage. And so arriving in England, the messengers presented themselves to the king, giving him Fengons letters; who having read the contents, sayd nothing as then, but stayed convenient time to effect Fengons desire, meane time using the Danes familiarly,

doing them that honour to sit at his table (for that kings as then were not so curiously, nor solemnly served as in these our dayes), for in these dayes meane kings, and lords of small reuene are as difficult and hard to bee seene, as in times past the monarches of Persia used to bee: or as it is reported of the great king of Aethyopia, who will not permit any man to see his face, which ordinarily hee covereth with a vaile. And as the messengers sate at the table with the king, subtile Hamlet was so far from being merry with them, that he would not taste one bit of meate, bread, nor cup of beare whatsoever, as then set upon the table, not without great wondering of the company, abashed to see a yong man and a stranger not to esteeme of the delicate meates and pleasant drinckes served at the banquet, rejecting them as things filthy, evill of tast, and worse prepared. The king, who for that time dissembled what he thought, caused his ghests to be conveyed into their chamber, willing one of his secret servantes to hide himselfe therein, and so to certifie him what speeches past among the Danes at their going to bed.

Now they were no sooner entred into the chamber, and those that were appointed to attend upon them gone out, but Hamlet's companions asked him, why he refused to eate and drinke of that which hee found upon the table, not honouring the banquet of so great a king, that entertained them in friendly sort, with such honour and courtesie as it deserved? saying further, that hee did not well, but dishonoured him that sent him, as if he sent men into England that feared to bee poysoned by so great a king. The prince, that had done nothing without reason and prudent consideration, answered them, and sayd: What, think you, that I wil eat bread dipt in humane blood, and defile my throate with the rust of yron, and use that meat that stinketh and savoureth of mans flesh, already putrified and corrupted, and that senteth like the savour of a dead carryon, long since cast into a valt? and how woulde you have mee to respect the king, that hath the countenance of a slave; and the queene, who in stead of great majestie, hath done three things more like a woman of base parentage, and fitter for a waiting gentlewoman then beseeming a lady of her qualitie and estate. And having sayd so, used many injurious and sharpe speeches as well against the king and queene, as others that had assisted at that banquet for the intertainment of the Danish ambassadors; and therein Hamlet said trueth, as hereafter you shall heare, for that in those dayes, the north parts of the worlde, living as then under Sathans lawes, were full of inchanters, so that there was not any yong gentleman whatsoever that knew not something therein sufficient to serve his turne, if need required: as yet in those dayes in Gothland and Biarmy, there are many that knew not what the Christian religion permitteth, as by reading the histories of Norway and Gothland, you maie easilie perceive: and so Hamlet, while his father lived, had bin instructed in that devilish art, whereby the wicked spirite abusethe mankind, and advertiseth him (as he can) of things past.

It toucheth not the matter herein to discover the parts of devination in man, and whether this prince, by reason of his over great melancholy, had received those impressions, devining that, which never any but himselfe had before declared, like the philosophers, who discoursing of divers deep points of philosophie, attribute the force of those divinations to such as are saturnists by complection, who oftentimes speake of things which, their fury ceasing, they then alreadye can hardly understand who are the pronouncers; and for that cause Plato saith, many deviners and many poets, after the force and vigour of their fier beginneth to lessen, do hardly understand what they have written, although intreating of such things, while the spirite of devination continueth upon them, they doe in such sorte discourse thereof that the authors and inventers of the arts themselves by them alledged, commend their discourses and subtile disputations. Likewise I mean not to relate that which divers men beleeve, that a reasonable soul becometh the habitation of a meaner sort of devils, by whom men learn the secrets of things natural; and much lesse do I account of the supposed governors of the world fained by magicians, by whose means they brag to effect mervailous things. It would seeme miraculous that Hamlet should divine in that sort, which after proved so true (if as I said before) the devil had not knowledg of things past, but to grant it he knoweth things to come I hope you shall never finde me in so grosse an error. You will compare and make equall derivation, and conjecture with those that are made by the spirit of God, and pronounced by the holy prophets, that tasted of that marvelous science, to whome onely was declared the secrets and wondrous workes of the Almighty. Yet there are some imposturious companions that impute so much devinitie to the devell, the father of lyes, that they attribute unto him the truth of the knowledge of thinges that shall happen unto men, alledging the conference of Saul with the witch, although one example out of the Holy Scriptures, specially set downe for the condemnation of wicked man, is not of force to give a sufficient law to all the world; for they themselves confesse that they can devine, not according to the universal cause of things, but by signes borrowed from such like causes, which are all waies alike, and by those conjectures they can give judgement of thinges to come, but all this beeing grounded upon a weake support, (which is a simple conjecture) and having so slender a foundation, as some foolish or late experience the fictions being voluntarie, it should be a great folly in a man of good judgment, specially one that imbraceth the preaching of the gossell, and seeketh after no other but the trueth thereof, to repose upon any of these likelihoods or writings full of deceit.

As touching magical operations, I will grant them somewhat therein, finding divers histories that write thereof, and that the Bible maketh mention, and forbiddeth the use thereof: yea, the lawes of the gentiles and ordinances of emperors have bin made against it in such sort, that Mahomet, the great hereticke and friend of the devell, by whose subtiltyes hee abused most part

of the east countries, hath ordained great punishments for such as use and practise those unlawfull and damnable arts, which, for this time leaving of, let us returne to Hamblet, brought up in these abuses, according to the manner of his country, whose companions hearing his answere reproached him of folly, saying that hee could by no meanes show a greater point of indiscretion, then in despising that which is lawfull, and rejecting that which all men received as a necessary thing, and that hee had not grossely so forgotten himself as in that sort to accuse such and so excellent a man as the king of England, and to slander the queene, being then as famous and wise a princes as any at that day raigning in the ilands thereabouts, to cause him to be punished according to his deserts; but he, continuing in his dissimulation, mocked him, saying that hee had not done anything that was not good and most true. On the other side, the king being advertised thereof by him that stood to heare the discourse, judged presently that Hamlet, speaking so ambiguously, was either a perfect foole, or else one of the wisest princes in his time, answering so sodainly, and so much to the purpose upon the demaund by his companions made touching his behaviour; and the better to find the trueth, caused the bakler to be sent for, of whome inquiring in what place the corne grew whereof he made bread for his table, and whether in that ground there were not some signes or newes of a battaile fought, whereby humane blood had therein been shed? the bakler answered that not far from thence there lay a field ful of dead mens bones, in times past slaine in a battaile, as by the greate heapes of wounded sculles mighte well appeare, and for that the ground in that parte was become fertiler then other grounds, by reason of the fatte and humours of the dead bodies, that every yeer the farmers used there to have in the best wheat they could finde to serve his majesties house. The king perceiving it to be true, according to the yong princes wordes, asked where the hogs had bin fed that were killed to be served at his table? and answere was made him, that those hogs getting out of the said fielde wherein they were kepte, had found the bodie of a thiefe that had beene hanged for his demerits, and had eaten thereof: whereat the king of England beeing abashed, would needs know with what water the beer he used to drinke of had beene brued? which having knowne, he caused the river to bee digged somewhat deeper, and therin found great store of swords and rustie armours, that gave an ill savour to the drinke. It were good I should heere dilate somewhat of Merlins prophesies, which are said to be spoken of him before he was fully one yeere old; but if you consider wel what hath alreddy been spoken, it is no hard matter to divine of things past, although the minister of Sathan therein played his part, giving sodaine and prompt answeres to this yong prince, for that herein are nothing but natural things, such as were wel known to be true, and therefore not needfull to dreame of things to come. This knowne, the king, greatly moved with a certaine curiositie to knowe why the Danish prince saide that he had the countenance of a slave, suspecting



thereby that he reproached the basenes of his blood, and that he wold affirme that never any prince had bin his sire, wherin to satisfie himselfe he went to his mother, and leading her into a secret chamber, which he shut as soone as they were entred, desired her of her honour to shewe him of whome he was ingendred in this world. The good lady, wel assured that never any man had bin acquainted with her love touching any other man then her husband, sware that the king her husband onely was the man that had enjoyed the pleasures of her body; but the king her sonne, alreadie with the truth of the Danish princes answers, threatned his mother to make her tell by force, if otherwise she would not confesse it, who for feare of death acknowledged that she had prostrated her body to a slave, and made him father to the king of England; whereat the king was abashed, and wholly ashamed. I give them leave to judge who esteeming themselves honester than their neighbours, and supposing that there can be nothing amisse in their houses, make more enquirie then is requisite to know the which they would rather not have known. Neverthelesse dissembling what he thought, and biting upon the bridle, rather then he would deprive himselfe by publishing the lasciviousnes of his mother, thought better to leave a great sin unpunished, then thereby to make himselfe contemptible to his subjects, who peradventure would have rejected him, as not desiring to have a bastard to raigne over so great a kingdome.

But as he was sorry to hear his mothers confession, on the other side he tooke great pleasure in the subtilty and quick spirit of the yong prince, and for that cause went unto him to aske him, why he had reproved three things in his queene convenient for a slave, and savouring more of basenes then of royaltie, and far unfit for the majesty of a great prince? The king, not content to have received a great displeasure by knowing him selfe to be a bastard, and to have heard with what injuries he charged her whom hee loved best in all the world, would not content himselfe untill he also understood that which displeased him, as much as his owne proper disgrace, which was that his queen was the daughter of a chambermaid, and with all noted certaine foolish countenances she made, which not onely shewed of what parentage she came, but also that hir humors savored of the basenes and low degree of hir parents, whose mother, he assured the king, was as then yet holden in servitude. The king admiring the young prince, and behoulding in him some matter of greater respect then in the common sort of men, gave him his daughter in marriage, according to the counterfeit letters by him devised, and the next day caused the two servants of Fengon to be executed, to satisfie, as he thought, the king's desire. But Hamlet, although the sport plesed him wel, and that the king of England could not have done him a greater favour, made as though he had been much offended, threatning the king to be revenged, but the king, to appease him, gave him a great sum of gold, which Hamlet caused to be molten, and put into two staves, made hollow for the same purpose, to serve his tourne there with

as neede should require; for of all other the kings treasures he took nothing with him into Denmark but onely those two staves, and as soone as the yeere began to bee at an end, having somewhat before obtained licence of the king his father in law to depart, went for Denmarke; then, with all the speed hee could to returne againe into England to marry his daughter, and so set sayle for Denmarke.

## Chapter V

How Hamblet, having escaped out of England, arrived in Denmarke the same day that the Danes were celebrating his funerals, supposing him to be dead in England; and how he revenged his fathers death upon his uncle and the rest of the courtiers; and what followed.

Hamblet in that sort sayling into Denmark, being arrived in the country, entered into the pallace of his uncle the same day that they were celebrating his funerals, and going into the hall, procured no small astonishment and wonder to them all, no man thinking other but that hee had beene deade: among the which many of them rejoyced not a little for the pleasure which they knew Fengon would conceive for so pleasant a losse, and some were sadde, as remembering the honourable king Horvendile, whose victories they could by no meanes forget, much lesse deface out of their memories that which appertained unto him, who as then greatly rejoyced to see a false report spread of Hamlet's death, and that the tyrant had not as yet obtained his will of the heire of Jutie, but rather hoped God would restore him to his senses againe for the good and welfare of that province.

Their amazement at the last beeing tourned into laughter, all that as then were assistant at the funerall banquet of him whome they esteemed dead, mocked each at other, for having beene so simply deceived, and wondering at the prince, that in his so long a voyage he had not recovered any of his senses, asked what was become of them that had borne him company into Greate Brittain? to whome he made answere (shewing them the two hollow staves, wherein he had put his molten golde, that the King of England had given him to appease his fury, concerning the murther of his two companions), and said, Here they are both. Whereat many that already knew his humours, presently conjectured that hee had plaide some tricke of legerdemane, and to deliver himselfe out of danger, had throwne them into the pitte prepared for him; so that fearing to follow after them and light upon some evil adventure, they went presently out of the court.

And it was well for them that they didde so, considering the tragedy acted by him the same daie, beeing accounted his funerall, but in trueth their last daies, that as then rejoyced for their overthrow; for when every man busied himselfe to make good cheare, and Hamlets arivall provoked them more to

drinke and carouse, the prince himselfe at that time played the butler and a gentleman attending on the tables, not suffering the pots nor goblets to bee empty, whereby hee gave the noble men such store of liquor, that all of them being ful laden with wine and gorged with meate, were constrained to lay themselves downe in the same place where they had supt, so much their senses were dulled, and overcome with the fire of over great drinking (a vice common and familiar among the Almaines, and other nations inhabiting the north parts of the world) which when Hamlet perceiving, and finding so good opportunitie to effect his purpose and bee revenged of his enemies, and by the means to abandon the actions, gestures, and apparel of a mad man, occasion so fitly finding his turn, and as it were effecting it selfe, failed not to take hold therof, and seeing those drunken bodies, filled with wine, lying like hogs upon the ground, some sleeping, others vomiting the over great abundance of wine which without measure they had swallowed up, made the hangings about the hall to fall downe and cover them all over; which he nailed to the ground, being boorded, and at the ends thereof he stuck the brands, whereof I spake before, by him sharpned, which served for prickes, binding and tying the hangings in such sort, that what force soever they used to loose themselves, it was impossible to get from under them: and presently he set fire to the foure corners of the hal, in such sort, that all that were as then therein not one escaped away, but were forced to purge their sins by fire, and dry up the great abundance of liquor by them received into their bodies, all of them dying in the inevitable and mercilesse flames of the whot and burning fire: which the prince perceiving, became wise, and knowing that his uncle, before the end of the banquet, had withdrawn himselfe into his chamber, which stood apart from the place where the fire burnt, went thither, and entring into the chamber, layd hand upon the sword of his fathers murtherer, leaving his own in the place, which while he was at the banquet some of the courtiers had nailed fast into the scaberd, and going to Fengon said: I wonder, disloyal king, how thou canst sleep heer at thine ease, and al thy pallace is burnt, the fire thereof having burnt the greatest part of thy courtiers and ministers of thy cruelty, and detestable tirannies; and which is more, I cannot imagin how thou shouldst wel assure thy self and thy estate, as now to take thy ease, seeing Hamlet so neer thee armed with the shafts by him prepared long since, and at this present is redy to revenge the traiterous injury by thee done to his lord and father.

Fengon, as then knowing the truth of his nephews subtile practise, and hering him speak with stayed mind, and which is more, perceived a sword naked in his hand, which he already lifted up to deprive him of his life, leaped quickly out of the bed, taking holde of Hamlets sworde, that was nayled into the scaberd, which as hee sought to pull out, Hamlet gave him such a blowe upon the chine of the necke, that hee cut his head cleane from his shoulders, and as he fell to the ground sayd, This just and violent death is a just reward for such as thou art:

now go thy wayes, and when thou comest in hell, see thou forget not to tell thy brother (whom thou trayterously slewest), that it was his sonne that sent thee thither with the message, to the ende that beeing comforted thereby, his soule may rest among the blessed spirits, and quit mee of the obligation that bound me to pursue his vengeance upon mine owne blood, seeing it was by thee that I lost the chiefe thing that tyed me to this alliance and consanguinitie. A man (to say the trueth) hardie, couragious, and worthy of eternall comendation, who arming himself with a crafty, dissembling, and strange shew of beeing distract out of his wits, under that pretence deceived the wise, pollitike, and craftie, thereby not onely preserving his life from the treasons and wicked practises of the tyrant, but (which is more) by an new and unexpected kinde of punishment, revenged his fathers death, many yeeres after the act committed: in no such sort that directing his courses with such prudence, and effecting his purposes with so great boldnes and constancie, he left a judgement to be decyded among men of wisdom, which was more commendable in him, his constancy or magnanimitie, or his wisdom in ordring his affaires, according to the premeditable determination he had conceived.

If vengeance ever seemed to have any shew of justice, it is then, when pietie and affection constraineth us to remember our fathers unjustly murdered, as the things wherby we are dispensed withal, and which seeke the means not to leave treason and murther unpunished: seeing David a holy and just king, and of nature simple, courteous, and debonaire, yet when he dyed he charged his soone Salomon (that succeeded him in his throane) not to suffer certaine men that had done him injurie to escape unpunished. Not that this holy king (as then ready to dye, and to give account before God of all his actions) was carefull or desirous of revenge, but to leave this example unto us, that where the prince or countrey is interested, the desire of revenge cannot by any meanes (how small soever) beare the title of condemnation, but is rather commendable and worthy of praise: for otherwise the good kings of Juda, nor others had not pursued them to death, that had offended their predecessors, if God himself had not inspired and ingraven that desire within their hearts. Hereof the Athenian lawes beare witnesse, whose custome was to erect images in remembrance of those men that, revenging the injuries of the commonwealth, boldly massacred tyrants and such as troubled the peace and welfare of the citizens.

Hamlet, having in this manner revenged himselfe, durst not presently declare his action to the people, but to the contrary determined to worke by policie, so to give them intelligence, what he had done, and the reason that drewe him thereunto: so that beeing accompanied with such of his fathers friends that then were rising, he stayed to see what the people would doe when they shoulde heare of that sodaine and fearefull action. The next morning the townes bordering there aboutes, desiring to know from whence the flames of fire proceeded the night before they had seene, came thither, and perceiving

the kings pallace burnt to ashes, and many bodyes (most part consumed) lying among the ruines of the house, all of them were much abashed, nothing being left of the palace but the foundation. But they were much more amased to beholde the body of the king all bloody, and his head cut off lying hard by him; whereat some began to threaten revenge, yet not knowing against whom; others beholding so lamentable a spectacle, armed themselves, the rest rejoicing, yet not daring to make any shewe thereof; some detecting the crueltie, others lamenting the death of their Prince, but the greatest part calling Horvendiles murther to remembrance, acknowledging a just judgement from above, that had throwne downe the pride of the tyrant. And in this sort, the diversities of opinions among that multitude of people being many, yet every man ignorant what would be the issue of that tragedie, none stirred from thence, neither yet attempted to move any tumult, every man fearing his owne skinne, and distrusting his neighbour, esteeming each other to bee consenting to the massacre.



1619—[Anonymus]. From *A Funeral Elegy  
on the Death of Richard Burbage*

Richard Burbage (c. 1567–c. 1619) was the most famous actor of Shakespeare's company. He apparently played the roles of Hamlet, King Lear, and Othello, and the writer of this elegy commemorates Burbage's exploits by lamenting that he will never do so again. This passage likely recalls Burbage as Hamlet jumping into Ophelia's grave.

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He's gone and with him what a world are dead,  
Which he revived, to be revived so.  
No more young Hamlet, old Hieronimo,  
Kind Lear, the grieved Moor, and more beside,  
That lived in him, have now for ever died.  
Oft have I seen him leap into the grave,  
Suiting the person, which he seemed to have,  
Of a sad lover, with so true an eye  
That there I would have sworn he meant to die;  
Oft have I seen him play this part in jest,  
So lively that Spectators and the rest  
Of his sad crew, whilst he but seemed to bleed,  
Amazed, thought even then he died indeed.



**1661–1668—Samuel Pepys.**  
**From *The Diary of Samuel Pepys***

Samuel Pepys (1633–1703), Londoner and naval administrator, is most remembered today for his *Diary*, kept during 1660–1669, which gives a fascinating picture of the upper-class life of Restoration London.

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*[August 24, 1661]*

... Home; and there met Captain Isham enquiring for me to take his leave of me, he being upon his voyage to Portugal, and for my letters to my Lord—which are not ready. But I took him to the Miter and gave him a glass of sack, and so Adieu. And then I straight to the Opera and there saw *Hamlet Prince of Denmarke*, done with Scenes very well. But above all, Batterton did the Prince's part beyond imagination.

*[August 31, 1668]*

Up, and to my office, there to set my Journall for all the last week; and so by water to Westminster to the Exchequer; and thence to the Swan and there drank and did besar la fille there. And so to the New Exchange and paid for some things, and so to Hercules-Pillars and there dined all alone while I sent my shoe to have the heel fastened at Wotton's. And thence to White-hall to the Treasury-chamber, where did a little business; and thence to the Duke of York's playhouse and there met my wife and Deb and Mary Mercer and Batelier, where also W Hewers and Batelier was also; and saw *Hamlett*, which we have not seen this year before or more, and mightily pleased with it; but above all with Batterton, the best part, I believe, that ever man acted. Thence to the Fayre and saw *Polichinelle*; and so home and after a little supper, to bed. . . .

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**1679—John Dryden. From “The Preface  
to the Play,” in *Troilus and Cressida***

John Dryden (1631–1700) was an English poet, dramatist, and literary critic who so dominated the literary scene of his day that it came to be known as the Age of Dryden. He produced the first substantive criticism of his predecessor Shakespeare.

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The chief character or Hero in a Tragedy, as I have already shown, ought in prudence to be such a man, who has so much more in him of Virtue than of

Vice, that he may be left amiable to the Audience, which otherwise cannot have any concernment for his sufferings; and 'tis on this one character that the pity and terror must be principally, if not wholly founded: a Rule which is extremely necessary, and which none of the Critics that I know, have fully enough discovered to us. For terror and compassion work but weakly, when they are divided into many persons. If *Creon* had been the chief character in *Oedipus*, there had neither been terror nor compassion mov'd; but only detestation of the man and joy for his punishment; if *Adrastus* and *Euridice* had been made more appearing characters, then the pity had been divided, and lessen'd on the part of *Oedipus*: but making *Oedipus* the best and bravest person, and even *Jocasta* but an underpart to him; his virtues and the punishment of his fatall crime, drew both the pity, and the terror to himself.

By what had been said of the manners, it will be easy for a reasonable man to judge, whether the characters be truly or falsely drawn in a Tragedy; for if there be no manners appearing in the characters, no concernment for the persons can be rais'd: no pity or horror can be mov'd, but by vice or virtue, therefore without them, no person can have any business in the Play. If the inclinations be obscure, 'tis a sign the Poet is in the dark, and knows not what manner of man he presents to you; and consequently you can have no Idea, or very imperfect, of that man: nor can judge what resolutions he ought to take; or what words or actions are proper for him. Most Comedies made up of accidents, or adventures, are liable to fall into this error: and Tragedies with many turns are subject to it: for the manners never can be evident, where the surprises of Fortune take up all the business of the Stage; and where the Poet is more in pain, to tell you what hapned to such a man, than what he was. 'Tis one of the excellencies of *Shakespeare*, that the manners of his persons are generally apparent; and you see their bent and inclinations. *Fletcher* comes far short of him in this, as indeed he does almost in everything: there are but glimmerings of manners in most of his Comedies, which run upon adventures: and in his Tragedies, *Rollo*, *Otto*, the *King and No King*, *Melantius*, and many others of his best, are but Pictures shown you in the twi-light; you know not whether they resemble vice, or virtue, and they are either good, bad, or indifferent, as the present Scene requires it. But of all Poets, this commendation is to be given to *Ben. Jonson*, that the manners even of the most inconsiderable persons in his Plays are every where apparent.

By considering the Second quality of manners, which is that they be suitable to the Age, Quality, Country, Dignity, &c. of the character, we may likewise judge whether a Poet has follow'd Nature. In this kinde *Sophocles* and *Euripides*, have more excelled among the Greeks than *Aeschylus*: and *Terence*, more than *Plautus* among the Romans: Thus *Sophocles* gives to *Oedipus* the true qualities of a King, in both those Plays which bear his Name: but in the latter which is the *Oedipus Colonoeus*, he lets fall on purpose his Tragic Stile, his Hero speaks not in the Arbitrary tone; but remembers in the softness of his complaints, that

he is an unfortunate blind Old man, that he is banish'd from his Country, and persecuted by his next Relations. The present French Poets are generally accus'd, that wheresoever they lay the Scene, or in whatsoever Age, the manners of their Heroes are wholly French: *Racine's Bajazet* is bred at *Constantinople*; but his civilities are convey'd to him by some secret passage, from *Versailles* into the *Seraglio*. But our *Shakespeare*, having ascrib'd to *Henry the Fourth* the character of a King, and of a Father, gives him the perfect manners of each Relation, when either he transacts with his Son, or with his Subjects. *Fletcher*, on the other side gives neither to *Arbaces*, nor to his King in the *Maids Tragedy*, the qualities which are suitable to a Monarch: though he may be excus'd a little in the latter; for the King there is not uppermost in the character; 'tis the Lover of *Evadne*, who is King only, in a second consideration; and though he be unjust, and has other faults which shall be nameless, yet he is not the Hero of the Play: 'tis true we finde him a lawfull Prince, (though I never heard of any King that was in *Rhodes*) and therefore Mr. *Rymer's* Criticism stands good; that he should not be shown in so vicious a character. *Sophocles* has been more judicious in his *Antigone* for though he represents in *Creon* a bloody Prince, yet he makes him not a lawful King, but an Usurper, and *Antigone* her self is the Heroine of the Tragedy: But when *Philaster* wounds *Arethusa* and the Boy; and *Perigot* his Mistress, in *The Faithfull Shepherdess*, both these are contrary to the character of Manhood: Nor is *Valentinian* manag'd much better, for though *Fletcher* has taken his Picture truly, and shown him as he was, an effeminate voluptuous man, yet he has forgotten that he was an Emperor, and has given him none of those Royal marks, which ought to appear in a lawfull Successor of the Throne. If it be enquir'd, what *Fletcher* should have done on this occasion; ought he not to have represented *Valentinian* as he was? *Bossu* shall answer this question for me, by an instance of the like nature: *Mauritius* the Greek Emperor, was a Prince far surpassing *Valentinian*, for he was endued with many Kingly virtues; he was Religious, Mercifull, and Valiant, but withall he was noted of extream covetousness, a vice which is contrary to the character of a Hero, or a Prince: therefore says the Critic, that Emperor was no fit person to be represented in a Tragedy, unless his good qualities were only to be shown, and his covetousness (which sully'd them all) were slur'd over by the artifice of the Poet. To return once more to *Shakespeare*; no man ever drew so many characters, or generally distinguished 'em better from one another, excepting only *Jonson*: I will instance but in one, to show the copiousness of his Invention; 'tis that of *Calyban*, or the Monster in the *Tempest*. He seems there to have created a person which was not in Nature, a boldness which at first sight would appear intolerable: for he makes him a Species of himself, begotten by an *Incubus* on a *Witch*; but this as I have elsewhere prov'd, is not wholly beyond the bounds of credibility, at least the vulgar still believe it. We have the separated notions of a spirit, and of a *Witch*; (and Spirits according to *Plato*, are vested with a subtil body; according to some of his followers, have different Sexes) therefore



as from the distinct apprehensions of a Horse, and of a Man, Imagination has form'd a *Centaur*, so from those of an *Incubus* and a *Sorceress*, *Shakespeare* has produced his Monster. Whether or no his Generation can be defended, I leave to Philosophy; but of this I am certain, that the Poet has most judiciously furnish'd him with a person, a Language, and a character, which will suit him, both by Fathers and Mothers side: he has all the discontents, and malice of a Witch, and of a Devil; besides a convenient proportion of the deadly sins; Gluttony, Sloth, and Lust, are manifest; the dejectedness of a slave is likewise given him, and the ignorance of one bred up in a Desert Island. His person is monstrous, as he is the product of unnatural Lust; and his language is as hobgoblin as his person: in all things he is distinguished from other mortals. The characters of *Fletcher* are poor and narrow, in comparison of *Shakespeare's*; I remember not one which is not borrowed from him; unless you will except that strange mixture of a man in the *King and no King*: So that in this part *Shakespeare* is generally worth our Imitation; and to imitate *Fletcher* is but to Copy after him who was a Copyer.

Under this general head of Manners, the passions are naturally included, as belonging to the Characters. I speak not of pity and of terror, which are to be mov'd in the Audience by the Plot; but of Anger, Hatred, Love, Ambition, Jealousy, Revenge, &c. as they are shown in this or that person of the Play. To describe these naturally, and to move then artfully, is one of the greatest commendations which can be given to a Poet: to write pathetically, says *Longinus*, cannot proceed but from a lofty *Genius*. A Poet must be born with this quality; yet, unless he help himself by an acquired knowledg of the Passions, what they are in their own nature, and by what springs they are to be mov'd, he will be subject either to raise them where they ought not to be rais'd, or not to raise them by the just degrees of Nature, or to amplify them beyond the natural bounds, or not to observe the crisis and turns of them, in their cooling and decay: all which errors proceed from want of Judgment in the Poet, and from being unskilled in the Principles of Moral Philosophy. Nothing is more frequent in a Fanciful Writer, than to foil himself by not managing his strength: therefore, as in a Wrestler, there is first required some measure of force, a well-knit body, and active Limbs, without which all instruction would be vain; yet, these being granted, if he want the skill which is necessary to a Wrestler, he shall make but small advantage of his natural robustuousness: So in a Poet, his inborn vehemence and force of spirit, will only run him out of breath the sooner, if it be not supported by the help of Art. The roar of passion indeed may please an Audience, three parts of which are ignorant enough to think all is moving which is noise, and it may stretch the lungs of an ambitious Actor, who will dye upon the spot for a thundring clap; but it will move no other passion than indignation and contempt from judicious men. *Longinus*, whom I have hitherto follow'd, continues thus: If the passions be Artfully employ'd, the discourse becomes vehement and lofty; if otherwise, there is nothing more ridiculous than a great passion out of season. . . . Thus then the

Passions, as they are considered simply and in themselves, suffer violence when they are perpetually maintain'd at the same height; for what melody can be made on that Instrument, all whose strings are screw'd up at first to their utmost stretch, and to the same sound? But this is not the worst; for the Characters likewise bear a part in the general calamity, if you consider the Passions as embody'd in them: for it follows of necessity, that no man can be distinguish'd from another by his discourse, when every man is ranting, swaggering, and exclaiming with the same excess: as if it were the only business of all the Characters to contend with each other for the prize at *Billingsgate*; or that the Scene of the Tragedy lay in *Bet'lem*. Suppose the Poet should intend this man to be Cholerick, and that man to be patient; yet when they are confounded in the Writing, you cannot distinguish them from one another: for the man who was call'd patient and tame, is only so before he speaks; but let his clack be set a going, and he shall tongue it as impetuously, and as loudly as the errantest Hero in the Play. By this means, the characters are only distinct in name; but in reality, all the men and women in the Play are the same person. No man should pretend to write, who cannot temper his fancy with his Judgment: nothing is more dangerous to a raw horseman, than a hot-mouth'd Jade without a curb.

(. . .)

If *Shakespeare* be allow'd, as I think he must, to have made his Characters distinct, it will easily be infer'd that he understood the nature of the Passions: because it has been prov'd already, that confus'd passions make undistinguishable Characters: yet I cannot deny that he has his failings; but they are not so much in the passions themselves, as in his manner of expression: he often obscures his meaning by his words, and sometimes makes it unintelligible. I will not say of so great a Poet, that he distinguish'd not the blown puffy stile, from true sublimity; but I may venture to maintain that the fury of his fancy often transported him, beyond the bounds of Judgment, either in coining of new words and phrases, or racking words which were in use, into the violence of a Catachresis: 'Tis not that I would explode the use of Metaphors from passions, for *Longinus* thinks 'em necessary to raise it; but to use 'em at every word, to say nothing without a Metaphor, a Simile, an Image, or description, is I doubt to smell a little too strongly of the Buskin. I must be forc'd to give an example of expressing passion figuratively; but that I may do it with respect to *Shakespeare*, it shall not be taken from anything of his: 'tis an exclamation against Fortune, quoted in his *Hamlet*, but written by some other Poet.

Out, out, thou strumpet fortune; all you Gods,  
 In general Synod, take away her Power,  
 Break all the spokes and fallies from her Wheel,

And bowl the round Nave down the hill of Heav'n  
As low as to the Fiends. [2.2.487ff.]

And immediately after, speaking of *Hecuba*, when *Priam* was kill'd before her eyes:

The mobbled Queen ran up and down,  
Threatning the flame with bisson rheum: a clout about that head,  
Where late the Diadem stood; and for a Robe  
About her lank and all o're-teemed loyns,  
A blanket in th' alarm of fear caught up.  
Who this had seen, with tongue in venom steep'd  
'Gainst Fortune's state would Treason have pronounc'd;  
But if the Gods themselves did see her then,  
When she saw *Pyrrhus* make malicious sport  
In mincing with his sword her Husband's Limbs,  
The instant burst of clamor that she made  
(Unless things mortal move them not at all)  
Would have made milch the burning eyes of Heav'n,  
And passion in the Gods. [2.2.496ff.]

What a pudder is here kept in raising the expression of trifling thoughts. Would not a man have thought that the Poet had been bound Prentice to a Wheel-wright, for his first Rant? and had followed a Ragman, for the clout and blanket, in the second? Fortune is painted on a wheel; and therefore the writer in a rage, will have Poetical Justice done upon every member of that Engin: after this execution, he bowls the Nave downhill, from Heaven, to the Fiends: (an unreasonable long mark a man would think;) 'tis well there are no solid Orbs to stop it in the way, or no Element of fire to consume it: but when it came to the earth, it must be monstrous heavy, to break ground as low as to the Center. His making milch the burning eyes of Heaven, was a pretty tollerable flight too; and I think no man ever drew milk out of eyes before him: yet to make the wonder greater, these eyes were burning. Such a sight indeed were enough to have rais'd passion in the Gods, but to excuse the effects of it, he tells you perhaps they did not see it. Wise men would be glad to find a little sence couch'd under all those pompous words; for Bombast is commonly the delight of that Audience, which loves Poetry, but understands it not: and as commonly has been the practice of those Writers, who not being able to infuse a natural passion into the mind, have made it their business to ply the ears, and to stun their Judges by the noise. But *Shakespeare* does not often thus; for the passions in his Scene between *Brutus* and *Cassius* are extreemly natural, the thoughts are such as arise from the matter, and the expression of 'em not viciously

figurative. I cannot leave this Subject before I do justice to that Divine Poet, by giving you one of his passionate descriptions: 'tis of *Richard the Second* when he was depos'd, and led in Triumph through the Streets of *London* by *Henry of Bullingbrook*: the painting of it is so lively, and the words so moving, that I have scarce read anything comparable to it, in any other language. Suppose you have seen already the fortunate Usurper passing through the croud, and follow'd by the shouts and acclamations of the people; and now behold King *Richard* entring upon the Scene: consider the wretchedness of his condition, and his carriage in it; and refrain from pitty if you can.

As in a Theatre, the eyes of men  
 After a well-grac'd Actor leaves the Stage,  
 Are idly bent on him that enters next,  
 Thinking his prattle to be tedious:  
 Even so, or with much more contempt, mens eyes  
 Did scowl on *Richard*: no man cry'd God save him:  
 No joyful tongue gave him his welcom home,  
 But dust was thrown upon his Sacred head,  
 Which with such gentle sorrow he shook off,  
 His face still combating with tears and smiles  
 (The badges of his grief and patience)  
 That had not God (for some strong purpose) steel'd  
 The hearts of men, they must perforce have melted,  
 And Barbarism it self have pity'd him. [5.2.23ff.]

To speak justly of this whole matter; 'tis neither height of thought that is discommended, nor pathetic vehemence, nor any nobleness of expression in its proper place; but 'tis a false measure of all these, something which is like 'em, and is not them: 'tis the *Bristol-stone*, which appears like a Diamond; 'tis an extravagant thought, instead of a sublime one; 'tis roaring madness instead of vehemence; and a sound of words, instead of sence. If *Shakespeare* were stript of all the Bombast in his passions, and dress'd in the most vulgar words, we should find the beauties of his thoughts remaining; if his embroideries were burnt down, there would still be silver at the bottom of the melting-pot: but I fear (at least, let me fear it for myself) that we who Ape his sounding words, have nothing of his thoughts, but are all outside; there is not so much as a dwarf within our Giants cloaths. Therefore, let not *Shakespeare* suffer for our sakes; 'tis our fault, who succeed him in an Age which is more refin'd, if we imitate him so ill, that we cobby his failings only, and make a virtue of that in our Writings, which in his was an imperfection.

For what remains, the excellency of that Poet was, as I have said, in the more manly passions; *Fletcher's* in the softer: *Shakespeare* writ better betwixt man

and man; *Fletcher*, betwixt man and woman: consequently, the one describ'd friendship better; the other love: yet *Shakespeare* taught *Fletcher* to write love; and *Juliet*, and *Desdemona*, are Originals. 'Tis true, the Scholar had the softer soul; but the Master had the kinder. Friendship is both a virtue, and a Passion essentially; love is a passion only in its nature, and is not a virtue but by Accident: good nature makes Friendship; but effeminacy Love. *Shakespeare* had an Universal mind, which comprehended all Characters and Passions; *Fletcher* a more confin'd, and limited: for though he treated love in perfection, yet Honour, Ambition, Revenge, and generally all the stronger Passions, he either touch'd not, or not Masterly. To conclude all; he was a Limb of *Shakespeare*.

I had intended to have proceeded to the last property of manners, which is, that they must be constant; and the characters maintained the same from the beginning to the end; and from thence to have proceeded to the thoughts and expressions suitable to a Tragedy: but I will first see how this will relish with the Age. 'Tis I confess but cursorily written; yet the Judgment which is given here, is generally founded upon Experience: But because many men are shock'd at the name of Rules, as if they were a kinde of Magisterial prescription upon Poets, I will conclude with the words of *Rapin*, in his reflections on *Aristotles* work of Poetry: If the Rules be well consider'd: we shall find them to be made only to reduce Nature into Method, to trace her step by step, and not to suffer the least mark of her to escape us: 'tis only by these, that probability in Fiction is maintain'd, which is the Soul of Poetry: they are founded upon good Sence, and Sound Reason, rather than on Authority; for, though *Aristotle* and *Horace* are produc'd, yet no man must argue, that what they write is true, because they writ it; but 'tis evident, by the ridiculous mistakes and gross absurdities, which have been made by those Poets who have taken their Fancy only for their guide, that if this Fancy be not regulated, 'tis a meer caprice, and utterly incapable to produce a reasonable and judicious Poem.

The Prologue Spoken by Mr. *Betterton*,  
Representing the Ghost of *Shakespeare*.

See, my lov'd *Britons*, see your *Shakespeare* rise,  
An awfull ghost confessed to human eyes!  
Unnam'd, methinks, distinguished I had been  
From other shades, by this eternal green,  
About whose wreaths the vulgar Poets strive,  
And with a touch, their withered Bays revive.  
Untaught, unpractis'd, in a barbarous Age,  
I found not, but created first the Stage.  
And, if I drain'd no *Greek* or *Latin* store,  
'Twas, that my own abundance gave me more.

On foreign trade I needed not rely,  
 Like fruitfull *Britain*, rich without supply.  
 In this my rough-drawn Play, you shall behold  
 Some Master-strokes, so manly and so bold  
 That he, who meant to alter, found 'em such  
 He shook; and thought it Sacrilege to touch.  
 Now, where are the Successours to my name?  
 What bring they to fill out a Poets fame?  
 Weak, short-liv'd issues of a feeble Age;  
 Scarce living to be Christen'd on the Stage!  
 For Humour farce, for love they rhyme dispence,  
 That tolls the knell, for their departed sence.  
 Dulness might thrive in any trade but this:  
 'Twould recommend to some fat Benefice.  
 Dulness, that in a Playhouse meets disgrace  
 Might meet with Reverence, in its proper place.  
 The fulsome clench that nauseates the Town  
 Wou'd from a Judge or Alderman go down!  
 Such virtue is there in a Robe and gown!  
 And that insipid stuff which here you hate  
 Might somewhere else be call'd a grave debate:  
 Dulness is decent in the Church and State.  
 But I forget that still 'tis understood  
 Bad Plays are best decry'd by showing good:  
 Sit silent then, that my pleas'd Soul may see  
 A Judging Audience once, and worthy me:  
 My faithfull Scene from true Records shall tell  
 How *Trojan* valour did the *Greek* excell;  
 Your great forefathers shall their fame regain,  
 And *Homers* angry Ghost repine in vain.



**1698—Jeremy Collier. From *A Short View  
 of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage***

Jeremy Collier (1650–1726) was an English bishop of the nonjurors (clergy who refused to take the oaths of allegiance to William III and Mary II in 1689). He wrote this celebrated attack on the immorality of plays, actors, and playwrights.

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The Poets make *Women* speak Smuttily. Of this the Places before mention'd are sufficient Evidence: And if there was occasion they might be multiplied to a much greater Number. Indeed the *Comedies* are seldom clear of these Blemishes: And sometimes you have them in *Tragedy*. . . . For Modesty, as Mr. *Rapin* observes, is the *Character* of Women. To represent them without this Quality, is to make Monsters of them, and throw them out of their Kind. *Euripides*, who was no negligent Observer of Humane Nature, is always careful of this Decorum. Thus *Phaedra*, when possess'd with an infamous Passion, takes all imaginable Pains to conceal it. She is as regular and reserv'd in her Language as the most vertuous Matron. 'Tis true, the force of Shame and Desire; The Scandal of Satisfying, and the Difficulty of Parting with her Inclinations, disorder her to Distraction. However, her Frensy is not Lewd; she keeps her Modesty even after she has lost her Wits. Had *Shakespear* secur'd this point for his young Virgin *Ophelia*, the *Play* had been better contriv'd. Since he was resolv'd to drown the Lady like a Kitten, he should have set her a swimming a little sooner. To keep her alive only to sully her Reputation, and discover the Rankness of her Breath, was very cruel.



### 1699—James Drake.

#### From *The Antient and Modern Stages Survey'd*

James Drake (1666–1707) was an early writer of English comedy who paved the way for later playwrights such as William Wycherley and William Congreve. His *Antient and Modern Stages Survey'd* served as a response to Jeremy Collier's attack on the English theater. In addition to writing for the stage, Drake was the author of an anatomy textbook and was a politically active public figure.

The *Modern Tragedy* is a Field large enough for us to lose our selves in, and therefore I shall not take the Liberty of ranging thro 'em at large, but for the most part confine my self to such as Mr *Collier* has already attackt. Upon presumption therefore that these are the weakest, if these can be defended, the rest I suppose may hold out of themselves.

I shall begin with *Shakespear*, whom notwithstanding the severity of Mr *Rhimer*, and the hard usage of Mr *Collier*, I must still think the *Proto-Dramatist* of *England*, tho he fell short of the Art of *Johnson*, and the Conversation of *Beaumont* and *Fletcher*. Upon that account he wants many of their Graces, yet his Beauties make large amends for his Defects, and Nature has richly

provided him with the materials, tho his unkind Fortune denied him the Art of managing them to the best Advantage.

His *Hamlet*, a Play of the first rate, has the misfortune to fall under Mr *Collier's* displeasure; and *Ophelia* who has had the luck hitherto to keep her reputation, is at last censur'd for Lightness in her Frenzy; nay, Mr *Collier* is so familiar with her, as to make an unkind discovery of the unsavouriness of her Breath, which no Body suspected before. But it may be this is a groundless surmise, and Mr *Collier* is deceived by a bad Nose, or a rotten Tooth of his own; and then he is obliged to beg the poets and the Ladies pardon for the wrong he has done 'em; But that will fall more naturally under our consideration in another place.

*Hamlet* King of *Denmark* was privately murder'd by his Brother, who immediately thereupon marry'd the Dowager, and supplanted his Nephew in the Succession of the Crown. Thus far before the proper action of the Play.

The late Kings Ghost appears to his Son young *Hamlet*, and declares how and by whom he was murder'd, and engages him to revenge it. *Hamlet* hereupon grows very much discontented, and the King very jealous of him. Hereupon he is dispatched with Ambassadors to *England*, then supposed Tributary to *Denmark*, whither a secret Commission to put him to Death is sent by 'em: Which *Hamlet* discovering writes a new Commission, in which he inserts the names of the Ambassadors instead of his own. After this a Pirate engaging their Vessel, and *Hamlet* too eagerly boarding her is carried off, and set ashore in *Denmark* again. The Ambassadors not suspecting *Hamlet's* Trick, pursue their Voyage, and are caught in their own Trap. *Polonius*, a Councillour to the King, conveying himself as a Spy behind the Hangings, at an enterview between *Hamlet* and his Mother, is mistaken for the King, and killed by him. *Laertes* his Son, together with the King contrive the Death of *Hamlet* by a sham Match at Foyls, wherein *Laertes* uses a poyson'd unrelated Weapon. The King, not trusting to this single Treachery, prepares a poysoned Bowl for *Hamlet*, which the Queen ignorantly drinks. *Hamlet* is too hard for *Laertes*, and closes with him, and recovers the evenom'd weapon from him, but in so doing, he is hurt by, and hurts him with it. *Laertes* perceiving himself wounded, and knowing it to be mortal, confesses that it was a train laid by the King for *Hamlet's* Life, and that the foul practice is justly turn'd upon himself. The Queen at the same times cries out, that she is poysoned, whereupon *Hamlet* wounds the King with the evenom'd weapon. They all die.

Whatever defects the Criticks may find in this Fable, the Moral of it is excellent. Here was a Murder privately committed, strangely discover'd, and wonderfully punish'd. Nothing in Antiquity can rival this Plot for the admirable distribution of Poetick Justice. The criminals are not only brought to execution, but they are taken in their own Toyls, their own Stratagems recoil upon 'em, and they are involv'd themselves in that mischief and ruine, which



they had projected for *Hamlet. Polonius* by playing the Spy meets a Fate, which was neither expected by, nor intended for him. *Guildestern* and *Rosencrans*, the Kings Decoys, are counterplotted, and sent to meet that fate, to which they were trepanning the Prince. The Tyrant himself falls by his own Plot, and by the hand of the Son of that Brother, whom he had murder'd. *Laertes* suffers by his own Treachery, and dies by a Weapon of his own preparing. Thus every one's crime naturally produces his Punishment, and every one, (the Tyrant excepted) commences a Wretch almost as soon as a Villain.

The Moral of all this is very obvious, it shews us, *That the Greatness of the Offender does not qualifie the Offence, and that no Humane Power, or Policy are a sufficient Guard against the Impartial Hand, and Eye of Providence, which defeats their wicked purposes, and turns their dangerous Machinations upon their own heads.* This Moral *Hamlet* himself insinuates to us, when he tells *Horatio*, that he ow'd the Discovery of the Design against his Life in *England*, to a rash indiscreet curiosity, and thence makes this Inference.

Our Indiscretion sometimes serves as well,  
 When our dear Plots do fail, and that shou'd teach us,  
 There's a Divinity, that shapes our ends,  
 Rough hew'em how we will.

The Tragedies of this Author in general are Moral and Instructive, and many of 'em such, as the best of Antiquity can't equal in that respect. His King *Lear*, *Timon of Athens*, *Macbeth*, and some other are so remarkable upon that score, that 'twou'd be impertinent to trouble the Reader with a minute examination of Plays so generally known and approved.

(. . .)

*Ophelia* was a modest young Virgin, beloved by *Hamlet*, and in Love with him. Her Passion was approv'd, and directed by her Father, and her Pretensions to a match with *Hamlet*, the heir apparent to the Crown of *Denmark*, encouraged, and supported by the Countenance and Assistance of the King and Queen. A warrantable Love, so naturally planted in so tender a Breast, so carefully nursed, so artfully manured, and so strongly forced up, must needs take very deep Root, and bear a very great head. Love, even in the most difficult Circumstances, is the Passion naturally most predominant in young Breasts but when it is encouraged and cherish'd by those of whom they stand in awe, it grows Masterly and Tyrannical, and will admit of no Check. This was poor *Ophelia's* case. *Hamlet* had sworn, her *Father* had approved, the King and Queen consented to, nay, desired the Consummation of her Wishes. Her hopes were full blown, when they were miserably blasted. *Hamlet* by mistake kills her

Father, and runs mad; or, which is all one to her, counterfeits madness so well, that she is cheated into a belief of the reality of it. Here Piety and Love concur to make her Affliction piercing, and to impress her Sorrow more deep and lasting. To tear up two such passions violently by the roots, must needs make horrible Convulsions in a Mind so tender, and a Sex so weak. These Calamities distract her, and she talks incoherently; at which Mr *Collier* is amaz'd, he is downright stupified, and thinks the Woman's mad to run out of her wits. But tho she talks a little lightheaded, and seems to want sleep, I don't find she needed any *Casheew* in her Mouth to correct her Breath. That's a discovery of Mr *Collier's*, (like some other of his) who perhaps is of Opinion, that the Breath and the Understanding have the same Lodging, and must needs be vitiated together. However, *Shakespear* has drown'd her at last, and Mr *Collier* is angry that he did it no sooner. He is for having Execution done upon her seriously, and in sober sadness, without the excuse of madness for Self-murder. To kill her is not sufficient with him, unless she be damn'd into the bargain. Allowing the Cause of her madness to be *Partie per Pale*, the death of her Father, and the loss of her Love, which is the utmost we can give to the latter, yet her passion is as innocent, and inoffensive in her distraction as before, tho not so reasonable and well govern'd. Mr *Collier* has not told us, what he grounds his hard censure upon, but we may guess, that if he be really so angry as he pretends, 'tis at the mad Song, which *Ophelia* sings to the Queen, which I shall venture to transcribe without fear of offending the modesty of the most chaste Ear.

Tomorrow is Saint *Valentine's* day.

All in the morning betimes,  
And I a maid at your window,  
To be your Valentine.

Then up he rose and don'd his clothes  
And dupt the chamber door,  
Let in the maid, that out a maid  
Never departed more.

By *Gis* and by St *Charity*,  
Alack, and fie for shame!  
Young men will do't if they come to't,  
By Cock, they are to blame.

Quoth she, "Before you tumbled me,  
You promised me to wed."  
"So would I 'a' done, by yonder sun,  
An thou hadst not come to my bed."

'Tis strange this stuff shou'd wamble so in Mr *Collier's* Stomach, and put him into such an Uproar. 'Tis silly indeed, but very harmless and inoffensive; and 'tis no great Miracle, that a Woman out of her Wits shou'd talk Nonsense, who at the soundest of her Intellects had no extraordinary Talent at Speech-making. Sure Mr *Collier's* concoctive Faculty's extreamly deprav'd, that meer Water-Pap turns to such virulent Corruption with him.

But Children and Mad Folks tell truth, they say, and he seems to discover thro her Frenzy what she wou'd be at. She was troubled for the loss of a Sweet-heart, and the breaking off her Match, Poor Soul. Not unlikely. Yet this was no Novelty in the days of our Fore-fathers; if he pleases to consult the Records, he will find even in the days of *Sophocles*, Maids had an itching the same way, and longed to know, what was what, before they died.



# HAMLET

## IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY



Two developments conferred remarkable stature upon Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the eighteenth century. First, a continuing line of strong performers fortified the play's reputation among theater audiences; these began with Thomas Betterton (1635–1710) and ended with John Philip Kemble (1757–1823), with David Garrick (1717–1779) supremely reigning between them. Second, Shakespeare's work as a whole benefited from its publication by a nearly century-long succession of accomplished, serious editors. Such a concentration of dedicated textual critics has never been seen since, and their efforts helped to turn Shakespeare into England's preeminent literary genius. In the eighteenth century, then, Shakespeare continued to flourish onstage and came into his own on the page.

Betterton first played Hamlet in 1661, when he was 26, and would do so for the next 50 years. Samuel Pepys recorded in his diary that Betterton “did the prince's part beyond imagination.” Audiences thought of him in direct theatrical descent from Shakespeare himself: John Downes, in his theater chronicle *Roscious Anglicanus* (1708), asserted that Shakespeare had coached Joseph Taylor of the Blackfriars' Company. (This, in fact, was impossible, but Taylor *had* probably been influenced by the King's Men's main tragedian, Richard Burbage.) William Davenant, Shakespeare's theatrical heir in the Restoration, had seen Taylor perform, and Davenant in turn instructed Betterton. (However strained this theatrical lineage, it did leave one material trace: The iconic, earringed “Chandos” portrait of Shakespeare passed from Davenant into Betterton's possession.)

Betterton apparently played Hamlet with a poised elegance: Davenant's version of the play, from which both the high philosophizing and more crass outbursts were cut, encouraged this moderation, yet Betterton's own acting style was a kind of composite. His biographer Charles Gildon prescribed the actor's more internalized access to a “very strong Idea of the Subject of his Passion” that thus calls forth feeling to affect the senses. Other reports, however, suggest that Betterton maintained a decorum of movement and expression that neoclassical taste demanded. In short, the effect was powerful. His contemporary Colley

Cibber paid Betterton the high compliment of comparison with Shakespeare himself—both were “without competitors.” One actor who played the ghost to Betterton’s Hamlet reported a unique challenge of that role: “Instead of my awing him, he terrified me.” Richard Steele, in a May 1710 issue of *The Tatler*, movingly recorded Betterton’s burial in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey.

Fellow playwright Nicholas Rowe produced a six-volume edition of Shakespeare’s works in 1709. The compilers of the First Folio (1623) as, Rowe deserves the title of Shakespeare’s first editor—and first biographer, as he supplemented his collection with *Some Account of the Life of Mr. William Shakespear*. This seminal treatment established many of the themes and topics of interest to later critics: Shakespeare’s learning, his natural genius, his aesthetic faults, and (in the passage included here) his skilled depictions of “great men in the several fortunes and accidents of their lives.” Regarding *Hamlet*, Rowe relayed the detail that Shakespeare himself played the role of the ghost, and an illustration in his edition may also provide clues to early performances. It features Hamlet forcefully confronting his mother in her chamber; he has overturned a chair, and, true to the text, he appears with “stockings fouled / Ungartered and down-gyved to this ankle.”

Editions of Shakespeare’s works, commentary on their merits, and reviews of their performances became frequent, especially regarding *Hamlet*. Already in 1702 George Farquhar called the play “long the Darling of the English Audience, and like to continue with the same Applause.” And in 1710, the year after Rowe’s edition appeared, Anthony, earl of Shaftesbury, confirmed that *Hamlet* had “most affected *English* Hearts, and has perhaps been oftenest acted of any which have come upon our Stage.” Sir Richard Steele in *The Tatler* and Joseph Addison in another periodical, *The Spectator*, often mentioned the play. Addison called the ghost’s appearance “a master-piece in its kind,” combining attention and horror. Alexander Pope, a great poet but a so-so editor, issued his *Works of Shakespeare* in 1725. Too liberal in his editing and too influenced by his own preferences, Pope was heavily criticized by John Dennis, William Warburton, and Lewis Theobald, who in *Shakespeare Restored* (1726) decried the “epidemical Corruption” in Pope’s text.

Pope may have been comforted that Shakespeare himself had his critics. Dennis, who compared the plays with Shakespeare’s sources (such as plays by the Roman playwright Plautus), declared that the Bard had at best a slight grasp of classical literature. The author of *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark* (1736; attributed to Thomas Hanmer) attacked Hamlet for having no good reason to delay his revenge. This essay also condemned Hamlet’s wish to kill Claudius in a sinful state, calling the “desire to destroy a Man’s Soul” inhuman and unworthy of a hero. Playwright and critic Lewis Theobald, whose splendid edition appeared in 1733, nonetheless could find his subject offensive as well. Theobald reacted thus to Hamlet’s lewd puns to Ophelia: “If

ever the Poet deserved Whipping for low and indecent Ribaldry, it was for this passage." Theobald seems to have been the first scholar to associate the ghost with a Catholic image of purgatory, a topic that has been central to present-day scholars' readings of *Hamlet*. Performances of the play could also incite critics: In 1735 William Popple defended Shakespeare's Polonius as a "man of most excellent understanding and great knowledge of the world," whom actors wrongly portrayed as a mere fool.

The most severe criticism, however, emerged from the Continent. *Hamlet* apparently had a European audience early on, because one German play commonly called *Fratricide Punished* shares character names and plot details unique to the first quarto of Shakespeare's play. The manuscript was dated 1710, but it may represent a performance by a company of English actors touring Germany in the early seventeenth century. A few years later, an Italian playwright called Shakespeare the "Corneille of the English"—a high compliment. But another French writer, Voltaire, proved to be Shakespeare's most constant critic. Voltaire knew the plays mainly from attending London's theaters. Strict in his neoclassical demands, he noted the vigorous irregularity of Shakespeare as one might marvel at a hedgehog let loose. Voltaire's *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1734) referred to the plays as "brilliant monstrosities," and over the next 40 years his condescension increasingly turned into condemnation. In a preface to a play of his own, Voltaire dismissed *Hamlet* as a "gross and barbarous piece," which the "lowest of the rabble in France or Italy" would not tolerate.

Such critiques rallied patriotic English authors to a defense of their national poet. Arthur Murphy, Joseph Barette, and others pointed out Voltaire's misreadings of the English text. Murphy, for example, explained with surprising politeness that Hamlet did not *literally* mistake Polonius for a rat before killing him. Similarly, the English version of Voltaire's 1776 letter—which attacked Shakespeare for marring *Hamlet* with low, comic figures—included the following interjection: "The Translator does not agree to this truth; he takes the part of the Gravediggers." Special mention should be made of Elizabeth Montagu, a spirited respondent to Voltaire's "Misrepresentations." Her praise of Shakespeare's natural genius and humorous appraisal of her excessively literary French opponent owed much to Samuel Johnson's comments. As neoclassical ideals began to give way to Romantic tastes, these English voices were joined by Continental critics. For example, the German critic G. E. Lessing felt Voltaire had misread Aristotle and therefore overlooked Shakespeare's classical connections. Ancient or modern, tragedy must move its audience, Lessing argued, and so he advocated plays that combined judgment with imagination.

After Pope and Theobald, other editors poured forth more editions of Shakespeare's works: Hanmer (1747), Warburton (1747), Samuel Johnson (1765; a monumental edition), Edward Capell (1768), George Steevens (who published revisions of Johnson's edition followed by his own in 1793), and

his rival Edmund Malone (1790). In the history of English literary criticism, Johnson's efforts tower above all others. He crystallized ongoing critical attention to Shakespeare's characters (which he called "just representations of general nature") and dubbed Shakespeare a "poet of nature" who holds up to readers a "faithful mirrour of manners and of life." Unlike Voltaire, Johnson justified Shakespeare's interchange of seriousness and merriment: It is, he said, a valid compositional mode that in turns softens and exhilarates readers' minds. He gave to *Hamlet* particularly his "praise of variety." Johnson's prose renders his judgments favorably and memorably, and his useful notes (included here) bear the author's common sense and sensitivity to language.

Johnson is justly remembered. Unjustly forgotten, however, is his contemporary Capell, who like Johnson labored at his Shakespeare project from the 1740s to the 1760s. Because of Johnson's literary-critical accomplishments, Capell's textual and editorial innovations have met with neglect. Yet Capell was the first to list systematically the textual variants among Shakespeare's earliest editions. He also furthered critical understanding of Shakespeare's learning. But in this, too, he was overshadowed by an influential essay by Richard Farmer.

Some of the most perceptive critics from the mid-eighteenth century onward began to focus particularly on characterization in the play. In his 1747 *Essay Upon English Tragedy*, William Guthrie ushered in new critical values toward *Hamlet* by arguing that the title character is mainly a "well-meaning, sensible young man." Supported only by "the force of sentiment," Hamlet possesses no heroism, and in fact "in this character there is nothing but what is common with the rest of mankind." This is a rather forward-looking view for 1747. Maurice Morgann also deserves mention. Even though he dedicated his considerable critical capacity to a character analysis of Falstaff, instead of Hamlet, Morgann's study of a single character was then unparalleled in attention and depth. He refused to take offense at Falstaff's cowardice and obscene behavior but praised Shakespeare for creating characters "rather as historic than dramatic beings" who were so true to nature, foibles and all. (In response to this defense of Falstaff as a great comic hero, Samuel Johnson sneered that Morgann "may prove Iago to be a very good character.") Both Morgann and Guthrie were more interested in the individualized subtleties of character, as opposed to the broad actions or virtues of heroes.

Writing at the same time as Morgann, William Richardson also focused on characterization in his *Philosophical Analysis and Illustration of some of Shakespeare's Remarkable Characters* (1774), but he retained an ultimately ethical aim. Richardson was interested less in Shakespeare's characters as sovereign creations and more as examples to trace the "principles of human conduct." Other studies by Thomas Whately and Thomas Robertson confirm this critical shift, which reflects the age that produced these critics, often called the "age of sensibility." Readers in this period were inclined to look with

interest on Hamlet's complex feelings. Henry Mackenzie, whose novel *The Man of Feeling* (1771) helped to define this spirit of the age, found in Hamlet an "extreme sensibility of mind." Because melancholy people feel in themselves a "sort of double person," Mackenzie argued that Hamlet is not the culprit of contradictions that so irritated past critics but was, on the contrary, unified in personality and indescribably charming.

Yet it took the great German writer and critic Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to memorialize this view of Hamlet as a man suffering too acutely from his intense feeling. Goethe offered a lengthy analysis of Hamlet through the title character in his own 1795 novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (the influential translation by Thomas Carlyle appeared in 1824):

... To me it is clear that Shakespeare meant, in the present case, to represent the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it. In this view the whole piece seems to me to be composed. There is an oak-tree planted in a costly jar, which should have borne only pleasant flowers in its bosom; the roots expand, the jar is shivered.

A lovely, pure, noble, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away. All duties are holy for him; the present is too hard. . . .

The intensive adoration of Shakespeare from the 1760s onward was so great that R. W. Babcock has dubbed this period the "Genesis of Shakespeare Idolatry." This esteem found its voice in a variety of creative forms. William Hale could rely on readers' quick familiarity with *Hamlet* in his parody of 1777:

To hunt or not to hunt! that is the Question,—. . .  
To hunt, to ride, to ride, perchance to fall . . .

The developing English novel reflected Shakespeare's influence as well, from Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), with its chuckling confusion about the name "Osiric," to Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), whose character Partridge encounters London's most famous Hamlet of the day, David Garrick. One poem spoken by "Shakespeare's Ghost" mutually praised its speaker and Garrick, the subject: "So by each other's aid we both shall live, / I fame to thee, thou life to me shalt give."

Garrick's acting brought a new immediacy and emotional power to the plays of Shakespeare, and his long success (he played Hamlet from 1742 to 1776) aptly symbolizes Shakespeare's cultural ascendancy and longevity. "Garrick's face was a language," summarized one theatergoer. Garrick's naturalist style



was also criticized, however: Some accused him of misspeaking Shakespeare's blank verse, and the sensible Johnson found him too "stagey." (For example, he often broke into tears during the first soliloquy.) Garrick attracted controversy in 1772, when he presented a massively altered version of *Hamlet*. Vowing he "would not leave the stage till I had rescued that noble play from all the rubbish of the fifth act," he cut some thousand lines and moved almost immediately from Hamlet's speech as he beholds Fortinbras's army ("How all occasions do inform against me"), the ending of which he rewrote, to the killing of Claudius. Garrick considered his version a "great revolution in our theatrical history," but audiences eventually felt that too much—the voyage to England, news of escape, the gravediggers, Claudius's and Laertes's conspiracy, Osiric, Hamlet's speech on providence—had been left out. Garrick also presided over the era's most memorable public celebration of Shakespeare—a jubilee in Stratford in 1769. The town was decorated for the event, which featured a reading of Shakespeare's epitaph, Garrick's recitation of an ode, his dedication of a statue, and a procession of citizens dressed as characters from the plays. He soon transferred the performance to Drury Lane in London, where it also met with great success.

Finally, Garrick deserves credit as a supporter of younger Shakespearean actors, such as William Powell and Sarah Kemble Siddons, and as a benefactor to Shakespeare scholarship. He used his stage profits to amass an extensive collection of Renaissance-era dramatic texts, including many quartos of Shakespeare's plays. He made these texts available to a generation of editors who once again valued them, including Capell, Thomas Warton, and Steevens. Eventually these editions became a central part of the British Library's holdings in this area. Garrick, like many of his countrymen, was unquestionably a lover of Shakespeare: He even built a Temple to Shakespeare at his home in Hampton, right beside the Thames.

### 1709—Nicholas Rowe.

#### *From Some Account of the Life of Mr. William Shakespear*

Nicholas Rowe (1674–1718) was the first to attempt a critical edition of Shakespeare's works, *The Works of Mr. William Shakespear; Revis'd and Corrected* (1709), and the biography of Shakespeare he appended to the second edition of this collection was a similar watershed. Rowe succeeded Nahum Tate as poet laureate in 1715 and was a prominent English playwright.

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But, as I hinted before, his Design seems most commonly rather to describe those great Men in the several Fortunes and Accidents of their Lives than to

take any single great Action and form his Work simply upon that. However, there are some of his Pieces where the Fable is founded upon one Action only. Such are, more especially, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*. The Design in *Romeo and Juliet* is plainly the Punishment of their two Families for the unreasonable Feuds and Animosities that had been so long kept up between 'em, and occasion'd the Effusion of so much Blood. In the management of this Story he has shewn something wonderfully Tender and Passionate in the Love-part, and very Pitiful in the Distress. *Hamlet* is founded on much the same Tale with the *Electra* of *Sophocles*. In each of 'em a young Prince is engag'd to Revenge the Death of his Father; their Mothers are equally Guilty, are both concern'd in the Murder of their Husbands and are afterwards married to the Murderers. There is in the first Part of the *Greek* Tragedy something very moving in the Grief of *Electra*; but, as Mr. *D'Acier* has observ'd, there is something very unnatural and shocking in the Manners he has given that Princess and *Orestes* in the latter Part. *Orestes* embrues his Hands in the Blood of his own Mother; and that barbarous Action is perform'd, tho' not immediately upon the Stage, yet so near that the Audience hear *Clytemnestra* crying out to *Aegysthus* for Help, and to her Son for Mercy; while *Electra*, her Daughter, and a Princess—both of them Characters that ought to have appear'd with more Decency—stands upon the Stage and encourages her Brother in the Parricide. What Horror does this not raise! *Clytemnestra* was a wicked Woman, and had deserv'd to Die; nay, in the truth of the Story, she was kill'd by her own Son. But to represent an Action of this Kind on the Stage is certainly an Offence against those Rules of Manners proper to the Persons that ought to be observ'd there. On the contrary, let us only look a little on the Conduct of *Shakespeare*. *Hamlet* is represented with the same Piety towards his Father, and Resolution to Revenge his Death, as *Orestes*, he has the same Abhorrence for his Mother's Guilt, which, to provoke him the more, is heighten'd by Incest. But 'tis with wonderful Art and Justness of Judgment that the Poet restrains him from doing Violence to his Mother. To prevent any thing of that Kind, he makes his Father's Ghost forbid that part of his Vengeance.

But howsoever thou pursu'st this Act,  
Taint not thy Mind; nor let thy Soul contrive  
Against thy Mother ought; leave her to Heav'n,  
And to those Thorns that in her Bosom lodge,  
To prick and sting her. [1.5.84 ff]

This is to distinguish rightly between *Horror* and *Terror*. The latter is a proper Passion of Tragedy, but the former ought always to be carefully avoided. And certainly no Dramatick Writer ever succeeded better in raising *Terror* in the Minds of an Audience than *Shakespeare* has done. The whole Tragedy of *Macbeth*,

but more especially the Scene where the King is murder'd (in the second Act) as well as this Play, is a noble Proof of that manly Spirit with which he writ; and both shew how powerful he was in giving the strongest Motions to our Souls that they are capable of. I cannot leave *Hamlet* without taking notice of the Advantage with which we have seen this Master-piece of *Shakespeare* distinguish itself upon the Stage by Mr. *Betterton's* fine Performance of that Part. A Man who, tho' he had no other good Qualities, as he has a great many, must have made his way into the Esteem of all Men of Letters by this only Excellency. No Man is better acquainted with *Shakespeare's* manner of Expression, and indeed he has study'd him so well and is so much a Master of him that whatever Part of his he performs he does it as if it had been written on purpose for him, and that the Author had exactly conceiv'd it as he plays it. I must own a particular Obligation to him for the most considerable part of the Passages relating to his Life which I have here transmitted to the Publick, his Veneration for the Memory of *Shakespeare* having engag'd him to make a Journey into *Warwickshire* on purpose to gather up what Remains he could of a Name for which he had so great a Value.



**1734—Voltaire. “On Tragedy,”**  
*from Letters Concerning the English Nation*

François-Marie Arouet (1694–1778), better known by his pen name, Voltaire, was one of the greatest authors of eighteenth-century Europe. He is remembered as a crusader against tyranny and bigotry and noted for his wit and satire. Voltaire's neoclassical tastes made him particularly critical of Shakespearean drama, which he believed to be artless.

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The English already had a theatre, as did the Spanish, when the French still had nothing but portable stages. Shakespeare, who was considered the English Corneille, flourished at about the time of Lope de Vega. He had a strong and fertile genius, full of naturalness and sublimity, without the slightest spark of good taste or the least knowledge of the rules. I am going to tell you something rash but true, namely that the excellence of this author ruined the English theatre: there are such wonderful scenes, such grand and terrible passages scattered about in his monstrous farces, which are called tragedies, that these plays have always been performed with great success. Time, which alone makes the reputation of men, ends by making their defects respectable. After two hundred years most of the outlandish and monstrous ideas of this author have

acquired the right to be considered sublime, and almost all modern authors have copied him. But what succeeded in Shakespeare is booed in them and, as you can imagine, the veneration in which this Ancient is held increases as the Moderns are despised. It does not occur to people that they should not copy him, and the lack of success of their copies simply makes people think that he is inimitable.

You know that in the tragedy of the *Moor of Venice*, a most touching play, a husband strangles his wife on the stage, and while the poor woman is being strangled, she shrieks that she is dying most undeservedly. You are not unaware that in *Hamlet* gravediggers dig a grave, swallowing drinks and singing popular songs, cracking jokes typical of men of their calling about the skulls they come across. But what will surprise you is that these stupidities should have been imitated in the reign of Charles II, which was the age of politeness and the golden age of the arts.

Otway, in his *Venice Preserv'd*, introduces Senator Antonio and the courtesan Naki amid the horrors of the conspiracy of the Marquis of Bedmar. Old Senator Antonio with his courtesan goes through all the monkey tricks of an old debauchee who is impotent and out of his mind; he pretends to be a bull and a dog, he bites his mistress's legs and she kicks and whips him. These buffooneries, catering for the dregs of society, have been cut from Otway's play, but in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* the jokes of Roman shoemakers and cobblers, introduced on the stage with Brutus and Cassius, have been left in. That is because the stupidity of Otway is modern, while Shakespeare's is ancient.

You may well complain that those who have discussed the English theatre up to now, and above all the famous Shakespeare, have so far only pointed out his errors, and that nobody has translated any of the striking passages which atone for all his faults. I will answer that it is very easy to set out the errors of a poet in prose but very difficult to translate his beautiful lines. All the scribblers who set themselves up as critics of celebrated authors compile volumes. I would prefer two pages that pointed out a few of the beauties. For I shall always hold, with men of good taste, that there is more to be gained from a dozen lines of Homer and Virgil than from all the criticisms that have ever been written about these two great men.

I have ventured to translate a few passages of the best English poets. Here is one from Shakespeare. Have pity on the copy for the sake of the original, and always bear in mind when you see a translation that you are only looking at a feeble print of a great picture.

I have chosen the monologue from the tragedy of *Hamlet* which is familiar to all and begins with this line:

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

It is Hamlet, prince of Denmark, speaking:

Demeure, il faut choisir, et passer à l'instant  
 De la vie à la mort, ou de l'être au néant.  
 Dieux cruels, s'il en est, éclairez mon courage.  
 Faut-il vieillir courbé sous la main qui m'outrage,  
 Supporter, ou finir mon malheur et mon sort?  
 Qui suis-je? Qui m'arrête? Et qu'est-ce que la mort?  
 C'est la fin de nos maux, c'est mon unique asile;  
 Après de longs transports, c'est un sommeil tranquille.  
 On s'endort, et tout meurt; mais un affreux réveil  
 Doit succéder peut-être aux douceurs du sommeil.  
 On nous menace, on dit, que cette courte vie  
 De tourments éternels est aussitôt suivie.  
 O mort! moment fatal! affreuse éternité!  
 Tout coeur à ton seul nom se glace épouvanté.  
 Eh! qui pourrait sans toi supporter cette vie?  
 De nos Prêtres menteurs bénir l'hypocrisie?  
 D'une indigne maîtresse encenser les erreurs?  
 Ramper sous un Ministre, adorer ses hauteurs?  
 Et montrer les langueurs de son âme abattue,  
 A des amis ingrats, qui détournent la vue?  
 La mort serait trop douce en ces extrémités.  
 Mais le scrupule parle, et nous crie, 'Arrêtez.'  
 Il défend à nos mains cet heureux homicide,  
 Et d'un Héros guerrier, fait un Chrétien timide, etc.

Do not suppose that I have rendered the English word for word; woe to the makers of literal translations, who by rendering every word weaken the meaning! It is indeed by so doing that we can say the letter kills and the spirit gives life.

Here is another passage from a famous English tragic poet, Dryden, a poet of the time of Charles II, more productive than wise, whose reputation would have been unblemished had he only produced a tenth part of his works, and whose great drawback is a desire to be universal.

The passage begins thus:

When I consider life, 'tis all a cheat.  
 Yet fool'd by hope men favour the deceit.

De desseins en regrets, et d'erreurs en désirs,  
 Les mortels insensés promènent leur folie,

Dans des malheurs présents, dans l'espoir des plaisirs.  
 Nous ne vivons jamais, nous attendons la vie.  
 Demain, demain, dit-on, va combler tous nos vœux.  
 Demain vient, et nous laisse encore plus malheureux.  
 Quelle est l'erreur, hélas! du soin qui nous dévore?  
 Nul de nous ne voudrait recommencer son cours.  
 De nos premiers moments nous maudissons l'aurore,  
 Et de la nuit qui vient, nous attendons encore  
 Ce qu'ont en vain promis les plus beaux de nos jours, etc.

It is in these isolated passages that English tragic writers have excelled so far. Their plays, almost all barbarous, quite lacking in good taste, order and plausibility, have amazing flashes amid this gloom. The style is too bombastic, too far removed from nature, too much copied from Hebrew writers who are themselves so full of Asiatic hot air. But also it must be admitted that the stilts of the figurative style upon which the English language is raised do lift the spirit very high, although with an irregular gait.

The first Englishman to create a reasonable play written from end to end with elegance is the illustrious Addison. His *Cato of Utica* is a masterpiece in diction and beauty of verse. The role of Cato is to my mind far superior to that of Cornélie in Corneille's *Pompée*, for Cato is great without being high-flown, while Cornélie, who in any case is not an essential character, sometimes goes in for talking riddles. Addison's Cato seems to me the finest character on any stage, but the other characters in the play do not come up to him, and this work, though so well written, is marred by a frigid love plot which casts a mortal languor over the play.

The custom of dragging love somehow or other into dramatic works travelled from Paris to London in about 1660, with our ribbons and our perukes. Women, who adorn theatrical performances as they do here, will not abide that anything else but love be discussed in front of them. The astute Addison was weak and complaisant enough to bend the austerity of his character to fit the manners of his age, and spoiled a masterpiece through anxiety to please.

Since his plays have become more regular, people harder to please and authors more correct and less outrageous. I have seen recent plays very regular but frigid. It seems as though up to now the English have been born to create only irregular things of beauty. The brilliant monstrosities of Shakespeare are a thousand times more pleasing than modern conventionality. Until now the English poetic genius has been like an unruly tree planted by nature, throwing a thousand branches in all directions and growing irregularly but vigorously. It dies if you seek to force its nature and trim it like one of the trees in the gardens of Marly.



### 1735—William Popple. From *The Prompter*

William Popple (1701–1764) was an English government official and occasional writer and translator. He wrote two comedies, that were performed on the London stage in the 1730s and published his translation of Horace's *Ars Poetica* in 1753. In 1759 he published a verse satire, *The Age of Dulness*. The following extract is from issue 57 (May 27) of *The Prompter*, a theatrical paper that was published from 1734 to 1736.

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In tracing the corruption of the stage to its source, it may not be improper to take in every error that may have introduced itself and furnished its contingent to the general body. It will not therefore be foreign to my purpose to consider some characters in our dramatic pieces as they were originally designed by the poets who drew them, and as they appear to an audience from the manner in which the actor personates them.

A character falsified, like a stream of poisoned water, instead of nourishing, kills and destroys everything it runs thro'. Actors and managers have not always penetration enough to dive into the truth of character and are therefore content to receive it from tradition and misact it, as *Arlequin Astrologue* composes almanacs *de pere en fils*. This branch of corruption, when it relates to old plays, is not directly chargeable on the present actors or managers but is one of those general errors which time has given a sanction to and is, for that reason, the more considerable as well as dangerous. But tho' the error of itself does not cover them with a deserved shame, the reforming of it might crown them with deserved applause and make their penetration, like the sun long eclipsed, break out to the admiration of the present age and the comfort of posterity.

I shall inforce the truth of my observation by the character of Polonius in *Hamlet*, which I shall consider in its double presentation. Polonius, according to Shakespeare, is a man of most excellent understanding and great knowledge of the world, whose ridicule arises not from any radical folly in the old gentleman's composition, but a certain affectation of formality and method, mixed with a smattering of the wit of that age (which consisted in playing upon words) which being grown up with him is *incorporated* (if I may venture the expression) with all his words and actions.

That this is the true character of Polonius the doubtful reader may be satisfied if he will give himself the trouble to peruse the scenes between Polonius, Laertes, and Ophelia, and the first scene in the second act, between Polonius and Reynaldo. To save him part of the trouble, I shall make bold to borrow a couple of speeches for the immediate confirmation of this character given of Polonius, which will both establish his good sense and knowledge of the world and his affectation of formality and method.

The first is his advice to his son.

Give thy Thoughts no Tongue;  
 Nor any unproportion'd Thought his Act.  
 Be thou *familiar*, but by no means *vulgar*.  
 The Friends thou hast, and their Adoption try'd, *Grapple* them to thy  
 Soul with *Hooks of Steel*.  
 But do not dull thy Palm with Entertainment  
 Of each *new-hatch'd unfledg'd* Com'rade.—Beware  
 Of Entrance to a Quarrel; but, being in,  
 Bear't, that th' Opposed may be beware of thee.  
 GIVE ev'ry Man thine *Ear*; but few thy *Voice*.  
 Take each Man's *Censure*; but *reserve* thy  
*Judgment*—  
*Costly* thy *Habit*, as thy Purse can buy,  
 But not EXPREST in FANCY; *rich*, not *gaudy*:  
 FOR THE APPAREL OFT PROCLAIMS THE  
 MAN.  
 —Neither a *Borrower*, nor a *Lender* be;  
 For *Loan* oft loses both itself and Friend  
 And borrowing dulls the Edge of Husbandry.  
 This, above all, TO THINE ONE SELF BE TRUE—  
 And it must follow, as the Night the Day,  
 Thou can'st not then be false to any Man.  
 Farewel, &c.

No man that was really a fool could ever make such a speech, which would become the mouth of the wisest and most experienced.

The next is where Polonius acquaints the King and Queen that he has found out the very cause of Hamlet's lunacy.

*Pol*: My Liege and Madam, To expostulate  
 What Majesty should be, what Duty is,  
 Why Day is Day, Night, Night, and Time is Time,  
 Were nothing but to waste Night, Day, and  
 Time—  
 Therefore, since Brevity's the Soul of Wit,  
 And Tediousness the outward Limbs and Flourishes,  
 I will be brief: Your noble Son is mad;  
*Mad* call I it; for to define true Madness,  
 What is't but to be nothing else but mad?  
 But let that go—



*Qu.*: More Matter, with less Art.  
*Pol.*: Madam, I swear, I use no Art at all;  
 That he is mad, 'tis true; 'tis true, 'tis pitty;  
 And pitty 'tis, 'tis true; a foolish Figure,  
 But farewell it; for I will use no Art.  
 Mad let us grant him then; and now remains,  
 That we find out the Cause of this Effect;  
 For this EFFECT DEFECTIVE comes by  
 Cause—  
 Thus it remains, and the Remainder thus—  
 Perpend—  
 I have, &c.

Here is a visible affection of formality and method, with that particular sort of wit above mentioned, that makes the old man appear ridiculous at the same time that what he says has all the probability in the world of being the truth. If we examine the speeches of Polonius throughout the whole play, we shall find them reducible to this determinate character and to no other species of folly.

How does Polonius appear to an audience at present? He never looks or speaks but the fool stares out of his eyes and is marked in the tone of his voice. Even words that have the strongest sense, as well as beauty of sentiment and expression, lose their original stamp and dignity, as the character is now represented, and are converted into the seeming of folly. A few quotations, with the reader's recollection in what manner the speeches are delivered by Mr. Griffin and Mr. Hippisley (who perform this role in the two Theatres Royal) will illustrate this truth.

In the very first speech which Polonius makes, where I defy the most penetrating to find either a character of folly or any stamp of particular humour, or, in short, anything but a concern which the old gentleman expresses with great beauty of language and proper seriousness, at his son's going to travel and leaving him, our improving actors present us with the image of an old buffoon.

He has, My Lord, by WEARISOME Petition,  
 WRUNG from me my SLOW LEAVE; and at the  
 last,  
 Upon his will, I seal'd my HARD Consent.  
 I do beseech you, give him Leave to go.

Here is the most simple, plain, unstudied, unaffected reply that could be given. Yet, how is this spoke and acted? The eyes are turned obliquely and

dressed up in a foolish leer at the King, the words intermittently drawled out with a very strong emphasis, not to express a father's concern, which would be right, but something ridiculous to excite laughter, tho' neither the words, nor the sense, have any comic vein in them, the voice toned like the squeak of a bagpipe and the whole attitude suited to this false notion of his character.

In the scene between him and his daughter where he questions her about Hamlet's love, he fares no better. You see the figure and manner of an idiot, joined to the prudence of a parent giving advice to his daughter how to receive the addresses of a presumptive heir to the crown, a most unnatural connection which Shakespeare never thought of. The only vein of humour discoverable in the scene is a little playing on the word *Tenders*, a part of his natural character.

Marry, I'll teach you; think yourself a Baby,  
That you have ta'en his *Tenders* for true Pay  
Which are not *Sterling*: *Tender* yourself more dearly  
Or (not to crack the Wind of the poor Phrase,  
Wringing it thus) you'll *tender* me a Fool.

Immediately after—

Affection! Pugh! You speak like a green Girl  
Unsifted in such perillous Circumstance!

Every spectator of *Hamlet* will easily recollect what a horselaugh the manner of repeating these two lines never fails to occasion. Examine the sense of the language and you'll sooner find the weight and authority of a father reproofing an unexperienced child who does not know in what light she ought to consider both Hamlet and his love, and acquainting her how she ought to behave for the future, than any drollery or folly. Again,

Ay, Springes to catch *Woodcocks*; I do know  
When the *Blood boils*, how *prodigal the Soul*  
*Lends the Tongue Vows*.—

What can be more beautiful, as well as serious, than this sentiment! What rendered so light and ridiculous by the manner of speaking it at present!

In the first scene of the second act, where Ophelia gives Polonius an account of Hamlet's disorder, every reflection the old man makes is of the serious kind and does not give the actor the least cue for mirth or folly, yet in the representation we see a strong cast of both, without a shadow of that gravity his

uncertain conjectures and reflections upon the nature of the passion he imagines the Prince possessed with should naturally give him. Those who have seen *Hamlet* will easily recollect the figure Polonius makes in this scene and the tone of voice with which he utters:

*Pol.*: Mad for thy Love—

*Pol.*: This is the very Ecstasy of Love.

And in the scene where Polonius comes to Hamlet with a message from the Queen, tho', 'tis evident, Polonius only flatters Hamlet's supposed lunacy and Hamlet himself tells us so.

They fool me to the Top of my Bent—

Yet, from the manner this is acted, the audience is taught to believe that Polonius, in pure simplicity of sight, sees the cloud in the three different shapes Hamlet gives it.

It would be endless to carry *Shakespeare's* Polonius along with the *modern one* throughout the whole play in this manner. Enough has been quoted to show the judicious reader how much this character is falsified and what an intrusion of foreign false humour it labors under!

If it be said it is more entertaining now than it would be were it represented in its true humour, then the consequence will be that actors are better judges of characters than the poets who drew them, and every character will be in their power to represent as they please, which would pour a torrent of corruption on dramatic performances. It will avail them very little, as to the force of argument, to say the modern Polonius never fails to excite laughter, since neither the poet, nor the actor, should strive to please the quantity of what Shakespeare calls *barren spectators* by making the judicious grieve, *the censure of which one* (as the motto expresses it) *must outweigh a whole theatre of others*.

I have already said that this false edition of Polonius is the error of time, and no wise chargeable on the present representers, Mr. Griffin and Mr. Hippisley, who, bating some new exuberances, which I shall, in the course of this work, lop off, are the very best comic performers that we have, and that have the truest notions of the *vis comica*, which consists in bringing out the express humour of particular character, the idea of which lies *increate* in the sense of the words, 'till called forth by the penetrating genius of the actor it receives life and motion, to the delight of the judicious spectator who is ever ravished with true imagery and faithful portraiture.

But, to show that it is impossible Polonius could ever have been designed by Shakespeare the fool and idiot he appears now, we find him not only entrusted

by the King with an affair of the last consequence to him (which no wise Prince would ever commit to the care of a fool) but that in his younger days he has acquired the reputation of being cunning and politic—

Or else this Brain of mine,  
Hunts not the Trail of Policy *so sure*  
As I have us'd to do.

Again—

*Pol.*: Has there been such a Time, I'd fain know that,  
That I have positively said, 'Tis so,  
When it prov'd otherwise.—

*King*: Not that I know.—

'Tis true these are but the braggings of an old man, and he was out in his judgment in this case, but he is not the first politician, with a very good head, that has been mistaken. But, without this additional proof, the speeches quoted are sufficient to exclude folly from his composition.

One great cause of the corruption of this character of Polonius I take to lie in the obsolete language which, being very different from the phraseology of our days, the injudicious spectator takes the expressions to be what the French call *recherchees*, chosen on purpose to create laughter, as for example—

Affection! Pugh! You speak like a green Girl,  
Unsifted in such *perillous* circumstance.—

The sense of which being only, You speak like a raw girl, unacquainted with such matters, does not create any laughter at all in this modern garb, nor with the judicious in its antique one. But by the help of the figure Polonius makes, and for want of considering the idiom of those times, it acquires, in the opinion of many, a comic turn, in spite of the serious and moral sense it contains. And so of the rest.

The compass of a half-sheet will not allow me to give any further reasons for the recovery of Polonius' true character. Those that come to plays merely to laugh, tho' at the expense of reason, will relish Polonius as he is now. Those who reflect on propriety of character, truth of circumstances, and probability of fable, cannot bear the inconsistent, ridiculous, and foolish buffoon mixed so preposterously with the man of sense. As this is not the only character that has suffered as extraordinary a metamorphosis, and others still may, I leave it to every reader's reflection, how radically this corruption affects the stage.



1736—Thomas Hanmer. From *Some Remarks  
on the Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*

Sir Thomas Hanmer (1677-1746) served in Parliament, but he is perhaps best remembered as an early editor of Shakespeare. His edition of Shakespeare's works, published in 1744, "amended" the meter and grammar of the plays, to the dismay of some of his literary contemporaries. Alexander Pope ridiculed Hanmer in his mock epic *The Dunciad* for his criticisms of Shakespeare.

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The Tragedy that is now coming under our Examination, is one of the best of his Pieces, and strikes us with a certain Awe and Seriousness, of Mind, far beyond those Plays whose Whole Plot turns upon vehement and uncontrollable Love, such as are most of our modern Tragedies. These certainly have not the great Effect that others have, which turn either upon Ambition, the Love of one's Country, or Parental or Filial Tenderness. Accordingly we find, that few among the Ancients, and hardly any of our Author's Plays, are built upon the Passion of Love in a direct manner; by which I mean, that they have not the mutual Attachment of a Lover and his Mistress for their chief Basis. Love will always make a great Figure in Tragedy, if only its chief Branches be made use of; as for instance, Jealousy (as in *Othello*) or the beautiful Distress of Man and Wife (as in *Romeo and Juliet*) but never when the whole Play is founded upon two Lovers desiring to possess each other: And one of the Reasons for this seems to be, that this last Species of that Passion is more commonly met with than the former, and so consequently strikes us less. Add to this, that there may a suspicion arise, that the Passion of Love in a direct Manner may be more sensual than in those Branches which I have mention'd; which Suspicion is sufficient to take from its Dignity, and lessen our Veneration for it. Of all *Shakespeare's* Tragedies, none can surpass this, as to the noble Passions which it naturally raises in us. That the Reader may see what our Poet had to work upon, I shall insert the Plan of it as abridged from *Saxo-Grammaticus's Danish History* by Mr. *Theobalds*. "The Historian calls our Poet's Hero *Amlethus*, his Father *Horwendillus*, his Uncle *Fengo*, and his Mother *Gerutha*. The old king in single Combat, slew *Collerus*, King of *Norway*; *Fengo* makes away with his Brother *Horwendillus*, and marries his Widow *Gerutha*. *Amlethus*, to avoid being suspected by his Uncle of Designs, assumes a Form of utter Madness. A fine Woman is planted upon him, to try if he would yield to the Impressions of Love. *Fengo* contrives, that *Amlethus*, in order to sound him, should be closetted by his Mother. A Man is conceal'd in the Rushes to overhear their Discourse; whom *Amlethus* discovers and kills. When the Queen is frighted at this Behaviour of his; he tasks her about her criminal

Course of Life, and incestuous Conversation with her former Husband's Murtherer; confesses his Madness is but counterfeited, to protect himself, and secure his Revenge for his Father; to which he enjoins the Queen's Silence. *Fengo* sends *Amlethus* to *Britain*: Two of the King's Servants attend him with Letters to the *British* King, strictly pressing the Death of *Amlethus*, who, in the Night Time, coming at their Commission, over-reads it, forms a new One, and turns the Destruction designed towards himself on the Bearers of the Letters. *Amlethus* returning Home, by a Wile surprizes and kills his Uncle." I shall have Occasion to remark in the Sequel, that in one Particular he has followed the Plan so closely as to produce an Absurdity in his Plot. And I must premise also this, that in my Examination of the whole Conduct of the Play, the Reader must not be surprised, if I censure any Part of it, although it be entirely in Conformity to the Plan the Author has chosen; because it is easy to conceive, that a Poet's Judgment is particularly shewn in chusing the proper Circumstances, and rejecting the improper Ones of the Ground-work which he raises his Play upon. In general we are to take Notice, that as History ran very low in his Days, most of his Plays are founded upon some old wretched Chronicler, or some empty *Italian* Novelist; but the more base and mean were his Materials, so much more ought we to admire His Skill, Who has been able to work up his Pieces to such Sublimity from such low Originals. Had he had the Advantages of many of his Successors, ought not we to believe, that he would have made the greatest Use of them? I shall not insist upon the Merit of those who first break through the thick Mist of *Barbarism* in Poetry, which was so strong about the time our Poet writ, because this must be easily sensible to every Reader who has the least Tincture of Letters; but thus much we must observe, that before his Time there were very few (if any) Dramatick Performances of any Tragick Writer, which deserve to be remembred; so much were all the noble Originals of Antiquity buried in Oblivion. One would think that the works of *Sophocles*, *Euripides*, &c. were Discoveries of the last Age only; and not that they had existed for so many Centuries. There is something very astonishing in the general Ignorance and Dulness of Taste, which for so long a Time over-spread the World, after it had been so gloriously enlighten'd by *Athens* and *Rome*; especially as so many of their excellent Masterpieces were still remaining, which one would have thought should have excited even the Brutes of those barbarous Ages to have examined them, and form'd themselves according to such Models.

I shall close these Remarks with some general Observations, and shall avoid (as I have hitherto done) repeating any Thing which has been said by others, at least as much as I possibly can: Nor do I think it necessary to make an ostentatious Shew of Learning, or to draw quaint Parallels between our Author and the great Tragick Writers of Antiquity; for in Truth, this is very

little to the Purpose in reviewing *Shakespeare's* Dramatick Works; since most Men are I believe convinced, that he is very little indebted to any of them; and a remarkable Instance of this is to be observed in his Tragedy of *Troilus* and *Cressida*, wherein it appears (as *Mr. Theobalds* has evidently demonstrated it,) that he has chosen an old *English* Romance concerning the *Trojan* War, as a worthier Guide than even *Homer* himself. Nature was our great Poet's Mistress; her alone has he followed as his Conductress; and therefore it has been with regard to her only, that I have considered this Tragedy. It is not to be denied, but that *Shakespeare's* Dramatick Works are in general very much mix'd; his Gold is strangely mingled with Dross in most of his Pieces. He fell too much into the low Taste of the Age he liv'd in, which delighted in miserable Puns, low Wit, and affected sententious Maxims; and what is most unpardonable in him, he has interspersed his noblest Productions with this Poorness of Thought. This I have shewn in my Remarks on this Play. Yet, notwithstanding the Defects I have Pointed out, it is I think, beyond dispute, that there is much less of this in *Hamlet* than in any of his Plays; and that the Language in the Whole, is much more pure, and much more free from Obscurity or Bombast, than any of our Author's Tragedies; for sometimes *Shakespeare* may be justly tax'd with that Fault. And we may moreover take Notice, that the Conduct of this Piece is far from being bad; it is superior in that respect (in my Opinion) to many of those Performances in which the Rules are said to be exactly kept to. The Subject, which is of the nicest Kind; is managed with great Delicacy, much beyond that Piece wherein *Agamemnon's* Death is revenged by his Son *Orestes*, so much admired by all the Lovers of Antiquity; for the Punishment of the Murderer alone by the Son of the murdered Person, is sufficient; there is something too shocking in a Mother's being put to Death by her Son, although she be never so guilty. *Shakespeare's* Management in this Particular, has been much admired by one of our greatest Writers, who takes Notice of the beautiful Caution given by the Ghost to *Hamlet*,

But howsoever thou pursuest this Act, &c.

The making the Whole to turn upon the Appearance of a Spectre, is a great Improvement of the Plan he work'd upon; especially as he has conducted it in so sublime a Manner, and accompanied it with all the Circumstances that could make it most perfect in its kind.

There is less Time employ'd in this Tragedy, as I observed else where, than in most of our Author's Pieces, and the Unity of Place is not much disturbed. But here give me leave to say, that the Critick's Rules, in respect to these two Things, if they prove any Thing, prove too much; for if our Imagination will not bear a strong Imposition, surely no Play ought to be supposed to take more

Time than is really employ'd in the Acting; nor should there be any Change of Place in the least. This shews the Absurdity of such Arbitrary Rules. For how would such a Genius as *Shakespeare's* have been cramped had he thus fettered himself! But there is (in Truth) no Necessity for it. No Rules are of any Service in Poetry, of any kind, unless they add Beauties, which consist (in Tragedy) in an exact Conformity to Nature in the Conduct of the Characters, and in a sublimity of Sentiments and nobleness of Diction. If these two Things be well observed, tho' often at the Expence of Unity of Time and Place, such Pieces will always please, and never suffer us to find out the little Defects in the Plot; nay it generally happens (at least Experience has shewn it frequently) that those Pieces wherein the fantastick Rules of Criticks have been kept strictly to, have been generally flat and low. We are to consider, that no Dramatick Piece can affect us but by the Delusion of our Imagination; which, to taste true and real Pleasures at such Representations, must undergo very great Impositions, even such as in Speculation seem very gross, but which are nevertheless allowed of by the strictest Criticks. In the first Place, our Understandings are never shocked at hearing all Nations, on our Stage, speak *English*; an Absurdity one would think that should immediately revolt us; but which is, however, absolutely necessary in all Countries where Dramatick Performances are resorted to, unless the Characters be always supposed to be of each respective Nation; as for instance, in all *Shakespeare's* Historical Plays. I say, this never shocks us, nor do we find any Difficulty in believing the Stage to be *Rome*, (or *Denmark*, for instance, as in this Play;) or *Wilks* to be *Hamlet*, or *Booth* to be a Ghost, &c. These Things, I repeat it, appear difficult in Speculation; but we find, that in Reality they do go down; and must necessarily do so, or else farewell all Dramatick Performances; for unless the Distress and Woes appear to be real (which they never can, if we do not believe we actually see the Things that are represented) it is impossible our Passions should be moved. Let any one fairly judge, if these do not seem as great Impositions on our Reason, as the Change of Place, or the Length of Time, which are found fault with in our Poet. I confess there are Bounds set to this Delusion of our Imaginations, (as there are to every Thing else in this World) for this Delusion is never perform'd in direct Defiance of our Reason; on the contrary our Reason helps on the Deceit; but she will concur no farther in this Delusion, than to a certain Point which she will never pass, and that is, the Essential Difference between Plays which deceive us by the Assistance of our Reason, and others which would impose upon our Imaginations in Despight of our Reason. It is evident by the Success our Author's Pieces have always met with for so long a Course of Time; it is, I say, certain by this general Approbation, that his Pieces are of the former, not of the latter Sort. But to go to the Bottom of this Matter, would lead me beyond what I propose.



Since therefore it is certain, that the strict Observance of the Critick's Rules might take away Beauties, but not always add any, why should our Poet be so much blamed for giving a Loose to his Fancy? The Sublimity of Sentiments in his Pieces, and that exalted Diction which is so peculiarly his own, and in time, all the Charms of his Poetry, far outweigh any little Absurdity in his Plots, which no ways disturb us in the Pleasures we reap from the above-mention'd Excellencies. And the more I read him, the more I am convinced, that as he knew his own particular Talent well, he study'd more to work up great and moving circumstances to place his chief Characters in, so as to affect our Passions strongly, he apply'd himself more to This than he did to the Means or Methods whereby he brought his Characters into those Circumstances. How far a general Vogue is the Test of the Merit of a Tragedy, has been often considered by eminent Writers, and is a subject of too complicated a Nature to discuss in these few Sheets. But I shall just hint two or three of my own Thoughts on that Head. Nature is the Basis of all Tragick Performances, and no Play that is unnatural, *i.e.* wherein the Characters act inconsistently with themselves, and in a Manner repugnant to our natural Ideas, can please at all. But a Play may be natural, and yet displease one Sett of People out of Two, of which all Audiences are composed. If a Play be built upon low Subjects, but yet carried on consistently, and has no Merit but Nature, it will please the Vulgar; by which I mean, all the unlearned and ill-educated, (as for Instance, *George Bamwell*, a Piece calculated for the Many) but it must be nauseous to the Learned, and to those of improved and exalted Understandings. So on the other Hand, a Piece which turns upon Passions, which regard those of high Station chiefly, cannot be so pleasing to the Vulgar; for tho' all Men are born with the same Passions, yet Education very much exalts and refines them. Thus the Loves and Boors and Peasants may delight the Populace, but those of better Sort must have Delicacy in that Passion to see it represented with any tolerable Patience. The same is to be said of Jealousy and Revenge, which are indeed felt by all, but in Breasts well educated are felt with sharper Pangs, and are combated with more Vehemence, and from more and greater Motives; therefore such People are fitter to judge, and more likely to be taken with noble and sublime Representations of such Incidents. I need not observe, that the Vulgar cannot judge of the Historical Propriety of a great Character, This is obvious to every one; nor can they judge of the Passion of Ambition, as it has Power with Princes and great Men, because not being versed by Reading in parallel Stories, and not being in such a Situation of Life, as to feel the Torments of such Passions, they cannot certainly tell whether such Things are represented with proper Circumstances, and proper Consequences drawn from them. And moreover, as all Men are by Nature more prone to some Passions than to others, This must cause Variety of Sentiments in relation to the same

Piece. Besides all this, we may be very certain that different Education, different Degrees of Understanding, and of the Passions common to all Men, must cause a Variety of Sentiments concerning such Representations. To prove this, let us observe how the Tastes of Nations differ in relation to these Things; so much, that one would be tempted sometimes to think, that they did not all partake of the same Passions; but certainly they vary in the Degrees of them; therefore by a Parity of Reason we may justly conclude, that Difference of Education among those of the same Nation must affect their Passions and Sentiments. The better sort have (if one may so express it) some acquired Passions which the lower sort are ignorant of. Thus indeed it seems at first Sight; but on a nearer View they are found to be, as I said, the same Passions augmented or refined, and turned upon other Objects. The different Manner in which one of *Corneille's* or *Racine's* Pieces would be received by an Audience of *Turks or Russians*, and an Audience of *Frenchmen*, (supposing the former to understand the Language, and the latter to be free from any national Prejudices for the Authors) is a lively and strong Emblem of the Force of Education and Custom among Creatures, all cast in the same Mould, and endued with the same Faculties and Passions with very little real Difference. Still farther, we may observe, that even good Acting will recommend some bad Pieces, as bad Acting will take away half the Merit of Good Ones; and some National Subjects are pleasing (as the *Albion Queens* and *Earl of Essex*) to the Many, tho' they very little affect the Few. When I speak of Plays, I desire to be understood of Tragedies, in which I think the *English* excell; for I can mention very few of our Comedies with any Approbation; since in the Latter, neither the Morals of the Inhabitants of this Nation are regarded, or Nature followed. In short, not to pursue a Subject, that would carry me great Lengths, I conclude from this, that a Piece which has no Merit in it but Nature, will, please the Vulgar; whereas exalted Sentiments, and Purity and Nobleness of Diction, as well as Nature, are absolutely requisite to please those of a true Taste. And it is very possible, that a Play which turns upon some great Passion, seldom felt by the Vulgar, and wherein that Passion is treated with the greatest Delicacy and Justness; I say, it is very possible that such a Piece may please the Few, and displease the Many. And as a proof of the bad Taste of the Multitude, we find in this nation of ours, that a vile *Pantomime* Piece, full of Machinery, or a lewd blasphemous Comedy, or wretched Farce, or an empty obscure low Ballad Opera, (in all which, to the scandal of our Nation and Age, we surpass all the World) shall draw together crowded Audiences, when there is full Elbow-Room at a noble Piece of *Shakespeare's* or *Rowe's*.

Before I conclude, I must point out another Beauty in the Tragedy of Hamlet, beside those already mentioned, which does indeed arise from our Author's conforming to a Rule which he followed, (probably, without knowing

it,) only because it is agreeable to Nature; and this is, that there is not one Scene in this Play but what some way or other conduces towards the *Denouement* of the Whole; and thus the Unity of Action is indisputably kept up by every Thing tending to what we may call the main Design, and it all hangs by Consequence so close together, that no Scene can be omitted, without Prejudice to the Whole. Even *Laertes* going to *France*, and *Ophelia's* Madness, however trivial they may seem (and how much soever I dislike the Method of that last mentioned) are Incidents absolutely necessary towards the concluding of all; as will appear to any one upon due Consideration. This all holds good, notwithstanding it is my Opinion, that several of the Scenes might have been altered by our Author for the better; but as they all stand, it is, as I said, quite impossible to separate them, without a visible Prejudice to the Whole. I must add, that I am much in Doubt, whether Scenes of Prose are allowable, according to Nature and Reason, in Tragedies which are composed chiefly of Blank Verse; the Objection to them seems to be this, that as all Verse is not really in Nature, but yet Blank Verse is necessary in Tragedies, to ennoble the Diction, and by Custom is become natural to us, Prose mixed with it serves only, methinks, to discover the Effects of Art, by the Contraste between Verse and Prose. Add to this, That it is not suitable to the Dignity of such Performances.

In short, Vice is punished in this excellent Piece, and thereby the Moral Use of it is unquestionable. And *if Hamlet's* Virtue is not rewarded as we could wish, *Mr. Addison's* Maxim ought to satisfy us, which is this, "That no Man is so thoroughly Virtuous as to claim a Reward in Tragedy, or to have Reason to repine at the Dispensations of Providence; and it is besides more Instructive to the Audience, because it abates the Insolence of Human Nature, and teaches us not to judge of Men's Merit by their Successes. And he proceeds farther, and says, that though a virtuous Man may prove unfortunate, yet a vicious Man cannot be happy in a well wrought Tragedy." This last Rule is well observed here.

Another Reason why we ought to bear with more Patience the Sufferings of a virtuous Character, is the Reflection on the future Rewards prepared for such, which is more suitable to the Moral Maxims established in a Christian Country. Besides, had it pleased our Author to have spared *Hamlet's* Life, we had been deprived of that pleasing Sensation which always (as I have else where observed) accompanies a Consciousness that we are moved as we ought to be; which we most assuredly are, when we feel Compassion rise in us for the young Prince's Death in the last Scene. I shall just touch upon one Thing more, and then I shall end these Reflections.

I am very sensible that our Nation has long been censur'd for delighting in bloody Scenes on the Stage, and our Poets have been found fault with for complying with this vicious Taste. I cannot but own, that there is a great deal of Justice in these Complaints; and must needs be of Opinion, that such Sights

should never be exhibited but in order, visibly, to conduce to the Beauty of the Piece. This is sometimes so much the Case, that Action is often absolutely necessary. And to come more particularly to the Subject now in hand, I desire any unprejudiced Man, of any Nation whatever, (if such can be found) who understands our Language, to consider whether the Appearance of the Ghost, and the Deaths of the several principal Personages, (with whatever else may offend the Delicacy I mention) could possibly have that great, the noble Effect, by being told to the Audience, as they most undoubtedly have, by being brought on the Stage. If this Matter be well examined with all possible Candour, I am well perswaded that it would be found in the End, that this Piece would, by the Method I speak of, loose half its Beauty.



### 1748—Voltaire. From “Discourse on Ancient and Modern Tragedy”

François-Marie Arouet (pen name Voltaire) was a philosopher and writer of books, plays, and other works. Among his writings are the famous *Candide* and *Letters Concerning the English Nation*.

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The Roman philosophers had no faith in ghosts in the time of the emperors, and yet young Pompey raises one in the “*Pharsalia*.” The English have certainly no more belief in spirits than the Romans had, and yet they see every day with pleasure, in the tragedy of “Hamlet,” the ghost of a king, who appears nearly the same as the apparition of Ninus did at Paris. I am at the same time far from justifying the tragedy of “Hamlet” in every respect; it is a gross and barbarous piece, and would never be borne by the lowest of the rabble in France or Italy. Hamlet runs mad in the second act, and his mistress in the third; the prince kills the father of his mistress and fancies he is killing a rat; and the heroine of the play throws herself into the river. They dig her grave on the stage, and the grave-diggers, holding the dead men’s skulls in their hands, talk nonsense worthy of them. Hamlet answers their abominable stuff by some whimsies not less disgusting; during this time one of the actors makes the conquest of Poland. Hamlet, his mother, and father-in-law, drink together on the stage: they sing at table, quarrel, beat and kill one another: one would think the whole piece was the product of the imagination of a drunken savage: and yet, among all these gross irregularities, which make the English theatre even at this day so absurd and barbarous, we find in “Hamlet,” which is still more strange and unaccountable, some sublime strokes worthy of the greatest genius. It seems as if nature took pleasure to unite in the head of Shakespeare all that we can imagine great and

forcible, together with all that the grossest dullness could produce of everything that is most low and detestable.

It must be acknowledged, that, among the beauties that shine forth in the midst of all these horrid extravagancies, the ghost of Hamlet's father is one of the most striking: it has always a strong effect on the English—I mean, on those who are the best judges and are most hurt by the irregularity of their old theatre. This ghost inspires more terror, even in the reading, than the apparition of Darius in the "*Persians*" of Aeschylus: and why does it? because Darius, in Aeschylus, only appears to foretell the misfortunes of his family; whereas, in Shakespeare, the ghost of Hamlet appears to demand vengeance, and to reveal secret crimes. It is neither useless, nor brought in by force, but serves to convince mankind, that there is an invisible power, the master of nature. All men have a sense of justice imprinted on their hearts, and naturally wish that heaven would interest itself in the cause of innocence: in every age, therefore, and in every nation, they will behold with pleasure, the Supreme Being engaged in the punishment of crimes which could not come within the reach of human laws: this is a consolation to the weak, and a restraint on the insolence and obstinacy of the powerful.

—Heaven

Will oft suspend its own eternal laws  
 When justice calls, reversing death's decree,  
 Thus to chastise the sovereigns of the earth,  
 And terrify mankind—

Thus Semiramis speaks to the high priest of Babylon, and thus the successor of Samuel might have spoken to Saul, when the ghost of Samuel came to tell him of his condemnation.

I will go still further, and venture to affirm, when an extraordinary circumstance of this kind is mentioned in the beginning of a tragedy, when it is properly prepared, when things are so situated as to render it necessary and even looked for and desired by the spectators; it ought then to be considered as perfectly natural: it is at the same time sufficiently obvious, that these bold strokes are not to be too often repeated.



### 1749—Henry Fielding. From *Tom Jones*

Henry Fielding (1701–1754) was a playwright who wrote several comedies for the London stage (from 1728 to 1748) and an early English novelist. His first novel, *Joseph Andrews* (1742), brought him initial

success in this genre, but it is for his second novel, *Tom Jones* (1749), that he is best remembered today.

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Mr. Jones having spent three Hours in reading and kissing the aforesaid Letter, and being, at last, in a State of good Spirits, from the last-mentioned Considerations, he agreed to carry an Appointment which he had before made into Execution. This was to attend Mrs. *Miller* and her younger Daughter, into the Gallery at the Playhouse, and to admit Mr. *Partridge* as one of the Company. For as *Jones* had really that Taste for Humour which many affect, he expected to enjoy much Entertainment in the Criticisms of *Partridge*; from whom he expected the simple Dictates of Nature, unimproved indeed, but likewise unadulterated by Art.

In the first Row then of the first Gallery did Mr. *Jones*, Mrs. *Miller*, her youngest Daughter, and *Partridge*, take their Places. *Partridge* immediately declared, it was the finest Place he had ever been in. When the first Musick was played, he said, 'It was a Wonder how so many Fiddlers could play at one Time, without putting one another out.' While the Fellow was lighting the upper Candles, he cry'd out to Mrs. *Miller*, 'Look, look, Madam, the very Picture of the Man in the End of the Common-Prayer Book, before the Gunpowder-Treason Service': Nor could he help observing, with a Sigh, when all the Candles were lighted, 'That here were Candles enough burnt in one Night, to keep an honest poor Family for a whole Twelvemonth.'

As soon as the Play, which was *Hamlet*, Prince of Denmark, began, *Partridge* was all Attention, nor did he break Silence till the Entrance of the Ghost; upon which he asked *Jones*, 'what Man that was in the strange Dress; something', said he, 'like what I have seen in a Picture. Sure it is not Armour, is it?' *Jones* answered, 'That is the Ghost.' To which *Partridge* replied with a Smile, 'Perswade me to that, Sir, if you can. Though I can't say I ever actually saw a Ghost in my Life, yet I am certain I should know one, if I saw him, better than that comes to. No, no, Sir, Ghosts don't appear in such Dresses as that, neither.' In this Mistake, which caused much Laughter in the Neighbourhood of *Partridge*, he was suffered to continue 'till the Scene between the *Ghost* and *Hamlet*, when *Partridge* gave that Credit to Mr. *Garrick* which he had denied to *Jones*, and fell into so violent a Trembling, that his Knees knocked against each other. *Jones* asked him what was the Matter, and whether he was afraid of the Warrior upon the Stage? 'O la! Sir,' said he, 'I perceive now it is what you told me. I am not afraid of any Thing, for I know it is but a Play: And if it was really a Ghost, it could do one no Harm at such a Distance, and in so much Company; and yet if I was frightened, I am not the only Person.' 'Why, who', cries *Jones*, 'dost thou take to be such a Coward here besides thyself?' 'Nay, you may call me Coward if you will; but if that little Man there upon the Stage is not frightened, I never saw any Man frightened in my Life. Ay, ay; go along with you! Ay, to be sure! Who's Fool then? Will you?

Lud have Mercy upon such Fool-Hardiness!—Whatever happens it is good enough for you.—*Follow you?* I'd follow the Devil as soon. Nay, perhaps, it is the Devil—for they say he can put on what Likeness he pleases.—Oh! here he is again.—*No farther!* No, you have gone far enough already; farther than I'd have gone for all the King's Dominions.' *Jones* offered to speak, but *Partridge* cried, 'Hush, hush, dear Sir, don't you hear him!' And during the whole Speech of the Ghost, he sat with his Eyes fixed partly on the Ghost, and partly on *Hamlet*, and with his Mouth open; the same Passions which succeeded each other in *Hamlet*, succeeding likewise in him.

When the Scene was over, *Jones* said, 'Why, *Partridge*, you exceed my Expectations. You enjoy the Play more than I conceived possible.' 'Nay, Sir,' answered *Partridge*, 'if you are not afraid of the Devil, I can't help it; but to be sure it is natural to be surprised at such Things, though I know there is nothing in them: Not that it was the Ghost that surprised me neither; for I should have known that to have been only a Man in a strange Dress: But when I saw the little Man so frightened himself, it was that which took Hold of me.' 'And dost thou imagine then, *Partridge*,' cries *Jones*, 'that he was really frightened?' 'Nay, Sir,' said *Partridge*, 'did not you yourself observe afterwards, when he found out it was his own Father's Spirit, and how he was murdered in the Garden, how his Fear forsook him by Degrees, and he was struck dumb with Sorrow, as it were, just as I should have been, had it been my own Case.—But hush! O la! What Noise is that? There he is again.—Well, to be certain, though I know there is nothing at all in it, I am glad I am not down yonder, where those Men are.' Then turning his Eyes again upon *Hamlet*, 'Ay, you may draw your Sword; what signifies a Sword against the Power of the Devil?'

During the second Act, *Partridge* made very few Remarks. He greatly admired the Fineness of the Dresses; nor could he help observing upon the King's Countenance. 'Well,' said he, 'how People may be deceived by Faces? *Nulla fides fronti* is, I find, a true Saying. Who would think, by looking in the King's Face, that he had ever committed a Murder?' He then enquired after the Ghost; but *Jones*, who intended he should be surprised, gave him no other Satisfaction, than 'that he might possibly see him again soon, and in a Flash of Fire.'

*Partridge* sat in fearful Expectation of this; and now, when the Ghost made his next Appearance, *Partridge* cried out, 'There, Sir, now; what say you now? Is he frightened now or no? As much frightened as you think me; and, to be sure, no Body can help some Fears. I would not be in so bad a Condition as what's his Name, Squire *Hamlet*, is there, for all the World. Bless me! What's become of the Spirit? As I am a living Soul, I thought I saw him sink into the Earth.' 'Indeed, you saw right,' answered *Jones*. 'Well, well,' cries *Partridge*, 'I know it is only a Play; and besides, if there was any Thing in all this, Madam *Miller* would not laugh so: For as to you, Sir, you would not be afraid, I believe, if the Devil was

here in Person.—There, there—ay, no Wonder you are in such a Passion; shake the vile wicked Wretch to Pieces. If she was my own Mother I should serve her so. To be sure, all Duty to a Mother is forfeited by such wicked Doings.—Ay, go about your Business; I hate the Sight of you.’

Our Critic was now pretty silent till the Play, which *Hamlet* introduces before the King. This he did not at first understand, ’till *Jones* explained it to him: but he no sooner entered into the Spirit of it than he began to bless himself that he had never committed Murder. Then turning to Mrs. *Miller*, he asked her, ‘If she did not imagine the King looked as if he was touched; though he is’, said he, ‘a good Actor, and doth all he can to hide it. Well, I would not have so much to answer for, as that wicked Man there hath, to sit upon a much higher Chair than he sits upon.—No wonder he run away; for your Sake I’ll never trust an innocent Face again.’

The Grave-digging Scene next engaged the Attention of *Partridge*, who expressed much surprise at the Number of Skulls thrown upon the Stage. To which *Jones* answered, ‘That it was one of the most famous Burial-Places about Town.’ ‘No wonder then’, cries *Partridge*, ‘that the Place is haunted. But I never saw in my Life a worse Grave-digger. I had a Sexton, when I was Clerk, that should have dug three Graves while he is digging one. The Fellow handles a Spade as if it was the first Time he had ever had one in his Hand. Ay, ay, you may sing. You had rather sing than work, I believe.’—Upon *Hamlet’s* taking up the Skull, he cry’d out, ‘Well, it is strange to see how fearless some Men are: I never could bring myself to touch any Thing belonging to a dead Man on any Account.—He seemed frightened enough too at the Ghost I thought. *Nemo omnibus horis sapit.*’

Little more worth remembering occurred during the Play; at the End of which *Jones* asked him, ‘which of the Players he had liked best?’ To this he answered, with some Appearance of Indignation at the Question, ‘The King without Doubt.’ ‘Indeed, Mr. *Partridge*,’ says Mrs. *Miller*, ‘you are not of the same Opinion as the Town; for they are all agreed, that *Hamlet* is acted by the best Player who ever was on the Stage.’ ‘He the best Player!’ cries *Partridge*, with a contemptuous Sneer, ‘why, I could act as well as he myself. I am sure if I had seen a Ghost, I should have looked in the very same Manner, and done just as he did. And then, to be sure, in that Scene, as you called it, between him and his Mother, where you told me he acted so fine, why, Lord help me, any Man, that is, any good Man, that had had such a Mother, would have done exactly the same. I know you are only joking with me; but, indeed, Madam, though I was never at a Play in *London*, yet I have seen acting before in the Country; and the King for my Money; he speaks all his Words distinctly, half as loud again as the other.—Any Body may see he is an Actor.’

While Mrs *Miller* was thus engaged in conversation with *Partridge*, a lady came up to Mr *Jones*, whom he immediately knew to be Mrs *Fitzpatrick*. She



said she had seen him from the other part of the gallery, and had taken that opportunity of speaking to him, as she had something to say which might be of great service to himself. She then acquainted him with her lodgings, and made him an appointment the next day in the morning; which, upon recollection, she presently changed to the afternoon; at which time Jones promised to attend her.

Thus ended the adventure at the playhouse; where Partridge had afforded great mirth, not only to Jones and Mrs Miller, but to all who sat within hearing, who were more attentive to what he said than to anything that passed on the stage.

He durst not go to bed all that night, for fear of the ghost; and for many nights after sweated two or three hours before he went to sleep, with the same apprehensions, and waked several times in great horrors, crying out, 'Lord have mercy upon us! There it is.'



### 1765—Samuel Johnson. From “The Preface to Shakespeare” and “Notes on the Plays,” in *The Plays of William Shakespeare*

Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) is one of England’s greatest literary figures, and some consider him the foremost literary critic of English literature. In 1765 Johnson published his eight-volume collection *The Plays of William Shakespeare*. Although his edition of Shakespeare required further revisions by successors, Johnson’s critical preface, as well as his many notes and observations for that edition, remain classical statements in the history of Shakespeare criticism. Included below are passages from the preface most relevant to *Hamlet*, and also a selection of the most interesting of his notes on the text of *Hamlet*.

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[Johnson’s prefatory remarks on *Hamlet*]

... When Shakespeare’s plan is understood, most of the criticisms of Rhymer and Voltaire vanish away. The play of *Hamlet* is opened, without impropriety, by two sentinels; Iago bellows at Brabantio’s window, without injury to the scheme of the play, though in terms which a modern audience would not easily endure; the character of Polonius is seasonable and useful; and the Grave-diggers themselves may be heard with applause.

Shakespeare engaged in dramattick poetry with the world open before him; the rules of the ancients were yet known to few; the publick judgment was unformed; he had no example of such fame as might force him upon imitation,

nor criticks of such authority as might restrain his extravagance: He therefore indulged his natural disposition, and his disposition, as Rhymer has remarked, led him to comedy. In tragedy he often writes with great appearance of toil and study, what is written at last with little felicity; but in his comick scenes, he seems to produce without labour, what no labour can improve. In tragedy he is always struggling after some occasion to be comick, but in comedy he seems to repose, or to luxuriate, as in a mode of thinking congenial to his nature. In his tragick scenes there is always something wanting, but his comedy often surpasses expectation or desire. His comedy pleases by the thoughts and the language, and his tragedy for the greater part by incident and action. His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy to be instinct.

The force of his comick scenes has suffered little diminution from the changes made by a century and a half, in manners or in words. As his personages act upon principles arising from genuine passion, very little modified by particular forms, their pleasures and vexations are communicable to all times and to all places; they are natural, and therefore durable; the adventitious peculiarities of personal habits, are only superficial dyes, bright and pleasing for a little while, yet soon fading to a dim tinct, without any remains of former lustre; but the discriminations of true passion are the colours of nature; they pervade the whole mass, and can only perish with the body that exhibits them. The accidental compositions of heterogeneous modes are dissolved by the chance which combined them; but the uniform simplicity of primitive qualities neither admits increase, nor suffers decay. The sand heaped by one flood is scattered by another, but the rock always continues in its place. The stream of time, which is continually washing the dissoluble fabricks of other poets, passes without injury by the adamant of Shakespeare.

[*Johnson's notes on Hamlet*]

ACT I. SCENE i. (I. i. 63.)

He smote the sleaded Polack on the ice.

*Polack* was, in that age, the term for an inhabitant of *Poland*: *Polaque*, French. As in a translation of *Passeratius's* epitaph on *Henry III.* of *France*, published by *Camden*:

Whether thy chance or choice thee hither brings,  
 Stay, passenger, and wail the best of kings.  
 This little stone a great king's heart doth hold,  
 Who rul'd the fickle French and Polacks bold:  
 So frail are even the highest earthly things.  
 Go, passenger, and wail the hap of kings.

## ACT I. SCENE i. (I. i. 128.)

If thou hast any sound.

The speech of *Horatio* to the spectre is very elegant and noble, and congruous to the common traditions of the causes of apparitions.

## ACT I. SCENE i. (I. i. 153 foll.)

Whether in sea or fire, &c.

According to the pneumatology of that time, every element was inhabited by its peculiar order of spirits, who had dispositions different, according to their various places of abode. The meaning therefore is, that all *spirits extravagant*, wandering out of their element, whether aerial spirits visiting earth, or earthly spirits ranging the air, return to their station, to their proper limits in which they are *confined*.

## ACT I. SCENE ix. (I. v. 154.)

Swear by my sword.

Mr. *Garrick* produced me a passage, I think, in *Brantôme*, from which it appeared, that it was common to swear upon the sword, that is, upon the cross which the old swords had upon the hilt.

## ACT II. SCENE ii. (II. i. 114–17.)

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.

This is not the remark of a weak man. The vice of age is too much suspicion. Men long accustomed to the wiles of life *cast* commonly *beyond themselves*, let their cunning go further than reason can attend it. This is always the fault of a little mind, made artful by long commerce with the world.

## ACT II. SCENE iv. (II. ii.)

*Polonius* is a man bred in courts, exercised in business, stored with observation, confident of his knowledge, proud of his eloquence, and declining into dotage. His mode of oratory is truly represented as designed to ridicule the practice of those times, of prefaces that made no introduction, and of method that embarrassed rather than explained. This part of his character is accidental, the rest is natural. Such a man is positive and confident, because he knows that his

mind was once strong, and knows not that it is become weak. Such a man excels in general principles, but fails in the particular application. He is knowing in retrospect, and ignorant in foresight. While he depends upon his memory, and can draw from his repositories of knowledge, he utters weighty sentences, and gives useful counsel; but as the mind in its enfeebled state cannot be kept long busy and intent, the old man is subject to sudden dereliction of his faculties, he loses the order of his ideas, and entangles himself in his own thoughts, till he recovers the leading principle, and falls again into his former train. This idea of dotage encroaching upon wisdom, will solve all the phaenomena of the character of Polonius.

ACT II. SCENE vi. (II. ii. 269.)

The shadow of a dream.

Shakespeare has accidentally inverted an expression of *Pindar*, that the state of humanity is *skias onar*, the *dream* of a *shadow*.

ACT III. SCENE ii. (III. i. 56 foll.)

To be, or not to be?

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.

*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. If *to die*, were *to sleep, no more, and by a sleep to end* the miseries of our nature, such a sleep were *devoutly to be wished*; but if *to sleep* in death, be *to dream*, to retain our powers of sensibility, we must *pause* to consider, *in that sleep of death what dreams may come*. This consideration *makes calamity* so long endured; *for who would bear* the vexations of life, which might be ended *by a bare bodkin*, but that he is afraid of something in unknown futurity? This fear it is that gives efficacy to conscience, which, by turning the mind upon *this regard*, chills the ardour of *resolution*, checks the vigour of *enterprise*, and makes the *current* of desire stagnate in inactivity.

We may suppose that he would have applied these general observations to his own case, but that he discovered *Ophelia*.

ACT III. SCENE ii. (III. i. 70.)

The whips and scorns of time.

It may be remarked, that *Hamlet*, in his enumeration of miseries, forgets, whether properly or not, that he is a prince, and mentions many evils to which inferior stations only are exposed.

ACT III. SCENE ii. (III. i. 89).

Nymph, in thy orisons, &c.

This is a touch of nature. *Hamlet*, at the sight of *Ophelia*, does not immediately recollect, that he is to personate madness, but makes her an address grave and solemn, such as the foregoing meditation excited in his thoughts.

ACT III. SCENE v.

I know not why our editors should, with such implacable anger, persecute our predecessors. *Oi nekroi me daknousin*, the dead it is true can make no resistance, they may be attacked with great security; but since they can neither feel nor mend, the safety of mauling them seems greater than the pleasure; nor perhaps would it much misbeseem us to remember, amidst our triumphs over the *nonsensical* and the *senseless*, that we likewise are men; that *debemur morti*, and as *Swift* observed to *Burnet*, shall soon be among the dead ourselves.

ACT III. SCENE ix. (III. iii. 94–5.)

That his soul may be as damn'd and black  
As hell, whereto it goes.

This speech, in which *Hamlet*, represented as a virtuous character, is not content with taking blood for blood, but contrives damnation for the man that he would punish, is too horrible to be read or to be uttered.

ACT IV. SCENE v. (iv. v. 84.)

In hugger mugger to interr him.

All the modern editions that I have consulted give it,

In *private* to inter him;—

That the words now replaced are better, I do not undertake to prove; it is sufficient that they are *Shakespeare's*: If phraseology is to be changed as words

grow uncouth by disuse, or gross by vulgarity, the history of every language will be lost; we shall no longer have the words of any authour; and, as these alterations will be often unskilfully made, we shall in time have very little of his meaning.

ACT IV. SCENE ix. (IV. vii. 20–1.)

Would, like the spring that turneth wood to stone,  
Convert his gyves to graces.

This simile is neither very seasonable in the deep interest of this conversation, nor very accurately applied. If the *spring* had changed base metals to gold, the thought had been more proper.

ACT V. SCENE i. (V. i. 84–5.)

This might be the pate of a politician, which this ass o'er-offices.

In the quarto, for *over-offices* is, *over-reaches*, which agrees better with the sentence. I believe both the words were *Shakespeare's*. An authour in revising his work, when his original ideas have faded from his mind, and new observations have produced new sentiments, easily introduces images which have been more newly impressed upon him, without observing their want of congruity to the general texture of his original design.

ACT V. SCENE ii. (V. i. 254.)

*Allow'd her virgin RITES.*

The old quarto reads virgin CRANTS.

I have been informed by an anonymous correspondent, that *crants* is the *German* word for *garlands*, and I suppose it was retained by us from the *Saxons*. To carry *garlands* before the bier of a maiden, and to hang them over her grave, is still the practice in rural parishes.

*Crants* therefore was the original word, which the authour, discovering it to be provincial, and perhaps not understood, changed to a term more intelligible, but less proper. *Maiden rites* give no certain or definite image. He might have put *maiden wreaths*, or *maiden garlands*, but he perhaps bestowed no thought upon it, and neither genius nor practice will always supply a hasty writer with the most proper diction.

ACT V. SCENE iii. (V. ii. 6–7.)

Rashly,  
And prais'd be rashness for it.

*Hamlet*, delivering an account of his escape, begins with saying, That he *rashly*— and then is carried into a reflection upon the weakness of human wisdom. I

rashly—praised be rashness for it—*Let us* not think these events casual, but *let us know*, that is, *take notice and remember*, that we sometimes succeed by *indiscretion*, when we *fail* by *deep plots*, and infer the perpetual superintendence and *agency* of the *Divinity*. The observation is just, and will be allowed by every human being who shall reflect on the course of his own life.

ACT V. SCENE iii. (V. ii. 41–2.)

As Peace should still her wheaten garland wear,  
And stand a COMMA 'tween their amities;

The expression of our authour is, like many of his phrases, sufficiently constrained and affected, but it is not incapable of explanation. The *Comma* is the note of *connection* and continuity of sentences; the *Period* is the note of *abruption* and disjunction. *Shakespeare* had it perhaps in his mind to write, That unless *England* complied with the mandate, *war should put a period to their amity*; he altered his mode of diction, and thought that, in an opposite sense, he might put, That *Peace should stand a Comma between their amities*. This is not an easy style; but is it not the style of *Shakespeare*?

ACT V. SCENE v. (V. ii. 240.)

HAMLET. Give me your pardon, Sir. I've done you wrong.

I wish *Hamlet* had made some other defence; it is unsuitable to the character of a good or a brave man, to shelter himself in falsehood.

If the dramas of *Shakespeare* were to be characterised, each by the particular excellence which distinguishes it from the rest, we must allow to the tragedy of *Hamlet* the praise of variety. The incidents are so numerous, that the argument of the play would make a long tale. The scenes are interchangeably diversified with merriment and solemnity; with merriment that includes judicious and instructive observations, and solemnity, not strained by poetical violence above the natural sentiments of man. New characters appear from time to time in continual succession, exhibiting various forms of life and particular modes of conversation. The pretended madness of *Hamlet* causes much mirth, the mournful distraction of *Ophelia* fills the heart with tenderness, and every personage produces the effect intended, from the apparition that in the first act chills the blood with horror, to the fop in the last, that exposes affectation to just contempt.

The conduct is perhaps not wholly secure against objections. The action is indeed for the most part in continual progression, but there are some scenes which neither forward nor retard it. Of the feigned madness of *Hamlet* there appears no adequate cause, for he does nothing which he might not have done with the reputation of sanity. He plays the madman most, when he treats *Ophelia* with so much rudeness, which seems to be useless and wanton cruelty.

*Hamlet* is, through the whole play, rather an instrument than an agent. After he has, by the stratagem of the play, convicted the King, he makes no attempt to punish him, and his death is at last effected by an incident which *Hamlet* has no part in producing.

The catastrophe is not very happily produced; the exchange of weapons is rather an expedient of necessity, than a stroke of art. A scheme might easily have been formed, to kill *Hamlet* with the dagger, and *Laertes* with the bowl.

The poet is accused of having shewn little regard to poetical justice, and may be charged with equal neglect of poetical probability. The apparition left the regions of the dead to little purpose; the revenge which he demands is not obtained but by the death of him that was required to take it; and the gratification which would arise from the destruction of an usurper and a murderer, is abated by the untimely death of *Ophelia*, the young, the beautiful, the harmless, and the pious.



### 1768—Laurence Sterne.

#### From *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*

Laurence Sterne (1713–1768) was an Irish-born British novelist and Anglican clergyman. His novels include the hugely popular comic work *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (in nine volumes published serially 1760–1767) and *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768), meant to provoke strong emotion in the reader. The traveling protagonist of *A Sentimental Journey* is named Yorick after the dead jester in *Hamlet*.

#### The Passport-Versailles I

I FOUND no difficulty in getting admittance to Monsieur le Count de B\*\*\*\*. The set of Shakespeares was laid upon the table, and he was tumbling them over. I walk'd up close to the table, and giving first such a look at the books as to make him conceive I knew what they were—I told him I had come without any one to present me, knowing I should meet with a friend in his apartment, who, I trusted, would do it for me—it is my countryman the great Shakespeare, said I, pointing to his works—*et ayez la bonté, mon cher ami*, apostrophizing his spirit, added I, *de me faire cet honneur-là*—

The Count smiled at the singularity of the introduction; and seeing I look'd a little pale and sickly, insisted upon my taking an arm-chair; so I sat down; and to save him conjectures upon a visit so out of all rule, I told him simply of the incident in the bookseller's shop, and how that had impelled me rather to go to



him with a story of a little embarrassment I was under, than to any other man in France—And what is your embarrassment? let me hear it, said the Count. So I told him the story just as I have told it the reader.

And the master of my hotel, said I, as I concluded it, will needs have it, Monsieur le Count, that I should be sent to the Bastile—but I have no apprehensions, continued I—for in falling into the hands of the most polish'd people in the world, and being conscious I was a true man, and not come to spy the nakedness of the land, I scarce thought I laid at their mercy.—It does not suit the gallantry of the French, Monsieur le Count, said I, to shew it against invalids.

An animated blush came into the Count de B\*\*\*\*'s cheeks as I spoke this—*Ne craignez rien*—Don't fear, said he—Indeed I don't, replied I again—Besides, continued I a little sportingly, I have come laughing all the way from London to Paris, and I do not think Monsieur le Duc de Choiseul is such an enemy to mirth, as to send me back crying for my pains.

—My application to you, Monsieur le Count de B\*\*\*\* (making him a low bow), is to desire he will not.

The Count heard me with great good nature, or I had not said half as much—and once or twice said—*C'est bien dit*. So I rested my cause there and determined to say no more about it.

The Count led the discourse: we talk'd of indifferent things—of books, and politics, and men—and then of women—God bless them all! said I, after much discourse about them—there is not a man upon earth who loves them so much as I do: after all the foibles I have seen, and all the satires I have read against them, still I love them; being firmly persuaded that a man, who has not a sort of an affection for the whole sex, is incapable of ever loving a single one as he ought.

*Hèh bien! Monsieur l'Anglois*, said the Count, gaily—You are not come to spy the nakedness of the land—I believe you—*ni encore*, I dare say, *that* of our women—But permit me to conjecture if, *par hazard*, they fell into your way, that the prospect would not affect you.

I have something within me which cannot bear the shock of the least indecent insinuation: in the sportability of chit-chat I have often endeavoured to conquer it, and with infinite pain have hazarded a thousand things to a dozen of the sex together—the least of which I could not venture to a single one to gain heaven.

Excuse me, Monsieur le Count, said I—as for the nakedness of your land, if I saw it, I should cast my eyes over it with tears in them—and for that of your women (blushing at the idea he had excited in me), I am so evangelical in this, and have such a fellow-feeling for whatever is *weak* about them, that I would cover it with a garment, if I knew how to throw it on—But I could wish, continued I, to spy the *nakedness* of their hearts, and through the different disguises of customs, climates, and religion, find out what is good in them to fashion my own by—and therefore am I come.

It is for this reason, Monsieur le Count, continued I, that I have not seen the Palais Royal—nor the Luxembourg—nor the Façade of the Louvre—nor have attempted to swell the catalogues we have of pictures, statues, and churches—I conceive every fair being as a temple, and would rather enter in, and see the original drawings, and loose sketches hung up in it, than the transfiguration of Raphael itself.

The thirst of this, continued I, as impatient as that which inflames the breast of the connoisseur, has led me from my own home into France—and from France will lead me through Italy—’tis a quiet journey of the heart in pursuit of NATURE, and those affections which arise out of her, which make us love each other—and the world, better than we do.

The Count said a great many civil things to me upon the occasion; and added, very politely, how much he stood obliged to Shakespeare for making me known to him—But, à-propos, said he, Shakespeare is full of great things he forgot a small punctilio of announcing your name—it puts you under a necessity of doing it yourself.

### The Passport-Versailles II

THERE is not a more perplexing affair in life to me, than to set about telling any one who I am—for there is scarce any body I cannot give a better account of than myself; and I have often wish’d I could do it in a single word—and have an end of it. It was the only time and occasion in my life I could accomplish this to any purpose for Shakespeare lying upon the table, and recollecting I was in his books, I took up Hamlet, and turning immediately to the gravediggers scene in the fifth act, I laid my finger upon YORICK, and advancing the book to the Count, with my finger all the way over the name—Me voici! said I.

Now whether the idea of poor Yorick’s skull was put out of the Count’s mind by the reality of my own, or by what magic he could drop a period of seven or eight hundred years, makes nothing in this account—’tis certain the French conceive better than they combine—I wonder at nothing in this world, and the less at this; inasmuch as one of the first of our own church, for whose candour and paternal sentiments I have the highest veneration, fell into the same mistake in the very same case,—“He could not bear,” he said, “to look into the sermons wrote by the king of Denmark’s jester.”—Good my lord! said I; but there are two Yoricks. The Yorick your lordship thinks of has been dead and buried eight hundred years ago; he flourish’d in Horwendillus’s [Note: Horwendil was traditionally said to be the father of the Danish prince Amleth (i.e. Hamlet)] court—the other Yorick is myself, who have flourish’d, my lord, in no court—He shook his head—Good God! said I, you might as well confound Alexander the Great with Alexander the Coppersmith, my lord—’Twas all one, he replied.

—If Alexander king of Macedon could have translated your lordship, said I, I’m sure your lordship would not have said so.

The poor Count de B\*\*\*\* fell but into the same *error*—

—*Et, Monsieur, est il Yorick?* cried the Count.—*Je le suis*, said I. *Vous? Moi—moi qui ai l'honneur de vous parler, Monsieur le Comte—Mon Dieu!* said he, embracing me—*Vous êtes Yorick!*

The Count instantly put the Shakespeare into his pocket, and left me alone in his room.

### The Passport-Versailles III

I COULD not conceive why the Count de B\*\*\*\* had gone so abruptly out of the room, any more than I could conceive why he had put the Shakespeare into his pocket.—*Mysteries which must explain themselves are not worth the loss of time which a conjecture about them takes up:* 'twas better to read Shakespeare; so taking up "*Much Ado about Nothing*," I transported myself instantly from the chair I sat in to Messina in Sicily, and got so busy with Don Pedro and Benedict and Beatrice, that I thought not of Versailles, the Count, or the Passport.

Sweet pliability of man's spirit, that can at once surrender itself to illusions, which cheat expectation and sorrow of their weary moments!—Long—long since had he number'd out my days, had I not trod so great a part of them upon this enchanted ground; when my way is too rough for my feet, or too steep for my strength, I get off it, to some smooth velvet path which fancy has scattered over with rosebuds of delights; and having taken a few turns in it, come back strengthen'd and refresh'd—When evils press sore upon me, and there is no retreat from them in this world, then I take a new course—I leave it—and as I have a clearer idea of the elysian fields than I have of heaven, I force myself, like Aeneas, into them—I see him meet the pensive shade of his forsaken Dido, and wish to recognize it—I see the injured spirit wave her head, and turn off silent from the author of her miseries and dishonours—I lose the feelings for myself in hers, and in those affections which were wont to make me mourn for her when I was at school.

*Surely this is not walking in a vain shadow—nor does man disquiet himself in vain by it*—he oftener does so in trusting the issue of his commotions to reason only—I can safely say for myself, I was never able to conquer any one single bad sensation in my heart so decisively, as by beating up as fast as I could for some kindly and gentle sensation to fight it upon its own ground.

When I had got to the end of the third act, the Count de B\*\*\*\* entered with my passport in his hand. Mons. Le Duc de C\*\*\*\*, said the Count, is as good a prophet, I dare say, as he is a statesman.—*Un homme qui rit*, said the duke, *ne sera jamais dangereux.*—Had it been for anyone but the king's jester, added the Count, I could not have got it these two hours.—*Pardonnez moi*, Mons. Le Count, said I—I am not the king's jester—But you are Yorick?—Yes.—*Et vous plaisantez?*—I answered, Indeed I did jest—but was not paid for it—'twas entirely at my own expence.

We have no jester at court, Mons. Le Count, said I; the last we had was in the licentious reign of Charles II.—since which time our manners have been so gradually refining, that our court at present is so full of patriots, who wish for nothing but the honours and wealth of their country—and our ladies are all so chaste, so spotless, so good, so devout—there is nothing for a jester to make a jest of—

*Voilà un persiflage!* cried the Count.

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**1776—Voltaire. From “A Letter from M. Voltaire  
to the French Académie Containing an Appeal  
to That Society on the Merits of Shakespeare,  
Translated from the Original”**

François-Marie Arouet (pen name Voltaire) was a philosopher and writer of books, plays, and other works. Among his writings are the famous *Candide* and *Letters Concerning the English Nation*.

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Some of you, Gentlemen, know, that there exists a Tragedy of Shakespeare called *Hamlet*, in which a Spirit appears first of all to two Centinels and an Officer, without saying a word to them; after which he vanishes at the crowing of a cock. One of the Spectators observes, that Spirits are wont to disappear at the crowing of the Cock about the end of December, on account of the birth of our Saviour.

This Ghost is the father of Hamlet, who in his life was King of Denmark. His widow Gertrude, mother of Hamlet, has married the Brother of the defunct a short time after the death of her husband. This Hamlet in a soliloquy cries out:

Frailty, thy name is Woman!  
A little month, or ere those shoes were old  
With which she follow'd my poor father's body,  
Like Niobe all tears—why she, e'en she,  
O Heaven! a beast that wants discourse or reason  
Would have mourn'd longer—

It is not worth while observing, that cannon is fired at the rejoicings of the Queen Gertrude and her new husband, and at a contention of Fencing in the fifth Act, although the action is passing in the ninth Century, before the invention of cannon. This little inadvertency is not more remarkable, than that of making Hamlet swear by St Patrick, and appeal to Jesus our Saviour,

at a time when Denmark knew no more of Christianity than of powder and cannon.

But the most important circumstance is, that the Apparition informs his son in a very long *tête-à-tête*, that his wife and brother had poisoned him by the ear.

Hamlet is disposed to revenge his Father; and in order to give no umbrage to Gertrude, he counterfeits a madman during the whole Piece.—In one of the paroxysms of his first transport, he has a conversation with his mother Gertrude. The Great Chamberlain of the King conceals himself behind the tapestry. The Hero calls out that he hears a rat, and kills the Great Chamberlain.—The daughter of this officer of the Crown, who had an affection for Hamlet, becomes really mad, throws herself into the water, and is drowned.

The Theatre then at the fifth Act, represents a church and church-yard; although the Danes, Idolators in the first Act, were not become Christians in the fifth. The Sextons dig the grave of this poor Girl; and ask each other, if a drowned person ought to be buried in holy land? They then sing ballads suiting their profession and manners, turn up the earth, and shew the Public the skulls of the dead. After this Hamlet and the Brother of his Mistress jump into the grave and box each other. One of your Society, Gentlemen, has dared to remark, that these witticisms, which perhaps were conformable to the times of Shakespeare, were not sufficiently tragical for the age of my Lords Carteret, Chesterfield and Lyttleton; and that the Managers had retrenched them from the London Theatre: and Mr Marmontel, in one of his works, congratulates the English nation on it. ‘They abridge Shakespeare’, says he, ‘every day, and correct him. The celebrated Garrick has lately lopt off from his Stage the scene of the Grave-diggers, and almost all the fifth Act, and the Piece and the Author have been more applauded’.

(The Translator does not agree to this truth; he takes the part of the Grave-diggers. He wishes them to be preserved, as the respectable monuments of a singular genius. It is true, that there are a hundred passages in this work, and in every part of Shakespeare, equally noble, equally decent, equally sublime, and conducted with equal art; but the Translator gives the preference to the Grave-diggers: he grounds his reason on their having preserved this humane Scene on the other London Theatre; and seems to demand, that we should imitate this charming exhibition.)

The same Author has taken that happy liberty by which all the Actors pass in a moment in a vessel through the open sea, five hundred miles over the Continent, from an alehouse into a palace, and from Europe to Asia. The highest pitch of art, according to him, or rather the most natural beauty, is to represent an action, or many actions at the same time, which continue half a century.

In vain has the wise Despréaux, the legislator of good taste throughout all Europe, said in his Art of Poetry: ‘A Poet on the other side the Pyrenees, may include, without danger, whole years within a day upon the stage; it is there only

that the Hero of a barbarous performance, a child in the first Act, becomes a dotard in the last'.

In vain may one quote to him examples from the Greeks, who found out the three natural unities. In vain might one tell him of the Italians, who, long before Shakespeare, revived the fine arts at the beginning of the sixteenth Century, and faithfully adhered to the three great laws of good sense, Unity of Place, Unity of Time, and Unity of Action. In vain may he behold the *Sophonisba* of the Archbishop Trissino, the *Rosamond* and *Orestes* of Ruccellai, the *Dido* of Dolce, and many other pieces composed in Italy, near a hundred years before Shakespeare wrote at London, all subservient to the judicious rules laid down by the Greeks.

In vain may he be shewn that the *Aminto* of Tasso, and the *Pastor Fido* of Querini [sic], do not violate in a great degree the same rules; and that this difficulty surmounted, is a charm which enchants every person of taste. In vain may you insist on the example of all Painters, amongst whom not one is to be found who has painted different actions on the same canvas. To-day, Gentlemen, a decision is given, that the Unities are a Chimerical Law, because Shakespeare has regarded none of them, and because it is wished to depreciate us, by pretending that we have no other merit . . .

A great Scotch Judge, who has printed the *Elements of Criticism* in three volumes in which there are many judicious and refined reflections, has nevertheless had the misfortune to compare the first scene of the monster called *Hamlet*, to that master-piece *Iphigenie*. He affirms that these lines of Arcas,

Have you heard any sound in the air?  
Have the winds made any noise tonight?  
Or does every thing sleep; the Army, the Winds and the Sea?

are nothing in comparison of the true and suitable answer of the Centinel in *Hamlet*:

I have not heard a Mouse stirring.

Yes, Gentlemen, a Soldier may answer thus in a Guard-room, but not upon the Stage, before the first people of a nation who express themselves properly, and before whom the best language ought to be used.

If you ask why the Verse,

Or does every thing sleep; the Army, the Winds, and the Sea?

has the greatest beauty; and why the following Verses are still more beautiful? I will tell you; Because they express with harmony the great truths which are the

foundation of the piece. I will tell you that there is neither harmony, nor any interesting truth in that witticism of a Soldier,

I have not heard a mouse stirring.

Whether the Soldier heard a Mouse stir or not, the event is of little consequence to the *Tragedy of Hamlet*; it is nothing but a vulgar saying, a low proverb, which can have no effect. There is always a reason why a beauty is a beauty, and why a foolish thing is foolish.



### 1780—Henry Mackenzie. From *The Mirror*

A Scottish novelist, playwright, poet, and essayist, Henry Mackenzie (1745–1831) is remembered today for his most popular sentimental novel, *The Man of Feeling* (1771). Mackenzie became a leading figure of the Scottish Enlightenment through his own work and through his promotion of younger writers such as Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott. He helped to establish and wrote for the literary publication *The Mirror* (1779–1780), from which the following two extracts are drawn.

[No. 99, April 18, 1780]

Criticism, like every thing else, is subject to the prejudices of our education, or of our country. National prejudice, indeed, is, of all deviations from justice, the most common, and the most allowable; it is a near, though perhaps an illegitimate, relation of that patriotism, which has been ranked among the first virtues of characters the most eminent and illustrious. To authors, however, of a rank so elevated as to aspire to universal fame, the partiality of their countrymen has been sometimes prejudicial; in proportion as they have unreasonably applauded, the critics of other countries, from a very common sort of feeling, have unreasonably censured; and there are few great writers, whom prejudice on either side may not, from a partial view of their works, find some ground for estimating at a rate much above or much below the standard of justice.

No author, perhaps, ever existed, of whom opinion has been so various as Shakspeare. Endowed with all the sublimity, and subject to all the irregularities, of genius, his advocates have room for unbounded praise, and their opponents for frequent blame. His departure from all the common rules which criticism, somewhat arbitrarily, perhaps, has imposed, leaves no legal code by which the decision can be regulated; and in the feelings of different readers, the

same passage may appear simple or mean, natural or preposterous, may excite admiration, or create disgust.

But it is not, I apprehend, from particular passages or incidents that Shakspeare is to be judged. Though his admirers frequently contend for beauty in the most distorted of the former, and probability in the most unaccountable of the latter; yet it must be owned, that, in both, there are often gross defects which criticism cannot justify, though the situation of the poet, and the time in which he wrote, may easily excuse. But we are to look for the superiority of Shakspeare in the astonishing and almost supernatural powers of his invention, his absolute command over the passions, and his wonderful knowledge of Nature. Of the structure of his stories, or the probability of his incidents, he is frequently careless; these he took at random from the legendary tale or the extravagant romance; but his intimate acquaintance with the human mind seldom or never forsake him; and amidst the most fantastic and improbable situations, the persons of his drama speak in the language of the heart, and in the style of their characters.

Of all the characters of Shakspeare, that of Hamlet has been generally thought the most difficult to be reduced to any fixed or settled principle. With the strongest purposes of revenge, he is irresolute and inactive; amidst the gloom of the deepest melancholy, he is gay and jocular; and while he is described as a passionate lover, he seems indifferent about the object of his affections. It may be worth while to inquire, whether any leading idea can be found, upon which these apparent contradictions may be reconciled, and a character so pleasing in the closet, and so much applauded on the stage, rendered as unambiguous in the general as it is striking in detail? I will venture to lay before my readers some observations on this subject, though with the diffidence due to a question of which the public has doubted, and much abler critics have already written.

The basis of Hamlet's character seems to be an extreme sensibility of mind, apt to be strongly impressed by its situation, and overpowered by the feelings which that situation excites. Naturally of the most virtuous and most amiable dispositions, the circumstances in which he was placed unhinged those principles of action, which, in another situation, would have delighted mankind, and made himself happy. That kind of distress which he suffered was, beyond all others, calculated to produce this effect. His misfortunes were not the misfortunes of accident, which, though they may overwhelm at first, the mind will soon call up reflections to alleviate, and hopes to cheer; they were such as reflection only serves to irritate, such as rankle in the soul's tenderest part, her sense of virtue and feelings of natural affection: they arose from an uncle's villany, a mother's guilt, a father's murder!—Yet, amidst the gloom of melancholy and the agitation of passion, in which his calamities involve him, there are occasional breakings-out of a mind, richly



endowed by nature, and cultivated by education. We perceive gentleness in his demeanour, wit in his conversation, taste in his amusements, and wisdom in his reflections.

That Hamlet's character, thus formed by nature, and thus modelled by situation, is often variable and uncertain, I am not disposed to deny. I will content myself with the supposition, that this is the very character which Shakspeare meant to allot him. Finding such a character in real life, of a person endowed with feelings so delicate as to border on weakness, with sensibility too exquisite to allow of determined action, he has placed it where it could be best exhibited, in scenes of wonder, of terror, and of indignation, where its varying emotions might be most strongly marked amidst the workings of imagination and the war of the passions.

This is the very management of the character by which, above all others, we could be interested in its behalf. Had Shakspeare made Hamlet pursue his vengeance with a steady determined purpose, had he led him through difficulties arising from accidental causes, and not from the doubts and hesitation of his own mind, the anxiety of the spectator might have been highly raised; but it would have been anxiety for the event, not for the person. As it is, we feel not only the virtues, but the weaknesses of Hamlet as our own; we see a man who, in other circumstances, would have exercised all the moral and social virtues, one whom nature had formed to be

Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
The glass of fashion, and the mould of form,  
Th' observ'd of all observers,

placed in a situation in which even the amiable qualities of his mind serve but to aggravate his distress, and to perplex his conduct. Our compassion for the first, and our anxiety for the latter, are excited in the strongest manner; and hence arises that indescribable charm in Hamlet, which attracts every reader and every spectator, which the more perfect characters of other tragedies never dispose us to feel.

The Orestes of the Greek poet, who, at his first appearance, lays down a plan of vengeance which he resolutely pursues, interests us for the accomplishment of his purpose; but of him, we think only as the instrument of that justice which we wish to overtake the murderers of Agamemnon. We feel with Orestes (or rather with Sophocles, for in such passages we always hear the poet in his hero), that "it is fit that such gross infringements of the moral law should be punished with death, in order to render wickedness less frequent;" but when Horatio exclaims on the death of his friend,

Now cracks a noble heart!

we forget the murder of the King, the villany of Claudius, the guilt of Gertrude; our recollection dwells only on the memory of that "*sweet prince*," the delicacy of whose feelings a milder planet should have ruled, whose gentle virtues should have bloomed through a life of felicity and usefulness.

Hamlet, from the very opening of the piece, is delineated as one under the dominion of melancholy, whose spirits were overborne by his feelings. Grief for his father's death, and displeasure at his mother's marriage, prey on his mind; and he seems, with the weakness natural to such a disposition, to yield to their control. He does not attempt to resist or combat these impressions, but is willing to fly from the contest, though it were into the grave.

Oh! that this too solid flesh would melt, &c.

Even after his father's ghost has informed him of his murder, and commissioned him to avenge it, we find him complaining of that situation in which his fate had placed him:

The time is out of joint; oh! cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!

And afterward, in the perplexity of his condition, meditating on the expediency of suicide:

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

The account he gives of his own feelings to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which is evidently spoken in earnest, though somewhat covered with the mist of his affected distraction, is exactly descriptive of a mind full of that weariness of life which is characteristic of low spirits;

This goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, &c.

And, indeed, he expressly delineates his own character as of the kind above-mentioned, when hesitating on the evidence of his uncle's villany, he says,

The spirit that I have seen  
May be the devil, and the devil hath power  
T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,  
*Out of my weakness and my melancholy,*  
Abuses me to damn me.

This doubt of the grounds on which our purpose is founded, is as often the effect, as the cause, of irresolution, which first hesitates, and then seeks out an excuse for its hesitation.

It may, perhaps, be doing Shakspeare no injustice to suppose, that he sometimes began a play, without having fixed in his mind, in any determined manner, the plan or conduct of his piece. The character of some principal person of the drama might strike his imagination strongly in the opening scenes; as he went on, this character would continue to impress itself on the conduct as well as the discourse of that person, and, it is possible, might affect the situations and incidents, especially in those romantic or legendary subjects, where history did not confine him to certain unchangeable events. In the story of Amleth, the son of Horwondil, told by Saxo-Grammaticus, from which the tragedy of Hamlet is taken, the young prince, who is to revenge the death of his father, murdered by his uncle Fengo, counterfeits madness that he may be allowed to remain about the court in safety and without suspicion. He never forgets his purposed vengeance, and acts with much more cunning towards its accomplishment than the Hamlet of Shakspeare. But Shakspeare, wishing to elevate the hero of his tragedy, and at the same time to interest the audience in his behalf, throws around him, from the beginning, the majesty of melancholy, along with that sort of weakness and irresolution which frequently attends it. The incident of the Ghost, which is entirely the poet's own, and not to be found in the Danish legend, not only produces the happiest stage effect, but is also of the greatest advantage in unfolding that character which is stamped on the young prince at the opening of the play. In the communications of such a visionary being, there is an uncertain kind of belief, and a dark unlimited horror, which are aptly suited to display the wavering purpose and varied emotions of a mind endowed with a delicacy of feeling that often shakes its fortitude, with sensibility that overpowers its strength.

*[No. 100, April 11, 1780]*

The view of Hamlet's character, exhibited in my last Number, may, perhaps, serve to explain a difficulty which has always occurred both to the reader and the spectator on perceiving his madness, at one time, put on the appearance, not of fiction, but of reality; a difficulty by which some have been induced to suppose the distraction of the prince a strange unaccountable mixture throughout, of real insanity and counterfeit disorder.

The distraction of Hamlet, however, is clearly affected through the whole play, always subject to the control of his reason, and subservient to the accomplishment of his designs. At the grave of Ophelia, indeed, it exhibits some temporary marks of a real disorder. His mind, subject from nature to all the weakness of sensibility, agitated by the incidental misfortune of Ophelia's death, amidst the dark and permanent impression of his revenge, is thrown for

awhile off its poise, and in the paroxysm of the moment breaks forth into that extravagant rhapsody which he utters to Laertes.

Counterfeited madness, in a person of the character I have ascribed to Hamlet, could not be so uniformly kept up, as not to allow the reigning impressions of his mind to shew themselves in the midst of his affected extravagance. It turned chiefly on his love to Ophelia, which he meant to hold forth as its great subject; but it frequently glanced on the wickedness of his uncle, his knowledge of which it was certainly his business to conceal.

In two of Shakspeare's tragedies are introduced, at the same time, instances of counterfeit madness, and of real distraction. In both plays the same distinction is observed, and the false discriminated from the true by similar appearances. Lear's imagination constantly runs on the ingratitude of his daughters, and the resignation of his crown; and Ophelia, after she has wasted the first ebullience of her distraction in some wild and incoherent sentences, fixes on the death of her father for the subject of her song:

They bore him bare-fac'd on the bier—  
And will he not come again?  
And will he not come again? &c.

But Edgar puts on a semblance as opposite as may be to his real situation and his ruling thoughts. He never ventures on any expression, bordering on the subjects of a father's cruelty, or a son's misfortune. Hamlet, in the same manner, were he as firm in mind as Edgar, would never hint any thing in his affected disorder, that might lead to a suspicion of his having discovered the villany of his uncle; but his feeling, too powerful for his prudence, often breaks through that disguise which it seems to have been his original, and ought to have continued his invariable purpose to maintain, till an opportunity should present itself of accomplishing the revenge which he meditated.

Of the reality of Hamlet's love, doubts have also been suggested. But if that delicacy of feeling, approaching to weakness, for which I contend, be allowed him, the affected abuse, which he suffers at last to grow into scurrility, of his mistress, will, I think, be found not inconsistent with the truth of his affection for her. Feeling its real force, and beginning to play the madman on that ground, he would naturally go as far from the reality as possible. Had he not loved her at all, or slightly loved her, he might have kept up some appearance of passion amidst his feigned insanity; but really loving her, he would have been hurt by such a resemblance in the counterfeit. We can bear a downright caricature of our friend much easier than an unfavourable likeness.

It must be allowed, however, that the momentous scenes in which he is afterward engaged, seem to have smothered, if not extinguished, the feelings of his love. His total forgetfulness of Ophelia so soon after her death cannot

easily be justified. It is vain, indeed, to attempt justifying Shakspeare in such particulars. "*Time*," says Dr. Johnson, "*toil'd after him in vain*." He seems often to forget its rights, as well in the progress of the passions, as in the business of the stage. That change of feeling and of resolution which time only can effect, he brings forth within the limits of a single scene. Whether love is to be excited, or resentment allayed, guilt to be made penitent, or sorrow cheerful, the effect is frequently produced in a space hardly sufficient for words to express it.

It has been remarked, that our great poet was not so happy in the delineation of *love* as of the other passions. Were it not treason against the majesty of Shakspeare, one might observe, that though he looked with a sort of instinctive perception into the recesses of nature, yet it was impossible for him to possess a knowledge of the refinements of delicacy, or to catch in his pictures the nicer shades of polished manners; and, without this knowledge, love can seldom be introduced on the stage, but with a degree of coarseness which will offend an audience of good taste. This observation is not meant to extend to Shakspeare's tragic scenes: in situations of deep distress or violent emotion, the *manners* are lost in the *passions*; but if we examine his lovers, in the lighter scenes of ordinary life, we shall generally find them trespassing against the rules of decorum, and the feelings of delicacy.

That gaiety and playfulness of deportment and of conversation, which Hamlet sometimes not only assumes, but seems actually disposed to, is, I apprehend, no contradiction to the general tone of melancholy in his character. That sort of melancholy which is the most genuine, as well as the most amiable of any, neither arising from natural sourness of temper, nor prompted by accidental chagrin, but the effect of delicate sensibility, impressed with a sense of sorrow, or a feeling of its own weakness, will, I believe, often be found indulging itself in a sportfulness of external behaviour, amidst the pressure of a sad, or even the anguish of a broken heart. Slighter emotions affect our ordinary discourse; but deep distress, sitting in the secret gloom of the soul, casts not its regard on the common occurrences of life, but suffers them to trick themselves out in the usual garb of indifference, or of gaiety, according to the fashion of the society around it, or the situation in which they chance to arise. The melancholy man feels in himself (if I may be allowed the expression) a sort of double person; one which, covered with the darkness of its imagination, looks not forth into the world, nor takes any concern in vulgar objects or frivolous pursuits; another, which he lends, as it were, to ordinary men, which can accommodate itself to their tempers and manners, and indulge, without feeling any degradation from the indulgence, a smile with the cheerful, and a laugh with the giddy.

The conversation of Hamlet with the Grave-digger seems to me to be perfectly accounted for under this supposition; and, instead of feeling it counteract the tragic effect of the story, I never see him in that scene, without

receiving, from his transient jests with the clown before him, an idea of the deepest melancholy being rooted at his heart. The light point of view in which he places serious and important things, marks the power of that great impression which swallows up every thing else in his mind, which makes Csesar and Alexander so indifferent to him, that he can trace their remains in the plaster of a cottage, or the stopper of a beer-barrel. It is from the same turn of mind, which, from the elevation of its sorrow, looks down on the bustle of ambition, and the pride of fame, that he breaks forth into the reflection, in the fourth act, on the expedition of Fortinbras.

It is with regret, as well as deference, that I accuse the judgment of Mr. Garrick, or the taste of his audience; but I cannot help thinking, that the exclusion of the scene of the Grave-digger, in his alteration of the tragedy of *Hamlet*, was not only a needless, but an unnatural violence done to the work of his favourite poet.

Shakspeare's genius attended him in all his extravagances. In the licence he took of departing from the regularity of the drama, or in his ignorance of those critical rules which might have restrained him within it, there is this advantage, that it gives him an opportunity of delineating the passions and affections of the human mind, as they exist in reality, with all the various colourings which they receive in the mixed scenes of life; not as they are accommodated by the hands of more artificial poets, to one great undivided impression, or an uninterrupted chain of congenial events. It seems therefore preposterous, to endeavour to *regularize* his plays, at the expense of depriving them of this peculiar excellence, especially as the alteration can only produce a very partial and limited improvement, and can never bring his pieces to the standard of criticism, or the form of the Aristotelian drama. Within the bounds of a pleasure-garden, we may be allowed to smooth our terraces and trim our hedge-rows; but it were equally absurd as impracticable, to apply the minute labours of the *roller* and the *pruning-knife*, to the nobler irregularity of trackless mountains and impenetrable forests.



### 1795—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. From *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), an early proponent of Romanticism, is considered one of the most influential thinkers in Western culture and perhaps the most important writer in the German language. His masterpiece is the dramatic poem *Faust*, published in two parts (in 1808 and 1832). Among Goethe's other well-known works are the novels *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and *Wilhelm Meister's*

*Apprenticeship* (1795). The following passages from the latter work are from the 1824 translation by Thomas Carlyle.

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*[Book IV, Chapter III]*

Seeing the [drama] company so favourably disposed, Wilhelm now hoped he might farther have it in his power to converse with them on the poetic merit of the pieces which might come before them. "It is not enough," said he next day, when they were all again assembled, "for the actor merely to glance over a dramatic work, to judge of it by his first impression, and thus, without investigation, to declare his satisfaction or dissatisfaction with it. Such things may be allowed in a spectator, whose purpose it is rather to be entertained and moved than formally to criticise. But the actor, on the other hand, should be prepared to give a reason for his praise or censure: and how shall he do this, if he have not taught himself to penetrate the sense, the views and feelings of his author? A common error is, to form a judgment of a drama from a single part in it; and to look upon this part itself in an isolated point of view, not in its connection with the whole. I have noticed this, within a few days, so clearly in my own conduct, that I will give you the account as an example, if you please to hear me patiently.

"You all know Shakspeare's incomparable Hamlet: our public reading of it at the Castle yielded every one of us the greatest satisfaction. On that occasion, we proposed to act the piece; and I, not knowing what I undertook, engaged to play the Prince's part. This I conceived that I was studying, while I began to get by heart the strongest passages, the soliloquies, and those scenes in which force of soul, vehemence and elevation of feeling have the freest scope; where the agitated heart is allowed to display itself with touching expressiveness.

"I farther conceived that I was penetrating quite into the spirit of the character, while I endeavoured as it were to take upon myself the load of deep melancholy under which my prototype was labouring, and in this humour to pursue him through the strange labyrinths of his caprices and his singularities. Thus learning, thus practising, I doubted not but I should by and by become one person with my hero.

"But the farther I advanced, the more difficult did it become for me to form any image of the whole, in its general bearings; till at last it seemed as if impossible. I next went through the entire piece, without interruption; but here too I found much that I could not away with. At one time the characters, at another time the manner of displaying them, seemed inconsistent; and I almost despaired of finding any general tint, in which I might present my whole part with all its shadings and variations. In such devious paths I toiled, and wandered long in vain; till at length a hope arose that I might reach my aim in quite a new way.

"I set about investigating every trace of Hamlet's character, as it had shown itself before his father's death: I endeavoured to distinguish what in it was

independent of this mournful event; independent of the terrible events that followed; and what most probably the young man would have been, had no such thing occurred.

“Soft, and from a noble stem, this royal flower had sprung up under the immediate influences of majesty: the idea of moral rectitude with that of princely elevation, the feeling of the good and dignified with the consciousness of high birth, had in him been unfolded simultaneously. He was a prince, by birth a prince; and he wished to reign, only that good men might be good without obstruction. Pleasing in form, polished by nature, courteous from the heart, he was meant to be the pattern of youth and the joy of the world.

“Without any prominent passion, his love for Ophelia was a still presentiment of sweet wants. His zeal in knightly accomplishments was not entirely his own; it needed to be quickened and inflamed by praise bestowed on others for excelling in them. Pure in sentiment, he knew the honourable-minded, and could prize the rest which an upright spirit tastes on the bosom of a friend. To a certain degree, he had learned to discern and value the good and the beautiful in arts and sciences; the mean, the vulgar was offensive to him; and if hatred could take root in his tender soul, it was only so far as to make him properly despise the false and changeful insects of a court, and play with them in easy scorn. He was calm in his temper, artless in his conduct; neither pleased with idleness, nor too violently eager for employment. The routine of a university he seemed to continue when at court. He possessed more mirth of humour than of heart; he was a good companion, pliant, courteous, discreet, and able to forget and forgive an injury; yet never able to unite himself with those who overstept the limits of the right, the good, and the becoming.

“When we read the piece again, you shall judge whether I am yet on the proper track. I hope at least to bring forward passages that shall support my opinion in its main points.” . . .

*[Book IV, Chapter XIII]*

. . . For the first time during many months, Wilhelm felt himself in his proper element once more. Of late in talking, he had merely found submissive listeners, and even these not always; but now he had the happiness to speak with critics and artists, who not only fully understood him, but repaid his observations by others equally instructive. With wonderful vivacity they travelled through the latest pieces; with wonderful correctness judged them. The decisions of the public they could try and estimate: they speedily threw light on each other's thoughts.

Loving Shakspeare as our friend did, he failed not to lead round the conversation to the merits of that dramatist. Expressing, as he entertained, the



liveliest hopes of the new epoch which these exquisite productions must form in Germany, he ere long introduced his Hamlet, who had busied him so much of late.

Serlo declared that he would long ago have played the piece, had this been possible, and that he himself would willingly engage to act Polonius. He added, with a smile: "An Ophelia, too, will certainly turn up, if we had but a Prince."

Wilhelm did not notice that Aurelia seemed a little hurt at her brother's sarcasm. Our friend was in his proper vein, becoming copious and didactic, expounding how he would have Hamlet played. He circumstantially delivered to his hearers the opinions we before saw him busied with; taking all the trouble possible to make his notion of the matter acceptable, sceptical as Serlo showed himself regarding it. "Well, then," said the latter, finally, "suppose we grant you all this, what will you explain by it?"

"Much, everything," said Wilhelm. "Conceive a prince such as I have painted him, and that his father suddenly dies. Ambition and the love of rule are not the passions that inspire him. As a king's son he would have been contented; but now he is first constrained to consider the difference which separates a sovereign from a subject. The crown was not hereditary; yet a longer possession of it by his father would have strengthened the pretensions of an only son, and secured his hopes of the succession. In place of this, he now beholds himself excluded by his uncle, in spite of specious promises, most probably forever. He is now poor in goods and favour, and a stranger in the scene which from youth he had looked upon as his inheritance. His temper here assumes its first mournful tinge. He feels that now he is not more, that he is less, than a private nobleman; he offers himself as the servant of every one; he is not courteous and condescending, he is needy and degraded.

"His past condition he remembers as a vanished dream. It is in vain that his uncle strives to cheer him, to present his situation in another point of view. The feeling of his nothingness will not leave him.

"The second stroke that came upon him wounded deeper, bowed still more. It was the marriage of his mother. The faithful tender son had yet a mother, when his father passed away. He hoped, in the company of his surviving noble-minded parent, to reverence the heroic form of the departed; but his mother too he loses, and it is something worse than death that robs him of her. The trustful image, which a good child loves to form of its parents, is gone. With the dead there is no help; on the living no hold. She also is a woman, and her name is Frailty, like that of all her sex.

"Now first does he feel himself completely bent and orphaned; and no happiness of life can repay what he has lost. Not reflective or sorrowful by nature, reflection and sorrow have become for him a heavy obligation. It is thus that we see him first enter on the scene. I do not think that I have mixed aught foreign with the piece, or overcharged a single feature of it."

Serlo looked at his sister, and said, "Did I give thee a false picture of our friend? He begins well; he has still many things to tell us, many to persuade us of." Wilhelm asseverated loudly, that he meant not to persuade, but to convince; he begged for another moment's patience.

"Figure to yourselves this youth," cried he, "this son of princes; conceive him vividly, bring his state before your eyes, and then observe him when he learns that his father's spirit walks; stand by him in the terrors of the night, when the venerable ghost itself appears before him. A horrid shudder passes over him; he speaks to the mysterious form; he sees it beckon him; he follows it, and hears. The fearful accusation of his uncle rings in his ears; the summons to revenge, and the piercing oft-repeated prayer, Remember me!

"And when the ghost has vanished, who is it that stands before us? A young hero panting for vengeance? A prince by birth, rejoicing to be called to punish the usurper of his crown? No! trouble and astonishment take hold of the solitary young man; he grows bitter against smiling villains, swears that he will not forget the spirit, and concludes with the significant ejaculation:

The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!

"In these words, I imagine, will be found the key to Hamlet's whole procedure. To me it is clear that Shakspeare meant, in the present case, to represent the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it. In this view the whole piece seems to me to be composed. There is an oak-tree planted in a costly jar, which should have borne only pleasant flowers in its bosom; the roots expand, the jar is shivered.

"A lovely, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away. All duties are holy for him; the present is too hard. Impossibilities have been 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."





# HAMLET

## IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY



A “new criticism” of Shakespeare emerged in the nineteenth century, yet it was not exactly new. Rather, writers and critics such as Goethe, August Wilhelm von Schlegel, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Hazlitt approached Shakespeare’s plays with more emphatic topical interests, fresh aesthetic values, and more incisive (or at least innovative) critical sensibilities. Overall, they benefited from the energies and perceptions of the Romantic movements in Germany and England.

Hazlitt boasted of a new mode of criticism in *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays* (1817); this is the first book-length study of Shakespeare, by an acute critic and a genius of prose style. It memorably presented ideas and themes already treated by his immediate predecessors. Hazlitt described Hamlet the Dane as a “great moralizer,” the “prince of philosophical speculators,” “thoroughly a master of the mixed motives of the human character,” and “as little of the hero as a man can well be.” Despite the sound of these final two descriptions, they amount to a Romantic defense of Hamlet’s character from prior critics. For example, George Steevens in 1778 had condemned the “immoral indecency” of Hamlet’s character. On the contrary, quipped Hazlitt, the “moral perfection . . . has been called in question, we think, by those who did not understand it.” In Hazlitt’s view, Hamlet is not delaying in his revenge on Claudius but rather “refining on his schemes of vengeance,” and Hamlet’s frequently criticized behavior toward Ophelia is “quite natural in his circumstances.” Hazlitt redefined assumptions about what makes a great tragic hero. He rejected the narrow definitions of heroism recognized by earlier ages for broader virtues: “Shakespeare had more magnanimity than any other poet, and he has shewn more of it in this play than in any other.” The play, said Hazlitt, is most remarkable for its “unstudied [that is, natural or unaffected] development of character.”

As the title of Hazlitt’s book suggests, character is the key topic—both the nature of Shakespeare’s characters and his artistry in animating them so. Edgar Allan Poe took Hazlitt to task for failing to emphasize this second point. Hazlitt, Poe said, erred in treating these characters “not as if they were the coinage of a human brain, but as if they had been actual existences upon earth.” Yet Hazlitt

was not the first to elevate Shakespeare's characters in this extreme manner. Indeed, he could have pointed to strong precedents in defense of his views, though it would have undermined his claims to critical discovery. Hamlet already had an "existence upon earth," at least textually, as a speaker in an anonymous dialogue of 1782, in which he disabuses Theseus (a character of the French playwright Corneille) of his reputation for immorality. This entertaining chat aside, Hazlitt could also point to something more formidable: more than a half-century of critical investment in Shakespeare's characters by eighteenth-century writers such as William Guthrie, Maurice Morgann, and Goethe, among others (as discussed earlier in this book, in the eighteenth-century overview essay).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a great poet in his own right and one of the finest critics of Shakespeare, maintained critical attention to Shakespearean characterization, yet he shifted its focus from sensibility to philosophy. In Coleridge's opinion, "Man is distinguished from the brute animals in proportion as thought prevails over sense." He also encouraged readers to separate the philosophical enigma of Hamlet's character from the rest of the play. In this approach Coleridge was clearly influenced by German Idealists such as August Wilhelm von Schlegel (though he resented it mightily when others, including his friend William Wordsworth, implied that Coleridge's own readings were merely borrowed from his German contemporaries). Although Coleridge expressed these views in forms that did not lead to immediate publication—marginal notes and reports of his lectures, for example—he insisted that he had shared his insights on Shakespeare as early as 1802. Reports of his Shakespeare lectures of 1811–1814 and 1819 are the written records most often reprinted today.

Coleridge attributed the creation of Hamlet to Shakespeare's "deep and accurate science in mental philosophy," and like a psychologist, Coleridge diagnosed Hamlet with an imbalance: "His thoughts, and the images of his fancy, are far more vivid than his actual perceptions, and his very perceptions, instantly passing through the *medium* of his contemplations, acquire, as they pass, a form and a colour not naturally their own." In other words, a healthy mind maintains a balance between "impressions from outward objects and the inward operations of the intellect"; too much contemplation deprives one of the power of action, leaving one a "creature of mere meditation." (Incidentally, Coleridge could relate to this imbalance personally. "I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so," he famously recorded in his 1827 *Table Talk*. Thus sympathy for Hamlet's irresolution as he "proceeds with the utmost slowness" no doubt fuels Coleridge's articulate, persuasive characterization of Shakespeare's hero.)

Other literary figures responded to Hamlet in touching and surprising ways. For example, John Keats in a letter to "his Ophelia" Fanny Brawne, managed to out-Hamlet Hamlet—"I am sickened at the brute world which you are smiling with. I hate men, and women more." Jane Austen, in a letter of 1811, spoke of

a “very unlucky change” of the play she was planning to attend, Shakespeare’s relatively minor history play *King John*, to *Hamlet*. Shortly afterward, Anna Brownell Jameson, a pioneer in the study of Shakespeare’s female characters, offered a sensitive, protofeminist defense of Ophelia: “The love of Ophelia which she never once confesses, is like a secret which we have stolen from her and which ought to die upon our hearts as upon her own.”

International literary figures also weighed in on the play. The Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev found a durable topic in his comparison of perhaps the two most enduring fictional creations in Western literature, Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. In France, François René de Chateaubriand sounded rather like Voltaire when he called *Hamlet* “that tragedy of maniacs, this *Royal Bedlam*, in which every character is either crazy or criminal, in which feigned madness is added to real madness. . . .” The French novelist Victor Hugo more than countered Chateaubriand’s hostility with his own Romantic reverence toward Shakespeare, who was, Hugo rhapsodically wrote, among those “men whose souls are like the sea.” Hugo measured Shakespeare favorably even compared with classical authors: “Lucretius *is*; Shakespeare *lives*.” He declared *Hamlet* to be at the center of Shakespeare’s work and declared its title character the “supreme tragedy of the human dream.” Near the end of the century, however, the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy attacked Shakespeare—or more precisely, attacked the internalized, abstracted readings of his plays—in “Shakespeare and the Drama.” Tolstoy’s own religious, activist convictions fueled his critique, which was aimed particularly at *King Lear* (and is excerpted in the *Shakespeare Through the Ages* volume on that play).

Critics throughout the nineteenth century expended their energies on two main topics—Hamlet’s delay and his madness. Algernon Charles Swinburne, for example, characterized Hamlet’s irresolution as the result not of weakness, “but rather the strong conflux of contending forces.” James Russell Lowell emphasized that Hamlet’s madness was feigned; otherwise, he said, the character was without purpose. The tenor of critical focus on Hamlet’s mental state became more technical as psychological study developed as a social scientific field.

Generally speaking, Victorian critics seem less memorable and less penetrating than their Romantic predecessors. The Scottish minister and fantasy writer George Macdonald produced a facing-page commentary on *Hamlet* that is still readable today, while the novelist George Eliot posited the intriguing idea that Hamlet’s character was less about destiny than circumstance: If Hamlet’s father had lived long or his uncle died earlier, said Eliot, this “speculative and irresolute” hero would have avoided his tragic ending, married Ophelia, and “got through life with a reputation of sanity.” Eliot’s own novels provide similar domestic illuminations.

Matthew Arnold emphasized the influence of the Renaissance essayist Montaigne on Shakespeare. Writing at the end of the century, Oscar Wilde

treated the play with an eclectic attitude (much admired by subsequent readers). He defended Rosencrantz and Guildenstern against their many detractors: Yes, they are “out of their sphere,” Wilde argued, but they are nevertheless immortal characters who represent “what modern life has contributed to the antique ideal of friendship.”

Some of the more influential nineteenth-century treatments of the play occurred beyond the realm of literary criticism proper. One such is Friederich Nietzsche’s comments on the play in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871), in which he identifies Hamlet with the Dionysiac tragic impulse. Another is Mark Twain’s hilarious account in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* of a roguish acting troupe consisting of two tramps who style themselves “the king” and “the duke.” For thousands of American schoolchildren, Twain’s “Hamlet on the Mississippi” represents their first exposure to the prince of Denmark.

The more literary, introspective readings of the Romantics seemed to dampen the general regard for theater productions. In his influential essay “On the Tragedies of Shakespeare” (1811), Charles Lamb claimed that Hamlet’s struggles feel improperly public when staged—how can an actor capture well a hero’s “transactions between himself and his moral sense”? Lamb’s contemporary Leigh Hunt considered the dominant Shakespearean actor of the day, John Philip Kemble, “rather a teacher of elocution than an actor.” Kemble’s Hamlet, said Hunt, was not a “man who grasps with the force of genius,” but rather one who “overcomes by the toil of attention.” Kemble’s true Romantic successor was the diminutive actor Edmund Kean, whose passionate, naturalistic performances earned him wide acclaim. Yet even he had to face ambivalence among the critics, who were used to idealizing the Dane in their own imaginations. Hazlitt, typically a supporter of Kean, admitted that Kean’s Hamlet was liable to “vulgarize, or diminish our idea of the character he plays.” Hazlitt revealed his priorities (literature over theater) when he praised Kean for offering audiences a “new reading” of the part. Later actors of note included Edwin Booth, who first played Hamlet in New York in 1857, and Henry Irving, whose performance of the role of Hamlet led the poet Tennyson to declare Irving had “lifted it to heaven.”

Anatole France was clearly enthusiastic about Hamlet’s character after a production at the Comedie-Française in 1886, even though he felt the actor had not captured the nobility and intelligence of the Dane’s melancholy. The hero’s state of mind derived from a “keen perception of destiny,” France said. His own mind was affected, too, and he apostrophized Hamlet: “. . . we cannot leave you without having our heads full of you, and for the last three days I have had no other thoughts than yours.”

Shakespeare scholarship in the nineteenth century enjoyed advances, but they were not as significant as those of the prior century. Edmund Malone and George

Steevens were the first compilers of what became variorum editions (editions with a detailed history of critical response for each passage); their 21 volumes were published in 1803, 1813, and 1821. One twentieth-century critic, J. Isaacs, called the *Cambridge Shakespeare* (1863–1866) the great scholarly landmark of its time. An expanded, updated New Variorum Shakespeare appeared in 1871, and shortly thereafter popular editions were prepared, including the Temple, Yale, and Arden editions. The Arden collection, now in its third series of editions, is frequently regarded as the preferred individual volumes of Shakespeare's plays among scholars today.

### 1809—August Wilhelm von Schlegel. From *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*

A leader of German Romanticism, August Wilhelm von Schlegel (1767–1845) was a German poet, translator, and critic. His translations of Shakespeare into German are highly regarded.

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*Hamlet* is singular in its kind: a tragedy of thought inspired by continual and never-satisfied meditation on human destiny and the dark perplexity of the events of this world, and calculated to call forth the very same meditation in the minds of the spectators. This enigmatical work resembles those irrational equations in which a fraction of unknown magnitude always remains, that will in no way admit of solution. Much has been said, much written, on this piece, and yet no thinking head who anew expresses himself on it, will (in his view of the connexion and the signification of all the parts) entirely coincide with his predecessors. What naturally most astonishes us, is the fact that with such hidden purposes, with a foundation laid in such unfathomable depth, the whole should, at a first view, exhibit an extremely popular appearance. The dread appearance of the Ghost takes possession of the mind and the imagination almost at the very commencement; then the play within the play, in which, as in a glass, we see reflected the crime, whose fruitlessly attempted punishment constitutes the subject-matter of the piece; the alarm with which it fills the King; Hamlet's pretended and Ophelia's real madness; her death and burial; the meeting of Hamlet and Laertes at her grave; their combat, and the grand determination; lastly, the appearance of the young hero Fortinbras, who, with warlike pomp, pays the last honours to an extinct family of kings; the interspersions of comic characteristic scenes with Polonius, the courtiers, and the grave-diggers, which have all of them their signification,—all this fills the stage with an animated and varied movement. The only circumstance from which this piece might be judged to be less theatrical than other tragedies of Shakespeare is, that in the last scene



the main action either stands still or appears to retrograde. This, however, was inevitable, and lay in the nature of the subject. The whole is intended to show that a calculating consideration, which exhausts all the relations and possible consequences of a deed, must cripple the power of acting; as Hamlet himself expresses it:—

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.

With respect to Hamlet's character: I cannot, as I understand the poet's view, pronounce altogether so favourable a sentence upon it as Goethe does. He is, it is true, of a highly cultivated mind, a prince of royal manners, endowed with the finest sense of propriety, susceptible of noble ambition, and open in the highest degree to an enthusiastic admiration of that excellence in others of which he himself is deficient. He acts the part of madness with unrivalled power, convincing the persons who are sent to examine into his supposed loss of reason, merely by telling them unwelcome truths, and rallying them with the most caustic wit. But in the resolutions which he so often embraces and always leaves unexecuted, his weakness is too apparent: he does himself only justice when he implies that there is no greater dissimilarity than between himself and Hercules. He is not solely impelled by necessity to artifice and dissimulation, he has a natural inclination for crooked ways; he is a hypocrite towards himself; his far-fetched scruples are often mere pretexts to cover his want of determination: thoughts, as he says on a different occasion, which have

but one part wisdom And ever three parts coward.

He has been chiefly condemned both for his harshness in repulsing the love of Ophelia, which he himself had cherished, and for his insensibility at her death. But he is too much overwhelmed with his own sorrow to have any compassion to spare for others; besides his outward indifference gives us by no means the measure of his internal perturbation. On the other hand, we evidently perceive in him a malicious joy, when he has succeeded in getting rid of his enemies, more through necessity and accident, which alone are able to impel him to quick and decisive measures, than by the merit of his own courage, as he himself confesses after the murder of Polonius, and with respect to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet has no firm belief either in himself

or in anything else: from expressions of religious confidence he passes over to skeptical doubts; he believes in the Ghost of his father as long as he sees it, but as soon as it has disappeared, it appears to him almost in the light of a deception. He has even gone so far as to say, "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so;" with him the poet loses himself here in labyrinths of thought, in which neither end nor beginning is discoverable. The stars themselves, from the course of events, afford no answer to the question so urgently proposed to them. A voice from another world, commissioned it would appear, by heaven, demands vengeance for a monstrous enormity, and the demand remains without effect; the criminals are at last punished, but as it were, by an accidental blow, and not in the solemn way requisite to convey to the world a warning example of justice; irresolute foresight, cunning treachery, and impetuous rage, hurry on to a common destruction; the less guilty and the innocent are equally involved in the general ruin. The destiny of humanity is there exhibited as a gigantic Sphinx, which threatens to precipitate into the abyss of scepticism all who are unable to solve her dreadful enigmas.

As one example of the many niceties of Shakspeare which have never been understood, I may allude to the style in which the player's speech about Hecuba is conceived. It has been the subject of much controversy among the commentators, whether this was borrowed by Shakspeare from himself or from another, and whether, in the praise of the piece of which it is supposed to be a part, he was speaking seriously, or merely meant to ridicule the tragical bombast of his contemporaries. It seems never to have occurred to them that this speech must not be judged of by itself, but in connexion with the place where it is introduced. To distinguish it in the play itself as dramatic poetry, it was necessary that it should rise above the dignified poetry of the former in the same proportion that generally theatrical elevation soars above simple nature. Hence Shakspeare has composed the play in *Hamlet* altogether in sententious rhymes full of antitheses. But this solemn and measured tone did not suit a speech in which violent emotion ought to prevail, and the poet had no other expedient than the one of which he made choice: overcharging the pathos. The language of the speech in question is certainly falsely emphatical; but yet this fault is so mixed up with true grandeur, that a player practised in artificially calling forth in himself the emotion he is imitating, may certainly be carried away by it. Besides, it will hardly be believed that Shakspeare knew so little of his art, as not to be aware that a tragedy in which Aeneas had to make a lengthy epic relation of a transaction that happened so long before as the destruction of Troy, could neither be dramatical nor theatrical.



1811—Charles Lamb.  
 “On the Tragedies of Shakespeare”

Charles Lamb (1775–1834), an English essayist, is best remembered for his *Essays of Elia* (1823) and the children’s book *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807). The latter is a retelling of Shakespeare’s work in language and storylines suited to children.

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The character of Hamlet is perhaps that by which, since the days of Betterton, a succession of popular performers have had the greatest ambition to distinguish themselves. The length of the part may be one of their reasons. But for the character itself, we find it in a play, and therefore we judge it a fit subject of dramatic representation. The play itself abounds in maxims and reflections beyond any other, and therefore we consider it as a proper vehicle for conveying moral instruction. But Hamlet himself—what does he suffer meanwhile by being dragged forth as the public schoolmaster, to give lectures to the crowd! Why, nine parts in ten of what Hamlet does, are transactions between himself and his moral sense; they are the effusions of his solitary musings, which he retires to holes and corners and the most sequestered parts of the palace to pour forth; or rather, they are the silent meditations with which his bosom is bursting, reduced to *words* for the sake of the reader, who must else remain ignorant of what is passing there. These profound sorrows, these light-and-noise-abhorring ruminations, which the tongue scarce dares utter to deaf walls and chambers, how can they be represented by a gesticulating actor, who comes and mouths them out before an audience, making four hundred people his confidants at once! I say not that it is the fault of the actor so to do; he must pronounce them *ore rotundo*; he must accompany them with his eye; he must insinuate them into his auditory by some trick of eye, tone or gesture, or he fails. *He must be thinking all the while of his appearance, because he knows that all the while the spectators are judging of it.* And this is the way to represent the shy, negligent, retiring Hamlet!

It is true that there is no other mode of conveying a vast quantity of thought and feeling to a great portion of the audience, who otherwise would never earn it for themselves by reading, and the intellectual acquisition gained this way may, for aught I know, be inestimable; but I am not arguing that Hamlet should not be acted, but how much Hamlet is made another thing by being acted. I have heard much of the wonders which Garrick performed in this part; but as I never saw him, I must have leave to doubt whether the representation of such a character came within the province of his art. Those who tell me of him, speak of his eye, of the magic of his eye, and of his commanding voice: physical properties, vastly desirable in an actor, and without which he can never insinuate meaning into an auditory,—but what have they to do with Hamlet; what have they to do with intellect? In fact, the things aimed at in theatrical representation, are to

arrest the spectator's eye upon the form and the gesture, and so to gain a more favourable hearing to what is spoken: it is not what the character is, but how he looks; not what he says, but how he speaks it. I see no reason to think that if the play of Hamlet were written over again by some such writer as Banks or Lillo, retaining the process of the story, but totally omitting all the poetry of it, all the divine features of Shakspeare, his stupendous intellect; and only taking care to give us enough of passionate dialogue, which Banks or Lillo were never at a loss to furnish; I see not how the effect could be much different upon an audience, nor how the actor has it in his power to represent Shakspeare to us differently from his representation of Banks or Lillo. Hamlet would still be a youthful accomplished prince, and must be gracefully personated; he might be puzzled in his mind, wavering in his conduct, seemingly cruel to Ophelia; he might see a ghost, and start at it, and address it kindly when he found it to be his father; all this in the poorest and most homely language of the servilest creeper after nature that ever consulted the palate of an audience; without troubling Shakspeare for the matter: and I see not but there would be room for all the power which an actor has, to display itself. All the passions and changes of passion might remain: for those are much less difficult to write or act than is thought; it is a trick easy to be attained, it is but rising or falling a note or two in the voice, a whisper with a significant foreboding look to announce its approach, and so contagious the counterfeit appearance of any emotion is, that let the words be what they will, the look and tone shall carry it off and make it pass for deep skill in the passions.

(. . .)

To return to Hamlet.—Among the distinguishing features of that wonderful character, one of the most interesting (yet painful) is that soreness of mind which makes him treat the intrusions of Polonius with harshness, and that asperity which he puts on in his interviews with Ophelia. These tokens of an unhinged mind (if they be not mixed in the latter case with a profound artifice of love, to alienate Ophelia by affected discourtesies, so to prepare her mind for the breaking off of that loving intercourse, which can no longer find a place amidst business so serious as that which he has to do) are parts of his character, which to reconcile with our admiration of Hamlet, the most patient consideration of his situation is no more than necessary; they are what we *forgive afterwards*, and explain by the whole of his character, but *at the time* they are harsh and unpleasant. Yet such is the actor's necessity of giving strong blows to the audience, that I have never seen a player in this character, who did not exaggerate and strain to the utmost these ambiguous features,—these temporary deformities in the character. They make him express a vulgar scorn at Polonius which utterly degrades his gentility, and which no explanation can render palatable; they make him show contempt, and curl up the nose at Ophelia's father,—contempt in its very grossest and most

hateful form; but they get applause by it: it is natural, people say; that is, the words are scornful, and the actor expresses scorn, and that they can judge of: but why so much scorn, and of that sort, they never think of asking.

So to Ophelia.—All the Hamlets that I have ever seen, rant and rave at her as if she had committed some great crime, and the audience are highly pleased, because the words of the part are satirical, and they are enforced by the strongest expression of satirical indignation of which the face and voice are capable. But then, whether Hamlet is likely to have put on such brutal appearances to a lady whom he loved so dearly, is never thought on. The truth is, that in all such deep affections as had subsisted between Hamlet and Ophelia, there is a stock of *supererogatory love* (if I may venture to use the expression), which in any great grief of heart, especially where that which preys upon the mind cannot be communicated, confers a kind of indulgence upon the grieved party to express itself, even to its heart's dearest object, in the language of a temporary alienation; but it is not alienation, it is a distraction purely, and so it always makes itself to be felt by that object: it is not anger, but grief assuming the appearance of anger,—love awkwardly counterfeiting hate, as sweet countenances when they try to frown: but such sternness and fierce disgust as Hamlet is made to show, is no counterfeit, but the real face of absolute aversion,—of irreconcilable alienation. It may be said he puts on the madman; but then he should only so far put on this counterfeit lunacy as his own real distraction will give him leave; that is, incompletely, imperfectly; not in that confirmed, practised way, like a master of his art, or as Dame Quickly would say, “like one of those harlotry players.”



### 1814—William Hazlitt.

#### “Mr. Kean’s Hamlet,” from *Morning Chronicle*

An English essayist and literary critic, William Hazlitt (1778–1830) is considered one of the finest commentators on Shakespeare, for both his style and his insights. His works include *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays* (1817), *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818) and *The Spirit of the Age* (1825). The following newspaper excerpt was originally printed on March 14, 1814.

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That which distinguishes the dramatic productions of Shakespeare from all others, is the wonderful variety and perfect individuality of his characters. Each of these is as much itself, and as absolutely independent of the rest, as if they were living persons, not fictions of the mind. The poet appears for the time being, to be identified with the character he wishes to represent, and to pass from one to the

other, like the same soul, successively animating different bodies. By an art like that of the ventriloquist, he throws his imagination out of himself, and makes every word appear to proceed from the very mouth of the person whose name it bears. His plays alone are properly expressions of the passions, not descriptions of them. His characters are real beings of flesh and blood; they speak like men, not like authors. One might suppose that he had stood by at the time, and had overheard what passed. Each object and circumstance seems to exist in his mind as it existed in nature; each several train of thought and feeling goes on of itself without effort or confusion; in the world of his imagination everything has a life, a place and being of its own.

These remarks are, we think, as applicable to *Hamlet*, as to any of Shakespeare's tragedies. It is, if not the finest, perhaps the most inimitable of all his productions. Lear is first, for the profound intensity of the passion: Macbeth, for the wildness of the imagination, and the glowing rapidity of the action: *Othello*, for the progressive interest, and rapid alternations of feeling: *Hamlet*, for perfect dramatic truth, and the unlooked-for development of sentiment and character. Shakespeare has in this play shewn more of the magnanimity of genius, than in any other. There is no attempt to force an interest, but everything is left to time and circumstances. The interest is excited without premeditation or effort, the events succeed each other as matters of course, the characters think, and speak and act just as they would do, if they were left to themselves. The whole play is an exact transcript of what might have taken place at the Court of Denmark five hundred years ago, before the modern refinements in morality and manners.

The character of Hamlet is itself a pure effusion of genius. It is not a character marked by strength of passion or will, but by refinement of thought and feeling. Hamlet is as little of the hero as a man can well be; but he is "a young and princely novice," full of high enthusiasm and quick sensibility—the sport of circumstances, questioning with fortune, and refining on his own feelings, and forced from the natural bias of his character, by the strangeness of his situation. He seems incapable of deliberate action, and is only hurried into extremities on the spur of the occasion, when he has no time to reflect, as in the scene where he kills Polonius, and where he alters the letters which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern take with them. At other times, he remains puzzled, undecided, and sceptical, dallies with his purposes till the occasion is lost, and always finds some reason to relapse into indolence and thoughtfulness again. For this reason he refuses to kill the King when he is at his prayers, and by a refinement in malice, which is only an excuse for his own want of resolution, defers his revenge to some more fatal opportunity, when he shall be engaged in some act "that has no relish of salvation in it." So he scruples to trust the suggestions of the Ghost, contrives the scene of the play to have surer proof of his uncle's guilt, and then rests satisfied with this confirmation of his suspicions, and the success of his experiment, instead of acting upon it. The moral perfection of this character

has been called in question. It is more natural than conformable to rules; and if not more amiable, is certainly more dramatic on that account. Hamlet is not, to be sure, a Sir Charles Grandison. In general, there is little of the drab-coloured quakerism of morality in the ethical delineations of "that noble and liberal casuist," as Shakespeare has been well called. He does not set his heroes in the stocks of virtue, to make mouths at their own situation. His plays are not transcribed from the "Whole Duty of Man"! We confess, we are a little shocked at the want of refinement in those, who are shocked at the want of refinement in Hamlet. The want of punctilious exactness of behaviour either partakes of the "license of the time," or belongs to the very excess of intellectual refinement in the character, which makes the common rules of life, as well as his own purposes, sit loose upon him. He may be said to be amenable only to the tribunal of his own thoughts, and is too much occupied with the airy world of contemplation, to lay as much stress as he ought on the practical consequences of things. His habitual principles of action are unhinged, and "out of joint" with the time.

This character is probably of all others the most difficult to personate on the stage. It is like the attempt to embody a shadow.

Come then, the colours and the ground prepare,  
Dip in the rainbow, trick her off in air,  
Chuse a firm cloud, before it falls, and in it  
Catch, 'ere she change, the Cynthia of a minute.

Such nearly is the task which the actor imposes on himself in the part of Hamlet. It is quite remote from hardness and dry precision. The character is spun to the finest thread, yet never loses its continuity. It has the yielding flexibility of "a wave of the sea." It is made up of undulating lines, without a single sharp angle. There is no set purpose, no straining at a point. The observations are suggested by the passing scene—the gusts of passion come and go, like the sounds of music borne on the wind. The interest depends not on the action, but on the thoughts—on "that within which passeth show." Yet, in spite of these difficulties, Mr. Kean's representation of the character had the most brilliant success. It did not indeed come home to our feelings, as Hamlet (that very Hamlet whom we read of in our youth, and seem almost to remember in our after-years), but it was a most striking and animated rehearsal of the part.

High as Mr. Kean stood in our opinion before, we have no hesitation in saying, that he stands higher in it (and, we think, will in that of the public), from the powers displayed in this last effort. If it was less perfect as a whole, there were parts in it of a higher cast of excellence than any part of his Richard. We will say at once, in what we think his general delineation of the character wrong. It was too strong and pointed. There was often a severity, approaching to virulence, in the common observations and answers. There is nothing of this in Hamlet. He

is, as it were, wrapped up in the cloud of his reflections, and only *thinks aloud*. There should therefore be no attempt to impress what he says upon others by any exaggeration of emphasis or manner, no talking *at* his hearers. There should be as much of the gentleman and scholar as possible infused into the part, and as little of the actor. A pensive air of sadness should sit unwillingly upon his brow, but no appearance of fixed and sullen gloom. He is full of "weakness and melancholy," but there is no harshness in his nature. Hamlet should be the most amiable of misanthropes. There is no one line in this play, which should be spoken like any one line in Richard; yet Mr. Kean did not appear to us to keep the two characters always distinct. He was least happy in the last scene with Guildenstern and Rosencrantz. In some of these more familiar scenes he displayed more energy than was requisite; and in others where it would have been appropriate, did not rise equal to the exigency of the occasion. In particular, the scene with Laertes, where he leaps into the grave, and utters the exclamation, "'Tis I, Hamlet the Dane," had not the tumultuous and overpowering effect we expected from it. To point out the defects of Mr. Kean's performance of the part, is a less grateful but a much shorter task, than to enumerate the many striking beauties which he gave to it, both by the power of his action and by the true feeling of nature. His surprise when he first sees the Ghost, his eagerness and filial confidence in following it, the impressive pathos of his action and voice in addressing it, "I'll call thee Hamlet, *Father*, Royal Dane," were admirable.

Mr. Kean has introduced in this part a *new reading*, as it is called, which we think perfectly correct. In the scene where he breaks from his friends to obey the command of his father, he keeps his sword pointed behind him, to prevent them from following him, instead of holding it before him to protect him from the Ghost. The manner of his taking Guildenstern and Rosencrantz under each arm, under pretence of communicating his secret to them, when he only means to trifle with them, had the finest effect, and was, we conceive, exactly in the spirit of the character. So was the suppressed tone of irony in which he ridicules those who gave ducats for his uncle's picture, though they would "make mouths at him," while his father lived. Whether the way in which Mr. Kean hesitates in repeating the first line of the speech in the interview with the player, and then, after several ineffectual attempts to recollect it, suddenly hurries on with it, "The rugged Pyrrhus," &c., is in perfect keeping, we have some doubts: but there was great ingenuity in the thought; and the spirit and life of the execution was beyond everything. Hamlet's speech in describing his own melancholy, his instructions to the players, and the soliloquy on death, were all delivered by Mr. Kean in a tone of fine, clear, and natural recitation. His pronunciation of the word "contumely" in the last of these, is, we apprehend, not authorized by custom, or by the metre.

Both the closet scene with his mother, and his remonstrances to Ophelia, were highly impressive. If there had been less vehemence of effort in the latter,



it would not have lost any of its effect. But whatever nice faults might be found in this scene, they were amply redeemed by the manner of his coming back after he has gone to the extremity of the stage, from a pang of parting tenderness to press his lips to Ophelia's hand. It had an electrical effect on the house. It was the finest commentary that was ever made on Shakespeare. It explained the character at once (as he meant it), as one of disappointed hope, of bitter regret, of affection suspended, not obliterated, by the distractions of the scene around him! The manner in which Mr. Kean acted in the scene of the Play before the King and Queen was the most daring of any, and the force and animation which he gave to it cannot be too highly applauded. Its extreme boldness "bordered on the verge of all we hate," and the effect it produced was a test of the extraordinary powers of this extraordinary actor.



**1817—William Hazlitt.**  
**"Hamlet," from *Characters of Shakespear's Plays***

This chapter from Hazlitt's book is in many ways an expansion of his earlier "Mr. Kean's Hamlet" (see above), and even repeats some passages from that essay almost verbatim.

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This is that Hamlet the Dane, whom we read of in our youth, and whom we may be said almost to remember in our after-years; he who made that famous soliloquy on life, who gave the advice to the players, who thought 'this goodly frame, the earth, a steril promontory, and this brave o'er-hanging firmament, the air, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours'; whom 'man delighted not, nor woman neither'; he who talked with the grave-diggers, and moralised on Yorick's skull; the school-fellow of Rosencrans and Guildenstern at Wittenberg; the friend of Horatio; the lover of Ophelia; he that was mad and sent to England; the slow avenger of his father's death; who lived at the court of Horwendillus five hundred years before we were born, but all whose thoughts we seem to know as well as we do our own, because we have read them in Shakespear.

Hamlet is a name; his speeches and sayings but the idle coinage of the poet's brain. What then, are they not real? They are as real as our own thoughts. Their reality is in the reader's mind. It is we who are Hamlet. This play has a prophetic truth, which is above that of history. Whoever has become thoughtful and melancholy through his own mishaps or those of others; whoever has borne about with him the clouded brow of reflection, and thought himself 'too much i' th' sun'; whoever has seen the golden lamp of day dimmed by envious mists

rising in his own breast, and could find in the world before him only a dull blank with nothing left remarkable in it; whoever has known 'the pangs of despised love, the insolence of office, or the spurns which patient merit of the unworthy takes'; he who has felt his mind sink within him, and sadness cling to his heart like a malady, who has had his hopes blighted and his youth staggered by the apparitions of strange things; who cannot be well at ease, while he sees evil hovering near him like a spectre; whose powers of action have been eaten up by thought, he to whom the universe seems infinite, and himself nothing; whose bitterness of soul makes him careless of consequences, and who goes to a play as his best resource to shove off, to a second remove, the evils of life by a mock representation of them—this is the true Hamlet.

We have been so used to this tragedy that we hardly know how to criticise it any more than we should know how to describe our own faces. But we must make such observations as we can. It is the one of Shakespear's plays that we think of the oftenest, because it abounds most in striking reflections on human life, and because the distresses of Hamlet are transferred, by the turn of his mind, to the general account of humanity. Whatever happens to him we apply to ourselves, because he applies it so himself as a means of general reasoning. He is a great moraliser; and what makes him worth attending to is, that he moralises on his own feelings and experience. He is not a common-place pedant. If *Lear* is distinguished by the greatest depth of passion, HAMLET is the most remarkable for the ingenuity, originality, and unstudied development of character. Shakespear had more magnanimity than any other poet, and he has shewn more of it in this play than in any other. There is no attempt to force an interest: everything is left for time and circumstances to unfold. The attention is excited without effort, the incidents succeed each other as matters of course, the characters think and speak and act just as they might do, if left entirely to themselves. There is no set purpose, no straining at a point. The observations are suggested by the passing scene—the gusts of passion come and go like sounds of music borne on the wind. The whole play is an exact transcript of what might be supposed to have taken place at the court of Denmark, at the remote period of time fixed upon, before the modern refinements in morals and manners were heard of. It would have been interesting enough to have been admitted as a by-stander in such a scene, at such a time, to have heard and witnessed something of what was going on. But here we are more than spectators. We have not only 'the outward pageants and the signs of grief'; but 'we have that within which passes shew'. We read the thoughts of the heart, we catch the passions living as they rise. Other dramatic writers give us very fine versions and paraphrases of nature; but Shakespear, together with his own comments, gives us the original text, that we may judge for ourselves. This is a very great advantage.

The character of Hamlet stands quite by itself. It is not a character marked by strength of will or even of passion, but by refinement of thought and sentiment.

Hamlet is as little of the hero as a man can well be: but he is a young and princely novice, full of high enthusiasm and quick sensibility—the sport of circumstances, questioning with fortune and refining on his own feelings, and forced from the natural bias of his disposition by the strangeness of his situation. He seems incapable of deliberate action, and is only hurried into extremities on the spur of the occasion, when he has no time to reflect, as in the scene where he kills Polonius, and again, where he alters the letters which Rosencrans and Guildenstern are taking with them to England, purporting his death. At other times, when he is most bound to act, he remains puzzled, undecided, and sceptical, dallies with his purposes, till the occasion is lost, and finds out some pretence to relapse into indolence and thoughtfulness again. For this reason he refuses to kill the King when he is at his prayers, and by a refinement in malice, which is in truth only an excuse for his own want of resolution, defers his revenge to a more fatal opportunity, when he shall be engaged in some act ‘that has no relish of salvation in it.’

‘He kneels and prays,  
 And now I’ll do’t, and so he goes to heaven,  
 And so am I reveng’d: *that would be scann’d.*  
 He kill’d my father, and for that,  
 I, his sole son, send him to heaven.  
 Why this is reward, not revenge.  
 Up sword and know thou a more horrid time  
 When he is drunk, asleep, or in a rage.’

He is the prince of philosophical speculators; and because he cannot have his revenge perfect, according to the most refined idea his wish can form, he declines it altogether. So he scruples to trust the suggestions of the ghost, contrives the scene of the play to have surer proof of his uncle’s guilt, and then rests satisfied with this confirmation of his suspicions, and the success of his experiment, instead of acting upon it. Yet he is sensible of his own weakness, taxes himself with it, and tries to reason himself out of it.

‘How all occasions do inform against me,  
 And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,  
 If his chief good and market of his time  
 Be but to sleep and feed? A beast; no more.  
 Sure he that made us with such large discourse,  
 Looking before and after, gave us not  
 That capability and god-like reason  
 To rust in us unus’d. Now whether it be  
 Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple

Of thinking too precisely on th' event,—  
A thought which quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom,  
And ever three parts coward;—I do not know  
Why yet I live to say, this thing's to do;  
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means  
To do it. Examples gross as earth exhort me:  
Witness this army of such mass and charge,  
Led by a delicate and tender prince,  
Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd,  
Makes mouths at the invisible event,  
Exposing what is mortal and unsure  
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,  
Even for an egg-shell. 'Tis not to be great  
Never to stir without great argument;  
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw,  
When honour's at the stake. 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, while to my shame I see  
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,  
That for a fantasy and trick of fame,  
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot  
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,  
Which is not tomb enough and continent  
To hide the slain?—O, from this time forth,  
My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth.'

Still he does nothing; and this very speculation on his own infirmity only affords him another occasion for indulging it. It is not from any want of attachment to his father or of abhorrence of his murder that Hamlet is thus dilatory, but it is more to his taste to indulge his imagination in reflecting upon the enormity of the crime and refining on his schemes of vengeance, than to put them into immediate practice. His ruling passion is to think, not to act: and any vague pretext that flatters this propensity instantly diverts him from his previous purposes.

The moral perfection of this character has been called in question, we think, by those who did not understand it. It is more interesting than according to rules; amiable, though not faultless. The ethical delineations of 'that noble and liberal casuist' (as Shakespear has been well called) do not exhibit the drab-coloured quakerism of morality. His plays are not copied either from the *Whole Duty of Man*, or from *The Academy of Compliments*! We confess we are a little shocked at the want of refinement in those who are shocked at the want of refinement in Hamlet. The neglect of punctilious exactness in

his behaviour either partakes of the 'licence of the time,' or else belongs to the very excess of intellectual refinement in the character, which makes the common rules of life, as well as his own purposes, sit loose upon him. He may be said to be amenable only to the tribunal of his own thoughts, and is too much taken up with the airy world of contemplation to lay as much stress as he ought on the practical consequences of things. His habitual principles of action are unhinged and out of joint with the time. His conduct to Ophelia is quite natural in his circumstances. It is that of assumed severity only. It is the effect of disappointed hope, of bitter regrets, of affection suspended, not obliterated, by the distractions of the scene around him! Amidst the natural and preternatural horrors of his situation, he might be excused in delicacy from carrying on a regular courtship. When 'his father's spirit was in arms,' it was not a time for the son to make love in. He could neither marry Ophelia, nor wound her mind by explaining the cause of his alienation, which he durst hardly trust himself to think of. It would have taken him years to have come to a direct explanation on the point. In the harassed state of his mind, he could not have done much otherwise than he did. His conduct does not contradict what he says when he sees her funeral,

'I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers  
 Could not with all their quantity of love  
 Make up my sum.'

Nothing can be more affecting or beautiful than the Queen's apostrophe to Ophelia on throwing flowers into the grave.

—'Sweets to the sweet, farewell.  
 I hop'd thou should'st have been my Hamlet's wife:  
 I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,  
 And not have strew'd thy grave.'

Shakespear was thoroughly a master of the mixed motives of the human character, and he here shews us the Queen, who was so criminal in some respects, not without sensibility and affection in other relations of life.—Ophelia is a character almost too exquisitely touching to be dwelt upon. Oh rose of May, oh flower too soon faded! Her love, her madness, her death, are described with the truest touches of tenderness and pathos. It is a character which nobody but Shakespear could have drawn in the way that he has done, and to the conception of which there is not even the smallest approach, except in some of the old romantic ballads.<sup>1</sup> Her brother, Laertes, is a character we do not like so well: he is too hot and choleric, and somewhat rhodomontade.

Polonius is a perfect character in its kind; nor is there any foundation for the objections which have been made to the consistency of this part. It is said that he acts very foolishly and talks very sensibly. There is no inconsistency in that. Again, that he talks wisely at one time and foolishly at another; that his advice to Laertes is very excellent, and his advice to the King and Queen on the subject of Hamlet's madness very ridiculous. But he gives the one as a father, and is sincere in it; he gives the other as a mere courtier, a busy-body, and is accordingly officious, garrulous, and impertinent. In short, Shakespear has been accused of inconsistency in this and other characters, only because he has kept up the distinction which there is in nature, between the understandings and the moral habits of men, between the absurdity of their ideas and the absurdity of their motives. Polonius is not a fool, but he makes himself so. His folly, whether in his actions or speeches, comes under the head of impropriety of intention.

We do not like to see our author's plays acted, and least of all, HAMLET. There is no play that suffers so much in being transferred to the stage. Hamlet himself seems hardly capable of being acted. Mr. Kemble unavoidably fails in this character from a want of ease and variety. The character of Hamlet is made up of undulating lines; it has the yielding flexibility of 'a wave o' th' sea'. Mr. Kemble plays it like a man in armour, with a determined inveteracy of purpose, in one undeviating straight line, which is as remote from the natural grace and refined susceptibility of the character, as the sharp angles and abrupt starts which Mr. Kean introduces into the part. Mr. Kean's Hamlet is as much too splenetic and rash as Mr. Kemble's is too deliberate and formal. His manner is too strong and pointed. He throws a severity, approaching to virulence, into the common observations and answers. There is nothing of this in Hamlet. He is, as it were, wrapped up in his reflections, and only *thinks aloud*. There should therefore be no attempt to impress what he says upon others by a studied exaggeration of emphasis or manner; no *talking at* his hearers. There should be as much of the gentleman and scholar as possible infused into the part, and as little of the actor. A pensive air of sadness should sit reluctantly upon his brow, but no appearance of fixed and sullen gloom. He is full of weakness and melancholy, but there is no harshness in his nature. He is the most amiable of misanthropes.

#### NOTE

1. In the account of her death, a friend has pointed out an instance of the poet's exact observation of nature:—

‘There is a willow growing o’er a brook,  
That shews its hoary leaves i’ th’ glassy stream.’

The inside of the leaves of the willow, next the water, is of a whitish colour, and the reflection would therefore be ‘hoary.’



**1818—Samuel Taylor Coleridge.**  
**From *Lectures and Notes on Shakspeare***  
**and *Other English Poets***

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) was an English poet and critic and a co-founder of the English Romantic movement, alongside his friend William Wordsworth. He is best known for his poems *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) and “Kubla Khan” (1816). His major prose work is the largely philosophical *Biographia Literaria* (1817). Between 1808 and 1819 he gave seven series of lectures on the work of Shakespeare, which were collected and published after his death.

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The seeming inconsistencies in the conduct and character of Hamlet have long exercised the conjectural ingenuity of critics: and, as we are always loth to suppose that the cause of defective apprehension is in ourselves, the mystery has been too commonly explained by the very easy process of setting it down as in fact inexplicable, and by resolving the phenomenon into a misgrowth or *lusus* of the capricious and irregular genius of Shakspeare. The shallow and stupid arrogance of these vulgar and indolent decisions I would fain do my best to expose. I believe the character of Hamlet may be traced to Shakspeare’s deep and accurate science in mental philosophy. Indeed, that this character must have some connection with the common fundamental laws of our nature may be assumed from the fact, that Hamlet has been the darling of every country in which the literature of England has been fostered. In order to understand him, it is essential that we should reflect on the constitution of our own minds. Man is distinguished from the brute animals in proportion as thought prevails over sense: but in the healthy processes of the mind, a balance is constantly maintained between the impressions from outward objects and the inward operations of the intellect;—for if there be an overbalance in the contemplative faculty, man thereby becomes the creature of mere meditation, and loses his natural power of action. Now one of Shakspeare’s modes of creating characters is, to conceive any one intellectual or moral faculty in morbid excess, and then to place himself, Shakspeare, thus mutilated or diseased, under given circumstances. In Hamlet he seems to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to the objects of our senses, and our meditation on the workings of our minds,—an *equilibrium* between the real and the imaginary worlds. In Hamlet this balance is disturbed: his thoughts, and the images of his fancy, are far more vivid than his actual perceptions, and his very perceptions, instantly passing through the *medium* of his contemplations, acquire, as they pass, a form and a colour not naturally their own. Hence we see a great, an almost enormous, intellectual activity, and a proportionate aversion to real action consequent upon it, with

all its symptoms and accompanying qualities. This character Shakspeare places in circumstances, under which it is obliged to act on the spur of the moment:—Hamlet is brave and careless of death; but he vacillates from sensibility, and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve. Thus it is that this tragedy presents a direct contrast to that of Macbeth; the one proceeds with the utmost slowness, the other with a crowded and breathless rapidity.

The effect of this overbalance of the imaginative power is beautifully illustrated in the everlasting broodings and superfluous activities of Hamlet's mind, which, unseated from its healthy relation, is constantly occupied with the world within, and abstracted from the world without,—giving substance to shadows, and throwing a mist over all common-place actualities. It is the nature of thought to be indefinite;—definiteness belongs to external imagery alone. Hence it is that the sense of sublimity arises, not from the sight of an outward object, but from the beholder's reflection upon it;—not from the sensuous impression, but from the imaginative reflex. Few have seen a celebrated waterfall without feeling something akin to disappointment: it is only subsequently that the image comes back full into the mind, and brings with it a train of grand or beautiful associations. Hamlet feels this; his senses are in a state of trance, and he looks upon external things as hieroglyphics. His soliloquy—

O! that this too too solid flesh would melt, &c,

springs from that craving after the indefinite—for that which is not—which most easily besets men of genius; and the self-delusion common to this temper of mind is finely exemplified in the character which Hamlet gives of himself:—

It cannot be  
But I am pigeon-livered, and lack gall  
To make oppression bitter.

He mistakes the seeing his chains for the breaking them, delays action till action is of no use, and dies the victim of mere circumstance and accident.

There is a great significancy in the names of Shakspeare's plays. In the *Twelfth Night*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, and *Winter's Tale*, the total effect is produced by a co-ordination of the characters as in a wreath of flowers. But in *Coriolanus*, *Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, &c. the effect arises from the subordination of all to one, either as the prominent person, or the principal object. *Cymbeline* is the only exception; and even that has its advantages in preparing the audience for the chaos of time, place, and costume, by throwing the date back into a fabulous king's reign.



But as of more importance, so more striking, is the judgment displayed by our truly dramatic poet, as well as poet of the drama, in the management of his first scenes. With the single exception of *Cymbeline*, they either place before us at one glance both the past and the future in some effect, which implies the continuance and full agency of its cause, as in the feuds and party-spirit of the servants of the two houses in the first scene of *Romeo and Juliet*; or in the degrading passion for shews and public spectacles, and the overwhelming attachment for the newest successful war-chief in the Roman people, already become a populace, contrasted with the jealousy of the nobles in *Julius Caesar*;—or they at once commence the action so as to excite a curiosity for the explanation in the following scenes, as in the storm of wind and waves, and the boatswain in the *Tempest*, instead of anticipating our curiosity, as in most other first scenes, and in too many other first acts;—or they act, by contrast of diction suited to the characters, at once to heighten the effect, and yet to give a naturalness to the language and rhythm of the principal personages, either as that of Prospero and Miranda by the appropriate lowness of the style,—or as in King *John*, by the equally appropriate stateliness of official harangues or narratives, so that the after blank verse seems to belong to the rank and quality of the speakers, and not to the poet;—or they strike at once the keynote, and give the predominant spirit of the play, as in the *Twelfth Night* and in *Macbeth*;—or finally, the first scene comprises all these advantages at once, as in *Hamlet*.

Compare the easy language of common life, in which this drama commences, with the direful music and wild wayward rhythm and abrupt lyrics of the opening of *Macbeth*. The tone is quite familiar;—there is no poetic description of night, no elaborate information conveyed by one speaker to another of what both had immediately before their senses—(such as the first distich in Addison's *Cato*, which is a translation into poetry of 'Past four o'clock and a dark morning!');—and yet nothing bordering on the comic on the one hand, nor any striving of the intellect on the other. It is precisely the language of sensation among men who feared no charge of effeminacy for feeling, what they had no want of resolution to bear. Yet the armour, the dead silence, the watchfulness that first interrupts it, the welcome relief of the guard, the cold, the broken expressions of compelled attention to bodily feelings still under control—all excellently accord with, and prepare for, the after gradual rise into tragedy;—but, above all, into a tragedy, the interest of which is as eminently *ad et apud intra*, as that of *Macbeth* is directly *ad extra*.

In all the best attested stories of ghosts and visions, as in that of Brutus, of Archbishop Cranmer, that of Benvenuto Cellini recorded by himself, and the vision of Galileo communicated by him to his favourite pupil Torricelli, the ghost-seers were in a state of cold or chilling damp from without, and of anxiety inwardly. It has been with all of them as with Francisco on his guard,—alone, in the depth and silence of the night;—'twas bitter cold, and they were sick at

heart, and *not a mouse stirring*.' The attention to minute sounds,—naturally associated with the recollection of minute objects, and the more familiar and trifling, the more impressive from the unusualness of their producing any impression at all—gives a philosophic pertinency to this last image; but it has likewise its dramatic use and purpose. For its commonness in ordinary conversation tends to produce the sense of reality, and at once hides the poet, and yet approximates the reader or spectator to that state in which the highest poetry will appear, and in its component parts, though not in the whole composition, really is, the language of nature. If I should not speak it, I feel that I should be thinking it;—the voice only is the poet's,—the words are my own. That Shakspeare meant to put an effect in the actor's power in the very first words—"Who's there?"—is evident from the impatience expressed by the startled Francisco in the words that follow—"Nay, answer me: stand and unfold yourself." A brave man is never so peremptory, as when he fears that he is afraid. Observe the gradual transition from the silence and the still recent habit of listening in Francisco's—"I think I hear them"—to the more cheerful call out, which a good actor would observe, in the—"Stand ho! Who is there?" Bernardo's inquiry after Horatio, and the repetition of his name and in his own presence indicate a respect or an eagerness that implies him as one of the persons who are in the foreground; and the scepticism attributed to him,—

Horatio says, 'tis but our fantasy;  
And will not let belief take hold of him—

prepares us for Hamlet's after eulogy on him as one whose blood and judgment were happily commingled. The actor should also be careful to distinguish the expectation and gladness of Bernardo's "Welcome, Horatio!" from the mere courtesy of his "Welcome, good Marcellus!"

Now observe the admirable indefiniteness of the first opening out of the occasion of all this anxiety. The preparation informative of the audience is just as much as was precisely necessary, and no more;—it begins with the uncertainty appertaining to a question:—

Mar.: What, has *this thing* appear'd again tonight?—

Even the word 'again' has its *credibilizing* effect. Then Horatio, the representative of the ignorance of the audience, not himself, but by Marcellus to Bernardo, anticipates the common solution—" 'tis but our fantasy!" upon which Marcellus rises into

This dreaded sight, twice seen of us—

which immediately afterwards becomes 'this apparition,' and that, too, an intelligent spirit, that is, to be spoken to! Then comes the confirmation of Horatio's disbelief;—

Tush! tush! 'twill not appear!—

and the silence, with which the scene opened, is again restored in the shivering feeling of Horatio sitting down, at such a time, and with the two eye-witnesses, to hear a story of a ghost, and that, too, of a ghost which had appeared twice before at the very same hour. In the deep feeling which Bernardo has of the solemn nature of what he is about to relate, he makes an effort to master his own imaginative terrors by an elevation of style,— itself a continuation of the effort,—and by turning off from the apparition, as from something which would force him too deeply into himself, to the outward objects, the realities of nature, which had accompanied it:—

*Ber.*: Last night of all,  
When yon same star, that's westward from the pole,  
Had made his course to illumine that part of heaven  
Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,  
The bell then beating one—

This passage seems to contradict the critical law that what is told, makes a faint impression compared with what is beholden; for it does indeed convey to the mind more than the eye can see; whilst the interruption of the narrative at the very moment, when we are most intensely listening for the sequel, and have our thoughts diverted from the dreaded sight in expectation of the desired, yet almost dreaded, tale—this gives all the suddenness and surprise of the original appearance;—

*Mar.*: Peace, break thee off; look, where it comes again!—

Note the judgment displayed in having the two persons present, who, as having seen the Ghost before, are naturally eager in confirming their former opinions,—whilst the sceptic is silent, and after having been twice addressed by his friends, answers with two hasty syllables—'Most like,'—and a confession of horror:

—It harrows me with fear and wonder.

O heaven! words are wasted on those who feel, and to those who do not feel the exquisite judgment of Shakspeare in this scene, what can be said?—Hume

himself could not but have had faith in this Ghost dramatically, let his anti-ghostism have been as strong as Samson against other ghosts less powerfully raised.



### 1845—Edgar Allan Poe. From “William Hazlitt”

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) was an American poet, short-story writer, essayist, literary critic, and leader of the American Romantic movement.

... In all commentating upon Shakspeare, there has been a radical error, never yet mentioned. It is the error of attempting to expound his characters—to account for their actions—to reconcile his inconsistencies—not as if they were the coinage of a human brain, but as if they had been actual existences upon earth. We talk of Hamlet the man, instead of Hamlet the *dramatis persona*—of Hamlet that God, in place of Hamlet that Shakspeare created. If Hamlet had really lived, and if the tragedy were an accurate record of his deeds, from this record (with some trouble) we might, it is true, reconcile his inconsistencies and settle to our satisfaction his true character. But the task becomes the purest absurdity when we deal only with a phantom. It is not (then) the inconsistencies of the acting man which we have as a subject of discussion—(although we proceed as if it were, and thus *inevitably* err,) but the whims and vacillations—the conflicting energies and indolences of the poet. It seems to us little less than a miracle, that this obvious point should have been overlooked.

While on this topic, we may as well offer an ill-considered opinion of our own as to the *intention of the poet* in the delineation of the Dane. It must have been well known to Shakspeare, that a leading feature in certain more intense classes of intoxication, (from whatever cause,) is an almost irresistible impulse to counterfeit a farther degree of excitement than actually exists. Analogy would lead any thoughtful person to suspect the same impulse in madness—where beyond doubt, it is manifest. This, Shakspeare *felt*—not thought. He felt it through his marvellous power of *identification* with humanity at large—the ultimate source of his magical influence upon mankind. He wrote of Hamlet as if Hamlet he were; and having, in the first instance, imagined his hero excited to partial unsanity by the disclosures of the ghost—he (the poet) *felt* that it was natural he should be impelled to exaggerate the insanity.



## 1860—Ivan Turgenev. “Hamlet and Don Quixote: The Two Eternal Human Types”

Ivan Turgenev (1818–1883) was a major Russian novelist and playwright. His *Fathers and Sons* is regarded as one of the most important novels of the nineteenth century. Turgenev’s own writing both recorded and inspired social change, and here he examines the impact that characters like Hamlet and Quixote might have on society.

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The first edition of Shakespeare’s tragedy *Hamlet* and the first part of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* appeared in the same year at the very beginning of the seventeenth century.

This coincidence seems to me significant. . . . It seems to me that in these two types are embodied two opposite fundamental peculiarities of man’s nature—the two ends of the axis about which it turns. I think that all people belong, more or less, to one of these two types; that nearly every one of us resembles either Don Quixote or Hamlet. In our day, it is true, the Hamlets have become far more numerous than the Don Quixotes, but the Don Quixotes have not become extinct.

Let me explain.

All people live—consciously or unconsciously—on the strength of their principles, their ideals; that is, by virtue of what they regard as truth, beauty, and goodness. Many get their ideals all ready-made, in definite, historically developed forms. They live trying to square their lives with this ideal, deviating from it at times, under the influence of passions or incidents, but neither reasoning about it nor questioning it. Others, on the contrary, subject it to the analysis of their own reason. Be this as it may, I think I shall not err too much in saying that for all people this ideal—this basis and aim of their existence—is to be found either outside of them or within them; in other words, for every one of us it is either his own “I” that forms the primary consideration or something else which he considers superior. I may be told that reality does not permit of such sharp demarcations; that in the very same living being both considerations may alternate, even becoming fused to a certain extent. But I do not mean to affirm the impossibility of change and contradiction in human nature; I wish merely to point out two different attitudes of man to his ideal. And now I will endeavor to show in what way, to my mind, these two different relations are embodied in the two types I have selected.

Let us begin with Don Quixote.

What does Don Quixote represent? We shall not look at him with the cursory glance that stops at superficialities and trifles. We shall not see in Don Quixote merely “the Knight of the sorrowful figure”—a figure created for the purpose of ridiculing the old-time romances of knighthood. It is known that

the meaning of this character had expanded under its immortal creator's own hand, and that the Don Quixote of the second part of the romance is an amiable companion to dukes and duchesses, a wise preceptor to the squire-governor—no longer the Don Quixote he appears in the first part, especially at the beginning of the work; not the odd and comical crank, who is constantly belabored by a rain of blows. I will endeavor, therefore, to go to the very heart of the matter. I repeat: What does Don Quixote represent?

Faith, in the first place; faith in something eternal, immutable; faith in the truth, in short, existing *outside* of the individual, which cannot easily be attained by him, but which is attainable only by constant devotion and the power of self-abnegation. Don Quixote is entirely consumed with devotion to his ideal, for the sake of which he is ready to suffer every possible privation and to sacrifice his life; his life itself he values only insofar as it can become a means for the incarnation of the ideal, for the establishment of truth and justice on earth. I may be told that this ideal is borrowed by his disordered imagination from the fanciful world of knightly romance. Granted—and this makes up the comical side of Don Quixote; but the ideal itself remains in all its immaculate purity. To live for oneself, to care for oneself, Don Quixote would consider shameful. He lives—if I may so express myself—outside of himself, entirely for others, for his brethren, in order to abolish evil, to counteract the forces hostile to mankind—wizards, giants, in a word, the oppressors. There is no trace of egotism in him; he is not concerned with himself, he is wholly a self-sacrifice—appreciate this word; he believes, believes firmly, and without circumspection. Therefore is he fearless, patient, content with the humblest fare, with the poorest clothes—what cares he for such things! Timid of heart, he is in spirit great and brave; his touching piety does not restrict his freedom; a stranger to variety, he doubts not himself, his vocation, or even his physical prowess; his will is indomitable. The constant aiming after the same end imparts a certain monotonousness to his thoughts and one-sidedness to his mind. He knows little, but need not know much; he knows what he is about, why he exists on earth—and this is the chief sort of knowledge. Don Quixote may seem to be either a perfect madman, since the most indubitable materialism vanishes before his eyes, melts like tallow before the fire of his enthusiasm (he really does see living Moors in the wooden puppets, and knights in the sheep); or shallow-minded, because he is unable lightly to sympathize or lightly to enjoy; but, like an ancient tree, he sends his roots deep into the soil, and can neither change his convictions nor pass from one subject to another. The stronghold of his moral constitution (note that this demented, wandering knight is everywhere and on all occasions the moral being) lends especial weight and dignity to all his judgments and speeches, to his whole figure, despite the ludicrous and humiliating situations into which he endlessly falls. Don Quixote is an enthusiast, a servant of an idea, and therefore is illuminated by its radiance.

Now what does Hamlet represent?

Analysis, first of all, and egotism, and therefore incredulity. He lives entirely for himself; he is an egotist. But even an egotist cannot believe in himself. We can only believe in that which is outside of and above ourselves. But this I, in which he does not believe, is dear to Hamlet. This is the point of departure, to which he constantly returns, because he finds nothing in the whole universe to which he can cling with all his heart. He is a skeptic, and always ponders about himself; he is ever busy, not with his duty, but with his condition. Doubting everything, Hamlet, of course, spares not himself; his mind is too much developed to be satisfied with what he finds within himself. He is conscious of his weakness; but even this self-consciousness is power; from it comes his irony, in contrast with the enthusiasm of Don Quixote. Hamlet delights in excessive self-depreciation. Constantly concerned with himself, always a creature of introspection, he knows minutely all his faults, scorns himself, and at the same time lives, so to speak, nourished by this scorn. He has no faith in himself, yet is vainglorious; he knows not what he wants nor why he lives, yet is attached to life. He exclaims:

Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd  
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!  
Most weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,  
Seem to me all the uses of this world! (I, ii, 131–134)

But he will not sacrifice this flat and unprofitable life. He contemplates suicide even before he sees his father's ghost, and receives the awful commission which breaks down completely his already weakened will—but he does not take his life. The love of life is expressed in the very thought of terminating it. Every youth of eighteen is familiar with such feelings as this: "When the blood boils, how prodigal the soul!"

I will not be too severe with Hamlet. He suffers, and his sufferings are more painful and galling than those of Don Quixote. The latter is pummeled by rough shepherds and convicts whom he has liberated; Hamlet inflicts his own wounds—teases himself. In his hands, too, is a lance—the two-edged lance of self-analysis.

Don Quixote, I must confess, is positively funny. His figure is perhaps the most comical that ever poet has drawn. His name has become a mocking nickname even on the lips of Russian peasants. Of this our own ears could convince us. The mere memory of him raises in our imagination a figure gaunt, angular, rugged-nosed, clad in caricature armor, and mounted on the withered skeleton of the pitiable Rosinante, a poor, starved and beaten nag, to whom we cannot deny a semi-amusing and semi-pathetic co-operation. Don Quixote makes us laugh, but there is a conciliatory and redeeming power in this laughter; and if the adage be true, "You may come to worship what you now deride," then

I may add: Whom you have ridiculed, you have already forgiven—are even ready to love.

Hamlet's appearance, on the contrary, is attractive. His melancholia; his pale though not lean aspect (his mother remarks that he is stout, saying, "Our son is fat"); his black velvet clothes, the feather crowning his hat; his elegant manners, the unmistakable poetry of his speeches; his steady feeling of complete superiority over others, alongside of the biting humor of his self-denunciation—everything about him pleases, everything captivates. Everybody flatters himself on passing for a Hamlet. None would like to acquire the appellation of "Don Quixote." "Hamlet Baratynski,"<sup>1</sup> wrote Pushkin to his friend. No one ever thought of laughing at Hamlet, and herein lies his condemnation. To love him is almost impossible; only people like Horatio become attached to Hamlet. Of these I will speak later. Everyone sympathizes with Hamlet, and the reason is obvious: nearly everyone finds in Hamlet his own traits; but to love him is, I repeat, impossible, because he himself does not love anyone.

Let us continue our comparison.

Hamlet is the son of a king, murdered by his own brother, the usurper of the throne; his father comes forth from the grave—from "the jaws of Hades"—to charge Hamlet to avenge him; but the latter hesitates, keeps on quibbling with himself, finds consolation in self-depreciation, and finally kills his stepfather by chance.

A deep psychological feature, for which many wise but shortsighted persons have ventured to censure Shakespeare! And Don Quixote, a poor man, almost destitute, without means or connections, old and lonely, undertakes the task of destroying evil and protecting the oppressed (total strangers to him) all over the world. It matters not that his first attempt to free innocence from the oppressor brings redoubled suffering upon the head of innocence. (I have in mind that scene in which Don Quixote saves an apprentice from a drubbing by his master, who, as soon as the deliverer is gone, punishes the poor boy with tenfold severity.) It matters not that, in his crusades against harmful giants, Don Quixote attacks useful windmills. The comical setting of these pictures should not distract our eyes from their hidden meaning. The man who sets out to sacrifice himself with careful forethought and consideration of all the consequences—balancing all the probabilities of his acts proving beneficial—is hardly capable of self-sacrifice. Nothing of the kind can happen to Hamlet; it is not for him, with his penetrative, keen, and skeptical mind, to fall into so gross an error. No, he will not wage war on windmills; he does not believe in giants, and would not attack them if they did exist. We cannot imagine Hamlet exhibiting to each and all a barber's bowl, and maintaining, as Don Quixote does, that it is the real magic helmet of Mambrin. I suppose that, were truth itself to appear incarnate before his eyes, Hamlet would still have misgivings as to whether it really was the truth. For who knows but that truth, too, is perhaps nonexistent, like giants? We laugh at Don



Quixote, but, my dear sirs, which of us, after having conscientiously interrogated himself, and taken into account his past and present convictions, will make bold to say that he always, under all circumstances, can distinguish a barber's pewter bowl from a magic golden helmet? It seems to me, therefore, that the principal thing in life is the sincerity and strength of our convictions—the result lies in the hands of fate. This alone can show us whether we have been contending with phantoms or real foes, and with what armor we covered our heads. Our business is to arm ourselves and fight.

Remarkable are the attitudes of the mob, the so-called mass of the people, toward Hamlet and Don Quixote. In *Hamlet* Polonius, in *Don Quixote* Sancho Panza, symbolize the populace.

Polonius is an old man—active, practical, sensible, but at the same time narrow-minded and garrulous. He is an excellent chamberlain and an exemplary father. (Recollect his instructions to his son, Laertes, when going abroad—instructions which vie in wisdom with certain orders issued by Governor Sancho Panza on the Island of Barataria.) To Polonius Hamlet is not so much a madman as a child. Were he not a king's son, Polonius would despise him because of his utter uselessness and the impossibility of making a positive and practical application of his ideas. The famous cloud scene, the scene where Hamlet imagines he is mocking the old man, has an obvious significance, confirming this theory. I take the liberty of recalling it to you:

POLONIUS: My lord, the queen would speak with you, and presently.

HAMLET: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

POLONIUS: By the mass, and 'tis like a camel, indeed.

HAMLET: Methinks it is like a weasel.

POLONIUS: It is backed like a weasel.

HAMLET: Or like a whale?

POLONIUS: Very like a whale.

HAMLET: Then will I come to my mother by and by. (III, ii, 391–402)

Is it not evident that in this scene Polonius is at the same time a courtier who humors the prince and an adult who would not cross a sickly, capricious boy? Polonius does not in the least believe Hamlet, and he is right. With all his natural, narrow presumptiveness, he ascribes Hamlet's capriciousness to his love for Ophelia, in which he is, of course, mistaken, but he makes no mistake in understanding Hamlet's character. The Hamlets are really useless to the people; they give it nothing, they cannot lead it anywhere, since they themselves are bound for nowhere. And, besides, how can one lead when he doubts the very ground he treads upon? Moreover, the Hamlets detest the masses. How can a man who does not respect himself respect any one or anything else? Besides, is it

really worth while to bother about the masses? They are so rude and filthy! And much more than birth alone goes to make Hamlet an aristocrat.

An entirely different spectacle is presented by Sancho Panza. He laughs at Don Quixote, knows full well that he is demented; yet thrice forsakes the land of his birth, his home, wife, and daughter, that he may follow this crazy man; follows him everywhere, undergoes all sorts of hardships, is devoted to him to his very death, believes him and is proud of him, then weeps, kneeling at the humble pallet where his master breathes his last. Hope of gain or ultimate advantage cannot account for this devotion. Sancho Panza has too much good sense. He knows very well that the page of a wandering knight has nothing save beatings to expect. The cause of his devotion must be sought deeper. It finds its root (if I may so put it) in what is perhaps the cardinal value of the people—in its capability of a blissful and honest blindness (alas! it is familiar with other forms of blindness), the capability of disinterested enthusiasm, the disregard of direct personal advantages, which to a poor man is almost equivalent to scorn for his daily bread. A great, universally historic virtue!

The masses of the people invariably end by following, in blind confidence, the very persons they themselves have mocked, or even cursed and persecuted. They give allegiance to those who fear neither curses nor persecution—nor even ridicule—but who go straight ahead, their spiritual gaze directed toward the goal which they alone see—who seek, fall, and rise, and ultimately find. And rightly so; only he who is led by the heart reaches the ultimate goal. “*Les grandes pensées viennent du coeur*,” said Vovenarg. And the Hamlets find nothing, invent nothing, and leave no trace behind them, save that of their own personality—no achievements whatsoever. They neither love nor believe, and what can they find? Even in chemistry—not to speak of organic nature—in order that a third substance may be obtained, there must be a combination of two others; but the Hamlets are concerned with themselves alone—they are lonely, and therefore barren.

“But,” you will interpose, “how about Ophelia—does not Hamlet love her?”

I shall speak of her, and, incidentally, of Dulcinea.

In their relations to woman, too, our two types present much that is noteworthy.

Don Quixote loves Dulcinea, a woman who exists only in his own imagination, and is ready to die for her. (Recall his words when, vanquished and bruised, he says to the conqueror, who stands over him with a spear: “Stab me, Sir Knight . . . Dulcinea del Toboso is the most beautiful woman in the world, and I the most unfortunate knight on earth. It is not fit that my weakness should lessen the glory of Dulcinea.”) He loves purely, ideally; so ideally that he does not even suspect that the object of his passion does not exist at all; so purely that, when Dulcinea appears before him in the guise of a rough and dirty peasant woman,

he trusts not the testimony of his eyes, and regards her as transformed by some evil wizard.

I myself have seen in my life, on my wanderings, people who laid down their lives for equally nonexistent Dulcineas or for a vulgar and oftentimes filthy something or other, in which they saw the realization of their ideal, and whose transformation they likewise attributed to evil—I almost said bewitching—events and persons. I have seen them, and when their like shall cease to exist, then let the book of history be closed forever: there will be nothing in it to read about. Of sensuality there is not even a trace in Don Quixote. All his thoughts are chaste and innocent, and in the secret depths of his heart he hardly hopes for an ultimate union with Dulcinea—indeed, he almost dreads such a union.

And does Hamlet really love? Has his ironic creator, a most profound judge of the human heart, really determined to give this egotist, this skeptic, saturated with every decomposing poison of self-analysis, a loving and devout heart? Shakespeare did not fall into the contradiction; and it does not cost the attentive reader much pains to convince himself that Hamlet is a sensual man, and even secretly voluptuous. (It is not for nothing that the courtier Rosencrantz smiles slyly when Hamlet says in his hearing that he is tired of women.) Hamlet does not love, I say, but only pretends—and mawkishly—that he loves. On this we have the testimony of Shakespeare himself. In the first scene of the third act Hamlet says to Ophelia: “I did love you once.” Then ensues the colloquy:

OPHELIA: Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

HAMLET: You should not have believed me . . . I loved you not.  
(III, i, 115–120)

And having uttered this last word, Hamlet is much nearer the truth than he supposed. His feelings for Ophelia—an innocent creature, pure as a saintess—are either cynical (recollect his words, his equivocal allusions, when, in the scene representing the theater, he asks her permission to lie . . . in her lap), or else hollow (direct your attention to the scene between him and Laertes, when Hamlet jumps into Ophelia’s grave and says, in language worthy of Bramarbas<sup>2</sup> or of Captain Pistol: “Forty thousand brothers could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum. . . . Let them throw millions of acres on us,” etc. V, i, 292–303).

All his relations with Ophelia are for Hamlet only the occasions for preoccupation with his own self, and in his exclamation, “Nymph! in thy orisons be all my sins remember’d!” (III, i, 88–89) we see but the deep consciousness of his own sickly inanition, a lack of strength to love, on the part of the almost superstitious worshiper before “the Saintess of Chastity.”

But enough has been said of the dark sides of the Hamlet type, of those phases which irritate us most because they are nearer and more familiar to us.

I will endeavor to appreciate whatever may be legitimate in him, and therefore enduring. Hamlet embodies the doctrine of negation, that same doctrine which another great poet has divested of everything human and presented in the form of Mephistopheles. Hamlet is the self-same Mephistopheles, but a Mephistopheles embraced by the living circle of human nature: hence his negation is not an evil, but is itself directed against evil. Hamlet casts doubt upon goodness, but does not question the existence of evil; in fact, he wages relentless war upon it. He entertains suspicions concerning the genuineness and sincerity of good; yet his attacks are made not upon goodness, but upon a counterfeit goodness, beneath whose mask are secreted evil and falsehood, its immemorial enemies. He does not laugh the diabolic, impersonal laughter of Mephistopheles; in his bitterest smile there is pathos, which tells of his sufferings and therefore reconciles us to him. Hamlet's skepticism, moreover, is not indifferentism, and in this consists his significance and merit. In his make-up good and evil, truth and falsehood, beauty and ugliness, are not blurred into an accidental, dumb, and vague something or other. The skepticism of Hamlet, which leads him to distrust things contemporaneous—the realization of truth, so to speak—is irreconcilably at war with falsehood, and through this very quality he becomes one of the foremost champions of a truth in which he himself cannot fully believe. But in negation, as in fire, there is a destructive force, and how can we keep it within bounds or show exactly where it is to stop, when that which it must destroy and that which it should spare are frequently blended and bound up together inseparably? This is where the oft-observed tragedy of human life comes into evidence: doing presupposes thinking, but thought and the will have separated, and are separating daily more and more. "And thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," Shakespeare tells us in the words of Hamlet.

And so, on the one side stand the Hamlets—reflective, conscientious, often all-comprehensive, but as often also useless and doomed to immobility; and on the other the half-crazy Don Quixotes, who help and influence mankind only to the extent that they see but a single point—often nonexistent in the form they see it. Unwillingly the questions arise: Must one really be a lunatic to believe in the truth? And, must the mind that has obtained control of itself lose, therefore, all its power?

We should be led very far indeed even by a superficial consideration of these questions.

I shall confine myself to the remark that in this separation, in this dualism which I have mentioned, we should recognize a fundamental law of all human life. This life is nothing else than an eternal struggle and everlasting reconciliation of two ceaselessly diverging and continually uniting elements. If I did not fear startling your ears with philosophical terms, I would venture to say that the Hamlets are an expression of the fundamental centripetal force of nature, in accordance with which every living thing considers itself the center

of creation and looks down upon everything else as existing for its sake. Thus the mosquito that settled on the forehead of Alexander the Great, in calm confidence of its right, fed on his blood as food which belonged to it; just so Hamlet, though he scorns himself—a thing the mosquito does not do, not having risen to this level—always takes everything on his own account. Without this centripetal force—the force of egotism—nature could no more exist than without the other, the centrifugal force, according to whose law everything exists only for something else. This force, the principle of devotion and self-sacrifice, illuminated, as I have already stated, by a comic light, is represented by the Don Quixotes. These two forces of inertia and motion, of conservatism and progress, are the fundamental forces of all existing things. They explain to us the growth of a little flower; they give us a key to the understanding of the development of the most powerful peoples.

I hasten to pass from these perhaps irrelevant speculations to other considerations more familiar to us.

I know that, of all Shakespeare's works, *Hamlet* is perhaps the most popular. This tragedy belongs to the list of plays that never fail to crowd the theater. In view of the modern attitude of our public and its aspiration toward self-consciousness and reflection, its scruples about itself and its buoyancy of spirit, this phenomenon is clear. But, to say nothing of the beauties in which this most excellent expression of the modern spirit abounds, one cannot help marveling at the master genius who, though himself in many respects akin to his Hamlet, cleft him from himself by a free sweep of creative force, and set up his model for the lasting study of posterity. The spirit which created this model is that of a Northern man, a spirit of meditation and analysis, a spirit heavy and gloomy, devoid of harmony and bright color, not rounded into exquisite, oftentimes shallow, forms; but deep, strong, varied, independent, and guiding. Out of his very bosom he has plucked the type of Hamlet; and in so doing has shown that, in the realm of poetry, as in other spheres of human life, he stands above his child, because he fully understands it.

The spirit of a Southerner went into the creation of Don Quixote, a spirit light and merry, naive and impressionable,—one that does not enter into the mysteries of life, that reflects phenomena rather than comprehends them.

At this point I cannot resist the desire, not to draw a parallel between Shakespeare and Cervantes, but simply to indicate a few points of likeness and of difference. Shakespeare and Cervantes—how can there be any comparison? some will ask. Shakespeare, that giant, that demigod! . . . Yes, but Cervantes is not a pygmy beside the giant who created *King Lear*. He is a man—a man to the full; and a man has the right to stand on his feet even before a demigod. Undoubtedly Shakespeare presses hard upon Cervantes—and not him alone—by the wealth and power of his imagination, by the brilliancy of his greatest poetry, by the depth and breadth of a colossal mind. But then you will not find in Cervantes'

romance any strained witticisms or unnatural comparisons or feigned concepts; nor will you meet in his pages with decapitations, picked eyes, and those streams of blood, that dull and iron cruelty, which are the terrible heirloom of the Middle Ages, and are disappearing less rapidly in obstinate Northern natures. And yet Cervantes, like Shakespeare, lived in the epoch that witnessed St. Bartholomew's Night;<sup>3</sup> and long after that time heretics were burned and blood continued to flow—shall it ever cease to flow? *Don Quixote* reflects the Middle Ages, if only in the provincial poetry and narrative grace of those romances which Cervantes so good-humoredly derided, and to which he himself paid the last tribute in *Persiles and Sigismunda*. Shakespeare takes his models from everywhere—from heaven and earth—he knows no limitations; nothing can escape his all-pervading glance. He seizes his subjects with irresistible power, like an eagle pouncing upon its prey. Cervantes presents his not over-numerous characters to his readers gently, as a father his children. He takes only what is close to him, but with that how familiar he is! Everything human seems subservient to the mighty English poet; Cervantes draws his wealth from his own heart only—a heart sunny, kind, and rich in life's experience, but not hardened by it. It was not in vain that during seven years of hard bondage Cervantes was learning, as he himself said, the science of patience. The circle of his experience is narrower than Shakespeare's, but in that, as in every separate living person, is reflected all that is human. Cervantes does not dazzle you with thundering words; he does not shock you with the titanic force of triumphant inspiration; his poetry—sometimes turbid, and by no means Shakespearean—is like a deep river, rolling calmly between variegated banks; and the reader, gradually allured, then hemmed in on every side by its transparent waves, cheerfully resigns himself to the truly epic calm and fluidity of its course.

The imagination gladly evokes the figures of these two contemporary poets, who died on the very same day, the twenty-sixth of April, 1616.<sup>4</sup> Cervantes probably knew nothing of Shakespeare, but the great tragedian in the quietude of his Stratford home, whither he had retired for the three years preceding his death, could have read through the famous novel, which had already been translated into English. A picture worthy of the brush of a contemplative artist—Shakespeare reading *Don Quixote*! Fortunate are the countries where such men arise, teachers of their generation and of posterity. The unfading wreath with which a great man is crowned rests also upon the brow of his people.

A certain English Lord—a good judge in the matter—once spoke in my hearing of Don Quixote as a model of a real gentleman. Surely, if simplicity and a quiet demeanor are the distinguishing marks of what we call a thorough gentleman, Don Quixote has a good claim to his title. He is a veritable *hidalgo*—a *hidalgo* even when the jeering servants of the prince are lathering his whole face. The simplicity of his manners proceeds from the absence of what I would venture to call his self-love, and not his self-conceit. Don Quixote is not busied

with himself, and, respecting himself and others, does not think of showing off. But Hamlet, with all his exquisite setting, is, it seems to me—excuse the French expression—*ayant des airs de parvenu*; he is troublesome—at times even rude—and he poses and scoffs. To make up for this, he was given the power of original and apt expression, a power inherent in every being in whom is implanted the habit of reflection and self-development—and therefore utterly unattainable so far as Don Quixote is concerned. The depth and keenness of analysis in Hamlet, his many-sided education (we must not forget that he studied at the Wittenberg University), have developed in him a taste almost unerring. He is an excellent critic; his advice to the actors is strikingly true and judicious. The sense of the beautiful is as strong in him as the sense of duty in Don Quixote.

Don Quixote deeply respects all existing orders—religions, monarchs, and dukes—and is at the same time free himself and recognizes the freedom of others. Hamlet rebukes kings and courtiers, but is in reality oppressive and intolerant.

Don Quixote is hardly literate; Hamlet probably kept a diary. Don Quixote, with all his ignorance, has a definite way of thinking about matters of government and administration; Hamlet has neither time nor need to think of such matters.

Many have objected to the endless blows with which Cervantes burdens Don Quixote. I have already remarked that in the second part of the romance the poor knight is almost unmolested. But I will add that, without these beatings, he would be less pleasing to children, who read his adventures with such avidity; and to us grownups he would not appear in his true light, but rather in a cold and haughty aspect, which would be incompatible with his character. Another interesting point is involved here. At the very end of the romance, after Don Quixote's complete discomfiture by the Knight of the White Moon, the disguised college bachelor, and following his renunciation of knight-errantry, shortly before his death, a herd of swine trample him underfoot. I once happened to hear Cervantes criticized for writing this, on the ground that he was repeating the old tricks already abandoned; but herein Cervantes was guided by the instinct of genius, and this very ugly incident has a deep meaning. The trampling under pigs' feet is always encountered in the lives of Don Quixotes, and just before their close. This is the last tribute they must pay to rough chance, to indifference and cruel misunderstanding; it is the slap in the face from the Pharisees. Then they can die. They have passed through all the fire of the furnace, have won immortality for themselves, and it opens before them.

Hamlet is occasionally double-faced and heartless. Think of how he planned the deaths of the two courtiers sent to England by the king. Recall his speech on Polonius, whom he murdered. In this, however, we see, as already observed, a reflection of the medieval spirit recently outgrown. On the other hand, we must note in the honest, veracious Don Quixote the disposition to a half-conscious,

half-innocent deception, to self-delusion—a disposition almost always present in the fancy of an enthusiast. His account of what he saw in the cave of Montesinos was obviously invented by him, and did not deceive the smart commoner, Sancho Panza.

Hamlet, on the slightest ill success, loses heart and complains; but Don Quixote, pummeled senseless by galley slaves, has not the least doubt as to the success of his undertaking. In the same spirit Fourier is said to have gone to his office every day, for many years, to meet an Englishman he had invited, through the newspapers, to furnish him with a million francs to carry out his plans; but, of course, the benefactor of his dreams never appeared. This was certainly a very ridiculous proceeding, and it calls to mind this thought: The ancients considered their gods jealous, and, in case of need, deemed it useful to appease them by voluntary offerings (recollect the ring cast into the sea by Polycrates); why, then, should we not believe that some share of the ludicrous must inevitably be mingled with the acts, with the very character of people moved unto great and novel deeds—as a bribe, as a soothing offering, to the jealous gods? Without these comical crank-pioneers, mankind would not progress, and there would not be anything for the Hamlets to reflect upon.

The Don Quixotes discover; the Hamlets develop. But how, I shall be asked, can the Hamlets evolve anything when they doubt all things and believe in nothing? My rejoinder is that, by a wise dispensation of Nature, there are neither thorough Hamlets nor complete Don Quixotes; these are but extreme manifestations of two tendencies—guideposts set up by the poets on two different roads. Life tends toward them, but never reaches the goal. We must not forget that, just as the principle of analysis is carried in Hamlet to tragedy, so the element of enthusiasm runs in Don Quixote to comedy; but in life, the purely comic and the purely tragic are seldom encountered.

Hamlet gains much in our estimation from Horatio's attachment for him. This character is excellent, and is frequently met with in our day, to the credit of the times. In Horatio I recognize the type of the disciple, the pupil, in the best sense of the word. With a stoical and direct nature, a warm heart, and a somewhat limited understanding, he is aware of his shortcomings, and is modest—something rare in people of limited intellect. He thirsts for learning, for instruction, and therefore venerates the wise Hamlet, and is devoted to him with all the might of his honest heart, not demanding even reciprocation. He defers to Hamlet, not as to a prince but as to a chief. One of the most important services of the Hamlets consists in forming and developing persons like Horatio; persons who, having received from them the seeds of thought, fertilize them in their hearts, and then scatter them broadcast through the world. The words in which Hamlet acknowledges Horatio's worth, honor himself. In them is expressed his own conception of the great worth of Man, his noble aspirations, which no skepticism is strong enough to weaken.



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. (III, ii, 76–79)

The honest skeptic always respects a stoic. When the ancient world had crumbled away—and in every epoch like unto that—the best people took refuge in stoicism as the only creed in which it was still possible to preserve man's dignity. The skeptics, if they lacked the strength to die—to betake themselves to the “undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns”—turned epicureans; a plain, sad phenomenon, with which we are but too familiar.

Both Hamlet and Don Quixote die a touching death; and yet how different are their ends! Hamlet's last words are sublime. He resigns himself, grows calm, bids Horatio live, and raises his dying voice in behalf of young Fortinbras, the unstained representative of the right of succession. Hamlet's eyes are not turned forward. “The rest is silence,” says the dying skeptic, as he actually becomes silent forever. The death of Don Quixote sends an inexpressible emotion through one's heart. In that instant the full significance of this personality is accessible to all. When his former page, trying to comfort Don Quixote, tells him that they shall soon again start out on an expedition of knight-errantry, the expiring knight replies: “No, all is now over forever, and I ask everyone's forgiveness; I am no longer Don Quixote, I am again Alonzo the good, as I was once called—Alonzo el Bueno.”

The word is remarkable. The mention of this nickname for the first and last time makes the reader tremble. Yes, only this single word still has a meaning, in the face of death. All things shall pass away, everything shall vanish—the highest station, power, the all-inclusive genius—all to dust shall crumble. “All earthly greatness vanishes like smoke.” But noble deeds are more enduring than resplendent beauty. “Everything shall pass,” the apostle said, “love alone shall endure.”

## NOTES

1. Jewgenij Abramovich Baratynski (1800–1844), a Russian lyric poet, was a contemporary and successful follower of Pushkin. Such poems as “Eda” and “The Gypsy” exhibited the melancholy which occasioned Pushkin's comment.

2. An expression denoting a braggart that derives from Ludwig von Holberg's (1684–1754) play *Jakob von Thyboe* (1723), whose chief character, named Bramarbas, is a boastful officer.

3. Tradition generally refers to St. Bartholomew's Day. See also p. 367.

4. It is generally agreed now that Cervantes was in captivity five years, died April 23, and was entombed April 24.



## 1864—Victor Hugo. From *William Shakespeare*

A French poet, novelist, playwright, statesman, and human rights advocate, Victor Hugo (1802–1885) was instrumental in bringing Romanticism to France. His poetry includes *Les Contemplations* (1856), but he is best known today for his novel *Les Misérables* (1862).

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### *Part II*

#### ***Book II. Shakespeare—His Work—The Culminating Points***

Two marvellous Adams, we have just said, are the man of Aeschylus, Prometheus, and the man of Shakespeare, Hamlet.

Prometheus is action. Hamlet is hesitation.

In Prometheus the obstacle is exterior; in Hamlet it is interior.

In Prometheus the will is securely nailed down by nails of brass and cannot get loose; besides, it has by its side two watchers,—Force and Power. In Hamlet the will is more tied down yet; it is bound by previous meditation,—the endless chain of the undecided. Try to get out of yourself if you can! What a Gordian knot is our revery! Slavery from within, that is slavery indeed. Scale this enclosure, “to dream!” escape, if you can, from this prison, “to love!” The only dungeon is that which walls conscience in. Prometheus, in order to be free, has but a bronze collar to break and a god to conquer; Hamlet must break and conquer himself. Prometheus can raise himself upright, if he only lifts a mountain; to raise himself up, Hamlet must lift his own thoughts. If Prometheus plucks the vulture from his breast, all is said; Hamlet must tear Hamlet from his breast. Prometheus and Hamlet are two naked livers; from one runs blood, from the other doubt.

We are in the habit of comparing Aeschylus and Shakespeare by Orestes and Hamlet, these two tragedies being the same drama. Never in fact was a subject more identical. The learned mark an analogy between them; the impotent, who are also the ignorant, the envious, who are also the imbeciles, have the petty joy of thinking they establish a plagiarism. It is after all a possible field for erudition and for serious criticism. Hamlet walks behind Orestes, parricide through filial love. This easy comparison, rather superficial than deep, strikes us less than the mysterious confronting of those two enchained beings, Prometheus and Hamlet.

Let us not forget that the human mind, half divine as it is, creates from time to time superhuman works. These superhuman works of man are, moreover, more numerous than it is thought, for they entirely fill art. Out of poetry,

where marvels abound, there is in music Beethoven, in sculpture Phidias, in architecture Piranesi, in painting Rembrandt, and in painting, architecture, and sculpture Michael Angelo. We pass many over, and not the least.

Prometheus and Hamlet are among those more than human works.

A kind of gigantic determination; the usual measure exceeded; greatness everywhere; that which astounds ordinary intellects demonstrated when necessary by the improbable; destiny, society, law, religion, brought to trial and judgment in the name of the Unknown, the abyss of the mysterious equilibrium; the event treated as a *rôle* played out, and, on occasion, hurled as a reproach against Fatality or Providence; passion, terrible personage, going and coming in man; the audacity and sometimes the insolence of reason; the haughty forms of a style at ease in all extremes, and at the same time a profound wisdom; the gentleness of the giant; the goodness of a softened monster; an ineffable dawn which cannot be accounted for and which lights up everything,—such are the signs of those supreme works. In certain poems there is starlight.

This light is in Aeschylus and in Shakespeare.

#### IV

Nothing can be more fiercely wild than Prometheus stretched on the Caucasus. It is gigantic tragedy. The old punishment that our ancient laws of torture call extension, and which Cartouche escaped because of a hernia, Prometheus undergoes it; only, the wooden horse is a mountain. What is his crime? Right. To characterize right as crime, and movement as rebellion, is the immemorial talent of tyrants. Prometheus has done on Olympus what Eve did in Eden,—he has taken a little knowledge. Jupiter, identical with Jehovah (*Iovi, Iova*), punishes this temerity,—the desire to live. The Eginetic traditions, which localize Jupiter, deprive him of the cosmic personality of the Jehovah of Genesis. The Greek Jupiter, bad son of a bad father, in rebellion against Saturn, who has himself been a rebel against Coelus, is a *parvenu*. The Titans are a sort of elder branch, which has its legitimists, of whom Aeschylus, the avenger of Prometheus, was one. Prometheus is right conquered. Jupiter has, as is always the case, consummated the usurpation of power by the punishment of right. Olympus claims the aid of Caucasus. Prometheus is fastened there to the *carcan*. There is the Titan, fallen, prostrate, nailed down. Mercury, the friend of everybody, comes to give him such counsel as follows generally the perpetration of *coups d'état*. Mercury is the type of cowardly intellect, of every possible vice, but of vice full of wit. Mercury, the god of vice, serves Jupiter the god of crime. This fawning in evil is still marked today by the veneration of the pickpocket for the assassin. There is something of that law in the arrival of the diplomatist behind the conqueror. The *chefs-d'oeuvre* are immense in this, that they are eternally present to the deeds of humanity. Prometheus on the Caucasus, is Poland after 1772; France after 1815; the Revolution after Brumaire. Mercury speaks; Prometheus listens but little. Offers of amnesty miscarry when it is the victim who alone should

have the right to grant pardon. Prometheus, though conquered, scorns Mercury standing proudly above him, and Jupiter standing above Mercury, and Destiny standing above Jupiter. Prometheus jests at the vulture which gnaws at him; he shrugs disdainfully his shoulders as much as his chain allows. What does he care for Jupiter, and what good is Mercury? There is no hold on this haughty sufferer. The scorching thunderbolt causes a smart, which is a constant call upon pride. Meanwhile tears flow around him, the earth despairs, the women-clouds (the fifty Oceanides), come to worship the Titan, the forests scream, wild beasts groan, winds howl, the waves sob, the elements moan, the world suffers in Prometheus; his *carcan* chokes universal life. An immense participation in the torture of the demigod seems to be henceforth the tragic delight of all Nature; anxiety for the future mingles with it: and what is to be done now? How are we to move? What will become of us? And in the vast whole of created beings, things, men, animals, plants, rocks, all turned toward the Caucasus, is felt this inexpressible anguish,—the liberator is enchained.

Hamlet, less of a giant and more of a man, is not less grand,—Hamlet, the appalling, the unaccountable, complete in incompleteness; all, in order to be nothing. He is prince and demagogue, sagacious and extravagant, profound and frivolous, man and neuter. He has but little faith in the sceptre, rails at the throne, has a student for his comrade, converses with any one passing by, argues with the first comer, understands the people, despises the mob, hates strength, suspects success, questions obscurity, and says “thou” to mystery. He gives to others maladies which he has not himself: his false madness inoculates his mistress with true madness. He is familiar with spectres and with comedians. He jests with the axe of Orestes in his hand. He talks of literature, recites verses, composes a theatrical criticism, plays with bones in a cemetery, dumbfounds his mother, avenges his father, and ends the wonderful drama of life and death by a gigantic point of interrogation. He terrifies and then disconcerts. Never has anything more overwhelming been dreamed. It is the parricide saying: “What do I know?”

Parricide? Let us pause on that word. Is Hamlet a parricide? Yes, and no. He confines himself to threatening his mother; but the threat is so fierce that the mother shudders. His words are like daggers. “What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me? Help! help! ho!” And when she dies, Hamlet, without grieving for her, strikes Claudius with this tragic cry: “Follow my mother!” Hamlet is that sinister thing, the possible parricide.

In place of the northern ice which he has in his nature, let him have, like Orestes, southern fire in his veins, and he will kill his mother.

This drama is stern. In it truth doubts, sincerity lies. Nothing can be more immense, more subtle. In it man is the world, and the world is zero. Hamlet, even full of life, is not sure of his existence. In this tragedy, which is at the same time a philosophy, everything floats, hesitates, delays, staggers, becomes

discomposed, scatters, and is dispersed. Thought is a cloud, will is a vapour, resolution is a crepuscule; the action blows each moment in an opposite direction; man is governed by the winds. Overwhelming and vertiginous work, in which is seen the depth of everything, in which thought oscillates only between the king murdered and Yorick buried, and in which what is best realized is royalty represented by a ghost, and mirth represented by a death's-head.

*Hamlet* is the *chef-d'oeuvre* of the tragedy-dream.

V

One of the probable causes of the feigned madness of Hamlet has not been up to the present time indicated by critics. It has been said, "Hamlet acts the madman to hide his thought, like Brutus." In fact, it is easy for apparent imbecility to hatch a great project; the supposed idiot can take aim deliberately. But the case of Brutus is not that of Hamlet. Hamlet acts the madman for his safety. Brutus screens his project, Hamlet his person. The manners of those tragic courts being known, from the moment that Hamlet, through the revelation of the ghost, is acquainted with the crime of Claudius, Hamlet is in danger. The superior historian within the poet is here manifested, and one feels the deep insight of Shakespeare into the ancient darkness of royalty. In the Middle Ages and in the Lower Empire, and even at earlier periods, woe unto him who found out a murder or a poisoning committed by a king! Ovid, according to Voltaire's conjecture, was exiled from Rome for having seen something shameful in the house of Augustus. To know that the king was an assassin was a State crime. When it pleased the prince not to have had a witness, it was a matter involving one's head to ignore everything. It was bad policy to have good eyes. A man suspected of suspicion was lost. He had but one refuge,—folly; to pass for "an innocent." He was despised, and that was all. Do you remember the advice that, in Aeschylus, the Ocean gives to Prometheus: "To look a fool is the secret of the wise man." When the Chamberlain Hugolin found the iron spit with which Edrick the Vendee had empaled Edmond II., "he hastened to put on madness," says the Saxon Chronicle of 1016, and saved himself in that way. Heraclian of Nisibe, having discovered by chance that Rhinomete was a fratricide, had himself declared mad by the doctors, and succeeded in getting himself shut up for life in a cloister. He thus lived peaceably, growing old and waiting for death with a vacant stare. Hamlet runs the same peril, and has recourse to the same means. He gets himself declared mad like Heraclian, and puts on folly like Hugolin. This does not prevent the restless Claudius from twice making an effort to get rid of him,—in the middle of the drama by the axe or the dagger in England, and toward the conclusion by poison.

The same indication is again found in *King Lear*; the Earl of Gloster's son takes refuge also in apparent lunacy. There is in that a key to open and

understand Shakespeare's thought. In the eyes of the philosophy of art, the feigned folly of Edgar throws light upon the feigned folly of Hamlet.

The Amleth of Belleforest is a magician; the Hamlet of Shakespeare is a philosopher. We just now spoke of the strange reality which characterizes poetical creations. There is no more striking example than this type,—Hamlet. Hamlet has nothing belonging to an abstraction about him. He has been at the University; he has the Danish rudeness softened by Italian politeness; he is small, plump, somewhat lymphatic; he fences well with the sword, but is soon out of breath. He does not care to drink too soon during the assault of arms with Laertes,—probably for fear of producing perspiration. After having thus supplied his personage with real life, the poet can launch him into full ideal. There is ballast enough.

Other works of the human mind equal *Hamlet*; none surpasses it. The whole majesty of melancholy is in *Hamlet*. An open sepulchre from which goes forth a drama,—this is colossal. *Hamlet* is to our mind Shakespeare's chief work.

No figure among those that poets have created is more poignant and stirring. Doubt counselled by a ghost,—that is Hamlet. Hamlet has seen his dead father and has spoken to him. Is he convinced? No, he shakes his head. What shall he do? He does not know. His hands clench, then fall by his side. Within him are conjectures, systems, monstrous apparitions, bloody recollections, veneration for the spectre, hate, tenderness, anxiety to act and not to act, his father, his mother, his duties in contradiction to each other,—a deep storm. Livid hesitation is in his mind. Shakespeare, wonderful plastic poet, makes the grandiose pallor of this soul almost visible. Like the great larva of Albert Dürer, Hamlet might be named "Melancholia." He also has above his head the bat which flies disembowelled; and at his feet science, the sphere, the compass, the hour-glass, love; and behind him in the horizon an enormous, terrible sun, which seems to make the sky but darker.

Nevertheless, at least one-half of Hamlet is anger, transport, outrage, hurricane, sarcasm to Ophelia, malediction on his mother, insult to himself. He talks with the gravediggers, nearly laughs, then clutches Laertes by the hair in the very grave of Ophelia, and stamps furiously upon the coffin. Sword-thrusts at Polonius, sword-thrusts at Laertes, sword-thrusts at Claudius. From time to time his inaction is torn in twain, and from the rent comes forth thunder.

He is tormented by that possible life, intermixed with reality and chimera, the anxiety of which is shared by all of us. There is in all his actions an expanded somnambulism. One might almost consider his brain as a formation; there is a layer of suffering, a layer of thought, then a layer of dreaminess. It is through this layer of dreaminess that he feels, comprehends, learns, perceives, drinks, eats, frets, mocks, weeps, and reasons. There is between life and him a transparency; it is the wall of dreams. One sees beyond, but one cannot step over it. A kind of cloudy obstacle everywhere surrounds Hamlet. Have you ever while sleeping, had

the nightmare of pursuit or flight, and tried to hasten on, and felt ankylosis in the knees, heaviness in the arms, the horror of paralysed hands, the impossibility of movement? This nightmare Hamlet undergoes while waking. Hamlet is not upon the spot where his life is. He has ever the appearance of a man who talks to you from the other side of a stream. He calls to you at the same time that he questions you. He is at a distance from the catastrophe in which he takes part, from the passer-by whom he interrogates, from the thought that he carries; from the action that he performs. He seems not to touch even what he grinds. It is isolation in its highest degree. It is the loneliness of a mind, even more than the loftiness of a prince. Indecision is in fact a solitude. You have not even your will to keep you company. It is as if your own self was absent and had left you there. The burden of Hamlet is less rigid than that of Orestes, but more undulating. Orestes carries predestination; Hamlet carries fate.

And thus apart from men, Hamlet has still in him a something which represents them all. *Agnosco fratrem*. At certain hours, if we felt our own pulse, we should be conscious of his fever. His strange reality is our own reality after all. He is the mournful man that we all are in certain situations. Unhealthy as he is, Hamlet expresses a permanent condition of man. He represents the discomfort of the soul in a life which is not sufficiently adapted to it. He represents the shoe that pinches and stops our walking; the shoe is the body. Shakespeare frees him from it, and he is right. Hamlet—prince if you like, but king never—Hamlet is incapable of governing a people; he lives too much in a world beyond. On the other hand, he does better than to reign; he *is*. Take from him his family, his country, his ghost, and the whole adventure at Elsinore, and even in the form of an inactive type, he remains strangely terrible. That is the consequence of the amount of humanity and the amount of mystery that is in him. Hamlet is formidable, which does not prevent his being ironical. He has the two profiles of destiny.

Let us retract a statement made above. The chief work of Shakespeare is not *Hamlet*. The chief work of Shakespeare is all Shakespeare. That is, moreover, true of all minds of this order. They are mass, block, majesty, bible, and their solemnity is their *ensemble*.

Have you sometimes looked upon a cape prolonging itself under the clouds and jutting out, as far as the eye can go, into deep water? Each of its hillocks contributes to make it up. No one of its undulations is lost in its dimension. Its strong outline is sharply marked upon the sky, and enters as far as possible into the waves, and there is not a useless rock. Thanks to this cape, you can go amidst the boundless waters, walk among the winds, see closely the eagles soar and the monsters swim, let your humanity wander mid the eternal hum, penetrate the impenetrable. The poet renders this service to your mind. A genius is a promontory into the infinite.



### 1868—James Russell Lowell. “Shakespeare Once More”

James Russell Lowell (1819–1891) was an American poet and diplomat and one of the most influential literary critics of the 19th century. An advocate of Romantic poetry, he was associated by friendship (not philosophy) with the Transcendental movement in New England. Collections of his poetry include *Conversations on Some of the Old Poets*, published in 1843.

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The first demand we make upon whatever claims to be a work of art (and we have a right to make it) is that it shall be in *keeping*. Now this propriety is of two kinds, either extrinsic or intrinsic. In the first I should class whatever relates rather to the body than the soul of the work, such as fidelity to the facts of history, (wherever that is important,) congruity of costume, and the like,—in short, whatever might come under the head of *picturesque* truth, a departure from which would shock too rudely our preconceived associations. I have seen an Indian chief in French boots, and he seemed to me almost tragic; but, put upon the stage in tragedy, he would have been ludicrous. Lichtenberg, writing from London in 1775, tells us that Garrick played Hamlet in a suit of the French fashion, then commonly worn, and that he was blamed for it by some of the critics; but, he says, one hears no such criticism during the play, nor on the way home, nor at supper afterwards, nor indeed till the emotion roused by the great actor has had time to subside. He justifies Garrick, though we should not be able to endure it now. Yet nothing would be gained by trying to make Hamlet’s costume true to the assumed period of the play, for the scene of it is laid in a Denmark that has no dates. In the second and more important category, I should put, first, co-ordination of character, that is, a certain variety in harmony of the personages of a drama, as in the attitudes and coloring of the figures in a pictorial composition, so that, while mutually relieving and setting off each other, they shall combine in the total impression; second, that subordinate truth to Nature which makes each character coherent in itself; and, third, such propriety of costume and the like as shall satisfy the superhistoric sense, to which, and to which alone, the higher drama appeals. All these come within the scope of *imaginative* truth. To illustrate my third head by an example. Tieck criticises John Kemble’s dressing for Macbeth in a modern Highland costume, as being ungraceful without any countervailing merit of historical exactness. I think a deeper reason for his dissatisfaction might be found in the fact, that this garb, with its purely modern and British army associations, is out of place on Fores Heath, and drags the Weird Sisters down with it from their proper imaginative remoteness in the gloom of the past to the disenchanting glare



of the foot-lights. It is not the antiquarian, but the poetic conscience, that is wounded. To this, exactness, so far as concerns ideal representation, may not only not be truth, but may even be opposed to it. Anachronisms and the like are in themselves of no account, and become important only when they make a gap too wide for our illusion to cross unconsciously, that is, when they are anacoluthons to the imagination. The aim of the artist is psychologic, not historic truth. It is comparatively easy for an author to *get up* any period with tolerable minuteness in externals, but readers and audiences find more difficulty in getting them down, though oblivion swallows scores of them at a gulp. The saving truth in such matters is a truth to essential and permanent characteristics. The Ulysses of Shakespeare, like the Ulysses of Dante and Tennyson, more or less harmonizes with our ideal conception of the wary, long-considering, though adventurous son of Laertes, yet Simon Lord Lovat is doubtless nearer the original type. In *Hamlet*, though there is no Denmark of the ninth century, Shakespeare has suggested the prevailing rudeness of manners quite enough for his purpose. We see it in the single combat of Hamlet's father with the elder Fortinbras, in the vulgar wassail of the king, in the English monarch being expected to hang Rosencrantz and Guildenstern out of hand merely to oblige his cousin of Denmark, in Laertes, sent to Paris to be made a gentleman of, becoming instantly capable of any the most barbarous treachery to glut his vengeance. We cannot fancy Ragnar Lodbrog or Eric the Red matriculating at Wittenberg, but it was essential that Hamlet should be a scholar, and Shakespeare sends him thither without more ado. All through the play we get the notion of a state of society in which a savage nature has disguised itself in the externals of civilization, like a Maori deacon, who has only to strip and he becomes once more a tattooed pagan with his mouth watering for a spare-rib of his pastor. Historically, at the date of *Hamlet*, the Danes were in the habit of burning their enemies alive in their houses, with as much of their family about them as might be to make it comfortable. Shakespeare seems purposely to have dissociated his play from history by changing nearly every name in the original legend. The motive of the play—revenge as a religious duty—belongs only to a social state in which the traditions of barbarism are still operative, but, with infallible artistic judgment, Shakespeare has chosen, not untamed Nature, as he found it in history, but the period of transition, a period in which the times are always out of joint, and thus the irresolution which has its root in Hamlet's own character is stimulated by the very incompatibility of that legacy of vengeance he has inherited from the past with the new culture and refinement of which he is the representative. One of the few books which Shakespeare is known to have possessed was Florio's Montaigne, and he might well have transferred the Frenchman's motto, *Que sçais-je?* to the front of his tragedy; nor can I help fancying something more than accident in the fact that Hamlet has been a student at Wittenberg, whence those new ideas went forth, of whose results

in unsettling men's faith, and consequently disqualifying them for promptness in action, Shakespeare had been not only an eye-witness, but which he must actually have experienced in himself.

One other objection let me touch upon here, especially as it has been urged against *Hamlet*, and that is the introduction of low characters and comic scenes in tragedy. Even Garrick, who had just assisted at the Stratford Jubilee, where Shakespeare had been pronounced divine, was induced by this absurd outcry for the proprieties of the tragic stage to omit the grave-diggers' scene from *Hamlet*. Leaving apart the fact that Shakespeare would not have been the representative poet he is, if he had not given expression to this striking tendency of the Northern races, which shows itself constantly, not only in their literature, but even in their mythology and their architecture, the grave-diggers' scene always impresses me as one of the most pathetic in the whole tragedy. That Shakespeare introduced such scenes and characters with deliberate intention, and with a view to artistic relief and contrast, there can hardly be a doubt. We must take it for granted that a man whose works show everywhere the results of judgment sometimes acted with forethought. I find the springs of the profoundest sorrow and pity in this hardened indifference of the grave-diggers, in their careless discussion as to whether Ophelia's death was by suicide or no, in their singing and jesting at their dreary work.

A pickaxe and a spade, a spade,  
 For—and a shrouding-sheet:  
 O, a pit of clay for to be made  
 For such a guest is meet!

We know who is to be the guest of this earthen hospitality,—how much beauty, love, and heartbreak are to be covered in that pit of clay. All we remember of Ophelia reacts upon us with tenfold force, and we recoil from our amusement at the ghastly drollery of the two delvers with a shock of horror. That the unconscious Hamlet should stumble on *this* grave of all others, that it should be *here* that he should pause to muse humorously on death and decay,—all this prepares us for the revulsion of passion in the next scene, and for the frantic confession,—

I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers  
 Could not with all *their* quantity of love  
 Make up my sum!

And it is only here that such an asseveration would be true even to the feeling of the moment; for it is plain from all we know of Hamlet that he could not so have loved Ophelia, that he was incapable of the self-abandonment of a

true passion, that he would have analyzed this emotion as he does all others, would have peeped and botanized upon it till it became to him a mere matter of scientific interest. All this force of contrast, and this horror of surprise, were necessary so to intensify his remorseful regret that he should believe himself for once in earnest. The speech of the King, "O, he is mad, Laertes," recalls him to himself, and he at once begins to rave:—

Zounds! show me what thou 'It do!  
 Woul't weep? woul't fight? woul't fast? woul't tear thyself?  
 Woul't drink up eysil? eat a crocodile?

It is easy to see that the whole plot hinges upon the character of Hamlet, that Shakespeare's conception of this was the ovum out of which the whole organism was hatched. And here let me remark, that there is a kind of genealogical necessity in the character,—a thing not altogether strange to the attentive reader of Shakespeare. Hamlet seems the natural result of the mixture of father and mother in his temperament, the resolution and persistence of the one, like sound timber wormholed and made shaky, as it were, by the other's infirmity of will and discontinuity of purpose. In natures so imperfectly mixed it is not uncommon to find vehemence of intention the prelude counterpoise of weak performance, the conscious nature striving to keep up its self-respect by a triumph in words all the more resolute that it feels assured beforehand of inevitable defeat in action. As in such slipshod housekeeping men are their own largest creditors, they find it easy to stave off utter bankruptcy of conscience by taking up one unpaid promise with another larger, and at heavier interest, till such self-swindling becomes habitual and by degrees almost painless. How did Coleridge discount his own notes of this kind with less and less specie as the figures lengthened on the paper! As with Hamlet, so it is with Ophelia and Laertes. The father's feebleness comes up again in the wasting heartbreak and gentle lunacy of the daughter, while the son shows it in a rashness of impulse and act, a kind of crankiness, of whose essential feebleness we are all the more sensible as contrasted with a nature so steady on its keel, and drawing so much water, as that of Horatio,—the foil at once, in different ways, to both him and Hamlet. It was natural, also, that the daughter of self-conceited old Polonius should have her softness stiffened with a fibre of obstinacy; for there are two kinds of weakness, that which breaks, and that which bends. Ophelia's is of the former kind; Hero is her counterpart, giving way before calamity, and rising again so soon as the pressure is removed.

It is an inherent peculiarity of a mind like Hamlet's that it should be conscious of its own defect. Men of his type are forever analyzing their own emotions and motives. They cannot do anything, because they always see two ways of doing it. They cannot determine on any course of action, because

they are always, as it were, standing at the cross-roads, and see too well the disadvantages of every one of them. It is not that they are incapable of resolve, but somehow the band between the motive power and the operative faculties is relaxed and loose. The engine works, but the machinery it should drive stands still. The imagination is so much in overplus, that thinking a thing becomes better than doing it, and thought with its easy perfection, capable of everything because it can accomplish everything with ideal means, is vastly more attractive and satisfactory than deed, which must be wrought at best with imperfect instruments, and always falls short of the conception that went before it. "If to do," says Portia in the *Merchant of Venice*,—"if to do were as easy as to know what't were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces." Hamlet knows only too well what't were good to do, but he falters with everything in a double sense: he sees the grain of good there is in evil, and the grain of evil there is in good, as they exist in the world, and, finding that he can make those feather-weighted accidents balance each other, infers that there is little to choose between the essences themselves. He is of Montaigne's mind, and says expressly that "there is nothing good or ill, but thinking makes it so." He dwells so exclusively in the world of ideas that the world of facts seems trifling, nothing is worth the while; and he has been so long objectless and purposeless, so far as actual life is concerned, that, when at last an object and an aim are forced upon him, he cannot deal with them, and gropes about vainly for a motive outside of himself that shall marshal his thoughts for him and guide his faculties into the path of action. He is the victim not so much of feebleness of will as of an intellectual indifference that hinders the will from working long in any one direction. He wishes to will, but never wills. His continual iteration of resolve shows that he has no resolution. He is capable of passionate energy where the occasion presents itself suddenly from without, because nothing is so irritable as conscious irresolution with a duty to perform. But of deliberate energy he is not capable; for there the impulse must come from within, and the blade of his analysis is so subtle that it can divide the finest hair of motive 'twixt north and northwest side, leaving him desperate to choose between them. The very consciousness of his defect is an insuperable bar to his repairing it; for the unity of purpose, which infuses every fibre of the character with will available whenever wanted, is impossible where the mind can never rest till it has resolved that unity into its component elements, and satisfied itself which on the whole is of greater value. A critical instinct so insatiable that it must turn upon itself, for lack of something else to hew and hack, becomes incapable at last of originating anything except indecision. It becomes infallible in what *not* to do. How easily he might have accomplished his task is shown by the conduct of Laertes. When *he* has a death to avenge, he raises a mob, breaks into the palace, bullies the king, and proves how weak the usurper really was.

The world is the victim of splendid parts, and is slow to accept a rounded whole, because that is something which is long in completing, still longer in demonstrating its completion. We like to be surprised into admiration, and not logically convinced that we ought to admire. We are willing to be delighted with success, though we are somewhat indifferent to the homely qualities which insure it. Our thought is so filled with the rocket's burst of momentary splendor so far above us, that we forget the poor stick, useful and unseen, that made its climbing possible. One of these homely qualities is continuity of character, and it escapes present applause because it tells chiefly, in the long run, in results. With his usual tact, Shakespeare has brought in such a character as a contrast and foil to Hamlet. Horatio is the only complete *man* in the play,—solid, well-knit, and true; a noble, quiet nature, with that highest of all qualities, judgment, always sane and prompt; who never drags his anchors for any wind of opinion or fortune, but grips all the closer to the reality of things. He seems one of those calm, undemonstrative men whom we love and admire without asking to know why, crediting them with the capacity of great things, without any test of actual achievement, because we feel that their manhood is a constant quality, and no mere accident of circumstance and opportunity. Such men are always sure of the presence of their highest self on demand. Hamlet is continually drawing bills on the future, secured by his promise of himself to himself, which he can never redeem. His own somewhat feminine nature recognizes its complement in Horatio, and clings to it instinctively, as naturally as Horatio is attracted by that fatal gift of imagination, the absence of which makes the strength of his own character, as its overplus does the weakness of Hamlet's. It is a happy marriage of two minds drawn together by the charm of unlikeness. Hamlet feels in Horatio the solid steadiness which he misses in himself; Horatio in Hamlet that need of service and sustainment to render which gives him a consciousness of his own value. Hamlet fills the place of a woman to Horatio, revealing him to himself not only in what he says, but by a constant claim upon his strength of nature; and there is great psychological truth in making suicide the first impulse of this quiet, undemonstrative man, after Hamlet's death, as if the very reason for his being were taken away with his friend's need of him. In his grief, he for the first and only time speaks of himself, is first made conscious of himself by his loss. If this manly reserve of Horatio be true to Nature, not less so are the communicativeness of Hamlet, and his tendency to soliloquize. If self-consciousness be alien to the one, it is just as truly the happiness of the other. Like a musician distrustful of himself, he is forever tuning his instrument, first overstraining this cord a little, and then that, but unable to bring them into unison, or to profit by it if he could.

We do not believe that Horatio ever thought he "was not a pipe for Fortune's finger to play what stop she please," till Hamlet told him so. That was Fortune's affair, not his; let her try it, if she liked. He is unconscious of his own peculiar

qualities, as men of decision commonly are, or they would not be men of decision. When there is a thing to be done, they go straight at it, and for the time there is nothing for them in the whole universe but themselves and their object. Hamlet, on the other hand, is always studying himself. This world and the other, too, are always present to his mind, and there in the corner is the little black kobold of a doubt making mouths at him. He breaks down the bridges before him, not behind him, as a man of action would do; but there is something more than this. He is an ingrained sceptic; though his is the scepticism, not of reason, but of feeling, whose root is want of faith in himself. In him it is passive, a malady rather than a function of the mind. We might call him insincere: not that he was in any sense a hypocrite, but only that he never was and never could be in earnest. Never could be, because no man without intense faith in something ever can. Even if he only believed in himself, that were better than nothing; for it will carry a man a great way in the outward successes of life, nay, will even sometimes give him the Archimedean fulcrum for moving the world. But Hamlet doubts everything. He doubts the immortality of the soul, just after seeing his father's spirit, and hearing from its mouth the secrets "of the other world." He doubts Horatio even, and swears him to secrecy on the cross of his sword, though probably he himself has no assured belief in the sacredness of the symbol. He doubts Ophelia, and asks her, "Are you honest?" He doubts the ghost, after he has had a little time to think about it, and so gets up the play to test the guilt of the king. And how coherent the whole character is! With what perfect tact and judgment Shakespeare, in the advice to the players, makes him an exquisite critic! For just here that part of his character which would be weak in dealing with affairs is strong. A wise scepticism is the first attribute of a good critic. He must not believe that the fire-insurance offices will raise their rates of premium on Charles River, because the new volume of poems is printing at Riverside or the University Press. He must not believe so profoundly in the ancients as to think it wholly out of the question that the world has still vigor enough in its loins to beget some one who will one of these days be as good an ancient as any of them.

Another striking quality in Hamlet's nature is his perpetual inclination to irony. I think this has been generally passed over too lightly, as if it were something external and accidental, rather assumed as a mask than part of the real nature of the man. It seems to me to go deeper, to be something innate, and not merely factitious. It is nothing like the grave irony of Socrates, which was the weapon of a man thoroughly in earnest,—the *boomerang* of argument, which one throws in the opposite direction of what he means to hit, and which seems to be flying away from the adversary, who will presently find himself knocked down by it. It is not like the irony of Timon, which is but the wilful refraction of a clear mind twisting awry whatever enters it,—or of Iago, which is the slime that a nature essentially evil loves to trail over all beauty and goodness to taint them

with distrust: it is the half-jest, half-earnest of an inactive temperament that has not quite made up its mind whether life is a reality or no, whether men were not made in jest, and which amuses itself equally with finding a deep meaning in trivial things and a trifling one in the profoundest mysteries of being, because the want of earnestness in its own essence infects everything else with its own indifference. If there be now and then an unmannerly rudeness and bitterness in it, as in the scenes with Polonius and Osrick, we must remember that Hamlet was just in the condition which spurs men to sallies of this kind: dissatisfied, at one neither with the world nor with himself, and accordingly casting about for something out of himself to vent his spleen upon. But even in these passages there is no hint of earnestness, of any purpose beyond the moment; they are mere cat's-paws of vexation, and not the deep-raking groundswell of passion, as we see it in the sarcasm of Lear.

The question of Hamlet's madness has been much discussed and variously decided. High medical authority has pronounced, as usual, on both sides of the question. But the induction has been drawn from too narrow premises, being based on a mere diagnosis of the *case*, and not on an appreciation of the character in its completeness. We have a case of pretended madness in the Edgar of *King Lear*; and it is certainly true that that is a charcoal sketch, coarsely outlined, compared with the delicate drawing, the lights, shades, and half-tints of the portraiture in Hamlet. But does this tend to prove that the madness of the latter, because truer to the recorded observation of experts, is real, and meant to be real, as the other to be fictitious? Not in the least, as it appears to me. Hamlet, among all the characters of Shakespeare, is the most eminently a metaphysician and psychologist. He is a close observer, continually analyzing his own nature and that of others, letting fall his little drops of acid irony on all who come near him, to make them show what they are made of. Even Ophelia is not too sacred, Osrick not too contemptible for experiment. If such a man assumed madness, he would play his part perfectly. If Shakespeare himself, without going mad, could so observe and remember all the abnormal symptoms as to be able to reproduce them in Hamlet, why should it be beyond the power of Hamlet to reproduce them in himself? If you deprive Hamlet of reason, there is no truly tragic motive left. He would be a fit subject for Bedlam, but not for the stage. We might have pathology enough, but no pathos. Ajax first becomes tragic when he recovers his wits. If Hamlet is irresponsible, the whole play is a chaos. That he is not so might be proved by evidence enough, were it not labor thrown away.

This feigned madness of Hamlet's is one of the few points in which Shakespeare has kept close to the old story on which he founded his play; and as he never decided without deliberation, so he never acted without unerring judgment. Hamlet *drifts* through the whole tragedy. He never keeps on one tack long enough to get steerage-way, even if, in a nature like his, with those electric

streamers of whim and fancy forever wavering across the vault of his brain, the needle of judgment would point in one direction long enough to strike a course by. The scheme of simulated insanity is precisely the one he would have been likely to hit upon, because it enabled him to follow his own bent, and to drift with an apparent purpose, postponing decisive action by the very means he adopts to arrive at its accomplishment, and satisfying himself with the show of doing something that he may escape so much the longer the dreaded necessity of really doing anything at all. It enables him to *play* with life and duty, instead of taking them by the rougher side, where alone any firm grip is possible,—to feel that he is on the way toward accomplishing somewhat, when he is really paltering with his own irresolution. Nothing, I think, could be more finely imagined than this. Voltaire complains that he goes mad without any sufficient object or result. Perfectly true, and precisely what was most natural for him to do, and, accordingly, precisely what Shakespeare meant that he should do. It was delightful to him to indulge his imagination and humor, to prove his capacity for something by playing a part: the one thing he could not do was to bring himself to *act*, unless when surprised by a sudden impulse of suspicion,—as where he kills Polonius, and there he could not see his victim. He discourses admirably of suicide, but does not kill himself; he talks daggers, but uses none. He puts by the chance to kill the king with the excuse that he will not do it while he is praying, lest his soul be saved thereby, though it is more than doubtful whether he believed it himself. He allows himself to be packed off to England, without any motive except that it would for the time take him farther from a present duty: the more disagreeable to a nature like his because it *was* present, and not a mere matter for speculative consideration. When Goethe made his famous comparison of the acorn planted in a vase which it bursts with its growth, and says that in like manner Hamlet is a nature which breaks down under the weight of a duty too great for it to bear, he seems to have considered the character too much from one side. Had Hamlet actually killed himself to escape his too onerous commission, Goethe's conception of him would have been satisfactory enough. But Hamlet was hardly a sentimentalist, like Werther; on the contrary, he saw things only too clearly in the dry north-light of the intellect. It is chance that at last brings him to his end. It would appear rather that Shakespeare intended to show us an imaginative temperament brought face to face with actualities, into any clear relation of sympathy with which it cannot bring itself. The very means that Shakespeare makes use of to lay upon him the obligation of acting—the ghost—really seems to make it all the harder for him to act; for the spectre but gives an additional excitement to his imagination and a fresh topic for his scepticism.

I shall not attempt to evolve any high moral significance from the play, even if I thought it possible; for that would be aside from the present purpose. The scope of the higher drama is to represent life, not everyday life, it is true, but



life lifted above the plane of bread-and-butter associations, by nobler reaches of language, by the influence at once inspiring and modulating of verse, by an intenser play of passion condensing that misty mixture of feeling and reflection which makes the ordinary atmosphere of existence into flashes of thought and phrase whose brief, but terrible, illumination prints the outworn landscape of every-day upon our brains, with its little motives and mean results, in lines of tell-tale fire. The moral office of tragedy is to show us our own weaknesses idealized in grander figures and more awful results,—to teach us that what we pardon in ourselves as venial faults, if they seem to have but slight influence on our immediate fortunes, have arms as long as those of kings, and reach forward to the catastrophe of our lives, that they are dry-rotting the very fibre of will and conscience, so that, if we should be brought to the test of a great temptation or a stringent emergency, we must be involved in a ruin as sudden and complete as that we shudder at in the unreal scene of the theatre. But the primary *object* of a tragedy is not to inculcate a formal moral. Representing life, it teaches, like life, by indirection, by those nods and winks that are thrown away on us blind horses in such profusion. We may learn, to be sure, plenty of lessons from Shakespeare. We are not likely to have kingdoms to divide, crowns foretold us by weird sisters, a father's death to avenge, or to kill our wives from jealousy; but Lear may teach us to draw the line more clearly between a wise generosity and a loose-handed weakness of giving; Macbeth, how one sin involves another, and forever another, by a fatal parthenogenesis, and that the key which unlocks forbidden doors to our will or passion leaves a stain on the hand, that may not be so dark as blood, but that will not out; Hamlet, that all the noblest gifts of person, temperament, and mind slip like sand through the grasp of an infirm purpose; Othello, that the perpetual silt of some one weakness, the eddies of a suspicious temper depositing their one impalpable layer after another, may build up a shoal on which an heroic life and an otherwise magnanimous nature may bilge and go to pieces. All this we may learn, and much more, and Shakespeare was no doubt well aware of all this and more; but I do not believe that he wrote his plays with any such didactic purpose. He knew human nature too well not to know that one thorn of experience is worth a whole wilderness of warning,—that, where one man shapes his life by precept and example, there are a thousand who have it shaped for them by impulse and by circumstances. He did not mean his great tragedies for scarecrows, as if the nailing of one hawk to the barn-door would prevent the next from coming down souse into the hen-yard. No, it is not the poor bleaching victim hung up to moult its draggled feathers in the rain that he wishes to show us. He loves the hawk-nature as well as the hen-nature; and if he is unequalled in anything, it is in that sunny breadth of view, that impregnability of reason, that looks down all ranks and conditions of men, all fortune and misfortune, with the equal eye of the pure artist.

Whether I have fancied anything into Hamlet which the author never dreamed of putting there I do not greatly concern myself to inquire. Poets are always entitled to a royalty on whatever we find in their works; for these fine creations as truly build themselves up in the brain as they are built up with deliberate forethought. Praise art as we will, that which the artist did not mean to put into his work, but which found itself there by some generous process of Nature of which he was as unaware as the blue river is of its rhyme with the blue sky, has somewhat in it that snatches us into sympathy with higher things than those which come by plot and observation. Goethe wrote his Faust in its earliest form without a thought of the deeper meaning which the exposition of an age of criticism was to find in it: without foremeaning it, he had impersonated in Mephistopheles the genius of his century. Shall this subtract from the debt we owe him? Not at all. If originality were conscious of itself, it would have lost its right to be original. I believe that Shakespeare intended to impersonate in Hamlet not a mere metaphysical entity, but a man of flesh and blood: yet it is certainly curious how prophetically typical the character is of that introversion of mind which is so constant a phenomenon of these latter days, of that over-consciousness which wastes itself in analyzing the motives of action instead of acting.

The old painters had a rule, that all compositions should be pyramidal in form,—a central figure, from which the others slope gradually away on the two sides. Shakespeare probably had never heard of this rule, and, if he had, would not have been likely to respect it more than he has the so-called classical unities of time and place. But he understood perfectly the artistic advantages of gradation, contrast, and relief. Taking Hamlet as the key-note, we find in him weakness of character, which, on the one hand, is contrasted with the feebleness that springs from overweening conceit in Polonius and with frailty of temperament in Ophelia, while, on the other hand, it is brought into fuller relief by the steady force of Horatio and the impulsive violence of Laertes, who is resolute from thoughtlessness, just as Hamlet is irresolute from overplus of thought.

If we must draw a moral from Hamlet, it would seem to be, that Will is Fate, and that, Will once abdicating, the inevitable successor in the regency is Chance. Had Hamlet acted, instead of musing how good it would be to act, the king might have been the only victim. As it is, all the main actors in the story are the fortuitous sacrifice of his irresolution. We see how a single great vice of character at last draws to itself as allies and confederates all other weaknesses of the man, as in civil wars the timid and the selfish wait to throw themselves upon the stronger side.

In Life's small things to be resolute and great

To keep thy muscles trained: know'st thou when Fate

Thy measure takes? or when she'll say to thee,  
 "I find thee worthy, do this thing for me"?

1871—Friedrich Nietzsche.  
 From *The Birth of Tragedy*

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) was a German philosopher who remains famous and influential even today for his critiques of religion, morality, contemporary culture, and science. His works include *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871), *The Gay Science* (1882), and *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886).

We must now summon to our aid all the principles of art discussed so far in order to find our way through what we are bound to describe as the labyrinth of the *origin of Greek tragedy*. I believe I am not talking nonsense when I assert that this problem of origin has not yet even been posed seriously, far less solved, despite the many attempts to sew together and pull apart again the tattered shreds of ancient historical evidence in various combinations. This evidence tells us most decisively *that tragedy arose from the tragic chorus* and was originally chorus and nothing but chorus. From this we derive the obligation to look into the heart of this tragic chorus as into the true, original drama, rather than simply contenting ourselves with the usual artistic clichés, such as the claim that the chorus is the ideal (*idealistisch*) spectator, or that it represents the people in contrast to the princely region of the stage. This last interpretation sounds so lofty to the ears of some politicians, as if the immutable moral law of the democratic Athenians were represented in the popular chorus which was always proved right, beyond all the passionate excesses and indulgences of the kings. But no matter how strongly a remark by Aristotle seems to suggest this,<sup>59</sup> this idea had no influence on the original formation of tragedy, since its purely religious origins preclude the entire opposition between prince and people, and indeed any kind of political-social sphere. Even with regard to the classical form of the chorus familiar to us from the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles, we regard it as blasphemous to speak of the premonition of a 'constitutional popular assembly', although others have been less reluctant to commit this blasphemy. In practice the ancient constitutions know of no constitutional popular assembly, and it is to be hoped that they did not even have a 'premonition' of one in their tragedy.

Much more famous than this political explanation of the chorus is one of A. W. Schlegel's<sup>60</sup> thoughts which recommends us to think of the chorus as, in a certain sense, the quintessence and distillation of the crowd of spectators, as

the 'ideal spectator'. When set next to the historical evidence that tragedy was originally only a chorus, this suggestion is revealed for what it really is: a crude, unscientific, but brilliant assertion, but one which derives its brilliance from the concentrated manner of its expression alone, from the characteristic Germanic prejudice in favour of anything that is called 'ideal', and from our momentary astonishment. For when we compare the public in the theatre, which we know well, with that chorus, we are simply astonished and we ask ourselves if it would ever be possible to distil from this public something ideal that would be analogous to the tragic chorus. In the privacy of our own thoughts we deny this possibility and we are as much surprised by the boldness of Schlegel's assertion as we are by the utterly different nature of the Greek public. This is because we had always believed that a proper spectator, whoever he might be, always had to remain conscious of the fact that what he saw before him was a work of art and not empirical reality, whereas the tragic chorus of the Greeks is required to see in the figures on stage real, physically present, living beings. The chorus of the Oceanides<sup>61</sup> really believes that it sees before it the Titan Prometheus, and takes itself to be as real as the god on the stage. Are we then supposed to believe that the highest and purest kind of spectator is one who, like the Oceanides, believes Prometheus to be physically present and real? And that it would be the mark of the ideal spectator to run on to the stage and free the god from his tortures? We had believed in an aesthetic public and had gauged the individual spectator's competence by the degree of his ability to take the work of art as art, i.e. aesthetically; but now Schlegel's phrase gave us to understand that the perfect, ideal spectator lets himself be affected by the world on stage physically and empirically rather than aesthetically. Oh, curse these Greeks, we sigh; they turn our aesthetics upside down! As we are accustomed to this, however, we simply repeated Schlegel's dictum whenever the chorus was under discussion.

But the historical evidence explicitly speaks against Schlegel here: the chorus as such, without a stage, which is to say the primitive form of tragedy, is not compatible with that chorus of ideal spectators. What kind of artistic genre would be one derived from the concept of the spectator, one where the true form of the genre would have to be regarded as the 'spectator as such'? The spectator without a spectacle is a nonsense. We fear that the explanation for the birth of tragedy can be derived neither from respect for the moral intelligence of the masses, nor from the concept of the spectator without a play, and we regard the problem as too profound for it even to be touched by such shallow ways of thinking about it.

In his famous preface to the *Bride of Messina*<sup>62</sup> Schiller betrayed an infinitely more valuable insight into the significance of the chorus when he considered it to be a living wall which tragedy draws about itself in order to shut itself off in purity from the real world and to preserve its ideal ground and its poetic freedom.

This is Schiller's main weapon in his fight against the common concept of the natural, against the illusion commonly demanded of dramatic poetry. He argued that, although in the theatre the day itself was only artificial, the architecture symbolic, and metrical speech had an ideal character, on the whole error still prevailed; it was not enough merely to tolerate as poetic freedom something which was, after all, the essence of all poetry. The introduction of the chorus was the decisive step by which war was declared openly and honestly on all naturalism in art. It seems to me that this way of looking at things is precisely what our (in its own opinion) superior age dismisses with the slogan 'pseudo-idealism'. I fear that, with our current veneration for the natural and the real, we have arrived at the opposite pole to all idealism, and have landed in the region of the waxworks. They too contain a kind of art, as do certain of today's popular novels; but let nobody torment us with the claim that, thanks to this art, the 'pseudo-idealism' of Schiller and Goethe has been overcome.

It is admittedly an 'ideal' ground on which, as Schiller rightly saw, the Greek chorus of satyrs, the chorus of the original tragedy, is wont to walk, a ground raised high above the real path along which mortals wander. For this chorus the Greeks built the hovering platform of a fictitious *state of nature* on to which they placed fictitious *creatures of nature*. Tragedy grew up on this foundation, and for this very reason, of course, was relieved from the very outset of any need to copy reality with painful exactness. Yet it is not a world which mere caprice and fantasy have conjured up between heaven and earth; rather it is a world which was just as real and credible to the believing Greek as Olympus and its inhabitants. As a member of the Dionysiac chorus, the satyr lives in a religiously acknowledged reality sanctioned by myth and cult. The fact that tragedy begins with the satyr, and that the Dionysiac wisdom of tragedy speaks out of him, is something which now surprises us just as much as the fact that tragedy originated in the chorus. Perhaps it will serve as a starting-point for thinking about this if I now assert that the satyr, the fictitious creature of nature, bears the same relation to the cultured human being as Dionysiac music bears to civilization. Of the latter Richard Wagner has said that it is absorbed, elevated, and extinguished (*aufgehoben*) by music, just as lamplight is superseded by the light of day.<sup>63</sup> I believe that, when faced with the chorus of satyrs, cultured Greeks felt themselves absorbed, elevated, and extinguished in exactly the same way. This is the first effect of Dionysiac tragedy: state and society, indeed all divisions between one human being and another, give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity which leads men back to the heart of nature. The metaphysical solace which, I wish to suggest, we derive from every true tragedy, the solace that in the ground of things, and despite all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable, this solace appears with palpable clarity in the chorus of satyrs, a chorus of natural beings whose life goes on ineradicably behind and beyond all civilization, as it were,

and who remain eternally the same despite all the changes of generations and in the history of nations.

The Hellene, by nature profound and uniquely capable of the most exquisite and most severe suffering, comforts himself with this chorus, for he has gazed with keen eye into the midst of the fearful, destructive havoc of so-called world history, and has seen the cruelty of nature, and is in danger of longing to deny the will as the Buddhist does. Art saves him, and through art life saves him—for itself.

The reason for this is that the ecstasy of the Dionysiac state, in which the usual barriers and limits of existence are destroyed, contains, for as long as it lasts, a *lethargic* element in which all personal experiences from the past are submerged. This gulf of oblivion separates the worlds of everyday life and Dionysiac experience. But as soon as daily reality re-enters consciousness, it is experienced as such with a sense of revulsion; the fruit of those states is an ascetic, will-negating mood. In this sense Dionysiac man is similar to Hamlet: both have gazed into the true essence of things, they have *acquired knowledge* and they find action repulsive, for their actions can do nothing to change the eternal essence of things; they regard it as laughable or shameful that they should be expected to set to rights a world so out of joint. Knowledge kills action; action requires one to be shrouded in a veil of illusion—this is the lesson of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom about Jack the Dreamer who does not get around to acting because he reflects too much, out of an excess of possibilities, as it were. No, it is not reflection, it is true knowledge, insight into the terrible truth, which outweighs every motive for action, both in the case of Hamlet and in that of Dionysiac man. Now no solace has any effect, there is a longing for a world beyond death, beyond the gods themselves; existence is denied, along with its treacherous reflection in the gods or in some immortal Beyond. Once truth has been seen, the consciousness of it prompts man to see only what is terrible or absurd in existence wherever he looks; now he understands the symbolism of Ophelia's fate, now he grasps the wisdom of the wood-god Silenus: he feels revulsion.

Here, at this moment of supreme danger for the will, *art* approaches as a saving sorceress with the power to heal. Art alone can re-direct those repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live; these representations are the *sublime*, whereby the terrible is tamed by artistic means, and the *comical*, whereby disgust at absurdity is discharged by artistic means. The dithyramb's chorus of satyrs is the saving act of Greek art; the attacks of revulsion described above spent themselves in contemplation of the intermediate world of these Dionysiac companions.

Dionysiac art, too, wants to convince us of the eternal lust and delight of existence; but we are to seek this delight, not in appearances but behind them.

We are to recognize that everything which comes into being must be prepared for painful destruction; we are forced to gaze into the terrors of individual existence—and yet we are not to freeze in horror: its metaphysical solace tears us momentarily out of the turmoil of changing figures. For brief moments we are truly the primordial being itself and we feel its unbounded greed and lust for being; the struggle, the agony, the destruction of appearances, all this now seems to us to be necessary, given the uncountable excess of forms of existence thrusting and pushing themselves into life, given the exuberant fertility of the world-Will; we are pierced by the furious sting of these pains at the very moment when, as it were, we become one with the immeasurable, primordial delight in existence and receive an intimation, in Dionysiac ecstasy, that this delight is indestructible and eternal. Despite fear and pity, we are happily alive, not as individuals, but as the *one* living being, with whose procreative lust we have become one.

The genesis of Greek tragedy now tells us with great clarity and definiteness how the tragic work of art of the Greeks was truly born from the spirit of music; we believe that, with this thought, we have done justice for the first time to the original and quite astonishing significance of the chorus. At the same time, we have to admit that the meaning of the tragic myth, as we have stated it, never became transparent and conceptually clear to the Greek poets, far less to the Greek philosophers; to a certain extent, their heroes speak more superficially than they act; myth is certainly not objectified adequately in the spoken word. The structure of the scenes and the vivid images reveal a deeper wisdom than the poet himself can put into words and concepts; the same thing can be seen in Shakespeare, whose Hamlet, for example, similarly speaks more superficially than he acts, so that the aforementioned lesson of *Hamlet* cannot be drawn from the words of the play, but from intense contemplation of, and reflection on, the whole. In the case of Greek tragedy, which we admittedly only find in the form of a word-drama, I have even indicated that the incongruity of myth and word could easily mislead us into thinking that it is shallower and more insignificant than it really is, and therefore into supposing that it had a more superficial effect than it must have had in reality, according to the testimony of the ancients, for it is so easy to forget that what the word-poet failed to achieve, namely the highest spiritualization and idealization of myth, he could accomplish successfully at any moment as a creative musician. Admittedly, we have to reconstruct the overpowering effect of the music almost by scholarly means, in order to receive something of that incomparable solace which must be inherent in true tragedy. But only if we were Greeks would we have felt the overpowering effect of music to be precisely this; whereas, when we listen to fully evolved Greek music and compare it to the much richer music with which we are now familiar, we believe that we are hearing only the youthful song of musical genius, struck up with a shy feeling of strength. As the Egyptian priests said, the Greeks are eternal children,<sup>130</sup> and in the tragic art, too, they

are mere children who do not know what sublime toy has been created—and smashed—by their hands.

That struggle of the spirit of music to be revealed in image and myth, a struggle which grows in intensity from the beginnings of the lyric up to Attic tragedy, suddenly breaks off, having just unfolded its riches, and disappears, as it were, from the face of Hellenic art, whereas the Dionysiac view of the world which was born out of this struggle lives on in the Mysteries and, while undergoing the strangest metamorphoses and degenerate mutations, never ceases to attract more serious natures. Will it perhaps, at some time in the future, re-emerge from its mystical depths as art?

What concerns us here is the question of whether the opposing power on which tragedy foundered will for ever remain strong enough to prevent the re-awakening of tragedy and the tragic view of the world. If ancient tragedy was thrown off course by the dialectical drive towards knowledge and the optimism of science, one should conclude from this fact that there is an eternal struggle between the *theoretical* and the *tragic views of the world*. Only when the spirit of science has been carried to its limits and its claim to universal validity negated by the demonstration of these limits might one hope for a rebirth of tragedy; the symbol which we would propose for this cultural form is that of the *music-making Socrates* in the sense discussed above. In making this contrast, what I understand by the spirit of science is the belief, which first came to light in the person of Socrates, that the depths of nature can be fathomed and that knowledge can heal all ills.

Anyone who recalls the immediate effects produced by this restlessly advancing spirit of science will recognize at once how *myth* was destroyed by it, and how this destruction drove poetry from its natural, ideal soil, so that it became homeless from that point onwards. If we are correct in ascribing to music the power to give birth to myth once more, we must also expect to see the spirit of science advancing on a hostile course towards the myth-creating force of music. This occurs during the evolution of the *new Attic dithyramb*, where the music no longer expressed the inner essence, the Will itself, but simply reproduced appearances inadequately, in an imitation mediated by concepts; truly musical natures then turned away from this inwardly degenerate music with the same feeling of revulsion as they felt for Socrates' tendency to murder art. Aristophanes' sure instinct certainly grasped things correctly when he expressed the same hatred for Socrates himself, the tragedy of Euripides, and the music of the new exponents of the dithyramb, for he scented the characteristics of a degenerate culture in all three phenomena. Thanks to the new dithyramb, a sacrilege was committed which turned music into a mere counterfeit of some phenomenon, e.g. of a battle or a storm at sea, and thus robbed it entirely of its myth-making power. For if music seeks to excite our pleasure merely by compelling us to seek out external analogies between events in life or nature and certain rhythmical



figures or characteristic musical sounds, if our understanding is to be satisfied by recognizing these analogies, then we are dragged down into a mood in which it is impossible to be receptive to the mythical; for myth needs to be felt keenly as a unique example of something universal and true which gazes out into infinity. In true Dionysiac music we find just such a general mirror of the world-Will; a vivid event refracted in this mirror expands immediately, we feel, into a copy of an eternal truth. Conversely, a vivid event of this kind is immediately stripped of any mythical character by the tone-painting of the new dithyramb; now music has become a miserable copy of a phenomenon, and is thus infinitely poorer than the phenomenon; as far as our feelings are concerned, this poverty even reduces the phenomenon itself, so that, for example, a battle imitated by such music amounts to no more than the noise of marching, the sounds of signals etc., and our fantasy is arrested precisely by these superficial details. Tone-painting is thus the antithesis of the myth-creating energy of true music, for it makes the phenomenal world even poorer than it is, whereas Dionysiac music enriches and expands the individual phenomenon, making it into an image of the world. It was a great victory for the un-Dionysiac spirit when, during the evolution of the new dithyramb, it alienated music from itself and reduced it to the status of a slave of appearances. Euripides, who must be described as a thoroughly unmusical nature in a higher sense, is passionately attached to the new dithyrambic music for precisely this reason, and he makes free with all its showy effects and manners with all the liberality of a robber.

Elsewhere we can see the force of this un-Dionysiac spirit directed actively against myth if we look at the excessive growth in the *presentation of character* and of psychological refinement in tragedy from Sophocles onwards. Character is no longer meant to be capable of being expanded into an eternal type; on the contrary, artificial subsidiary features, shading and the fine definition of every line, are all meant to give such an impression of individuality that the spectator no longer senses the myth at all, but only the great fidelity to nature and the imitative skills of the artist. Here too we may observe the victory of the phenomenal over the universal, and pleasure being taken in the individual anatomical specimen, as it were; already we are breathing the air of a theoretical world where scientific understanding is more highly prized than the artistic reflection of a universal rule. The trend towards the characteristic advances rapidly; whereas Sophocles still paints whole characters, harnessing myth to expound them subtly, Euripides is already at the stage of painting only individual characteristics which can be expressed in powerful passions; in the New Attic Comedy there are only masks with a *single* expression: frivolous old people, cheated pimps, cunning slaves, all tirelessly repeated. Where has the myth-shaping spirit of music gone now? All that remains of music is either music to excite the emotions or to prompt memory, i.e. either a stimulant for blunt and jaded nerves or tone-painting. The former hardly cares about the text

to which it is set; even in Euripides verbal expression is already beginning to become quite slovenly when the heroes or choruses start to sing; how far are things likely to have gone amongst his shameless successors?

But the clearest sign of the new, un-Dionysiac spirit can be seen in the *endings* of the new dramas. In the old tragedy the audience experienced metaphysical solace, without which it is quite impossible to explain man's pleasure in tragedy; the sounds of reconciliation from another world can perhaps be heard at their purest in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Now that the spirit of music had flown from tragedy, it is, in the strictest sense, dead, for from what other source was that metaphysical solace to come? Thus people looked for an earthly resolution of the tragic dissonance: after he had been sufficiently tortured by fate, the hero gained a well-earned reward in the form of a handsome marriage, or in being honoured by the gods. The hero had become a gladiator who was occasionally granted his freedom after he had been thoroughly flailed and was covered in wounds. The *deus ex machina* has taken the place of metaphysical solace. I do not say that the tragic view of the world was destroyed everywhere and utterly by the advancing spirit of the un-Dionysiac; we only know that it had to flee from art and into the underworld, as it were, where it degenerated into a secret cult. But almost everywhere in Hellenic life havoc was wreaked by the withering breath of that spirit which manifests itself in the kind of 'Greek cheerfulness' discussed above, as senile, unproductive pleasure in existence; this cheerfulness is the very opposite of the glorious 'naïveté' of the older Greeks as this should be understood, according to the characterization above, namely as the flower of Apolline culture growing from the depths of a gloomy abyss, as a victory which the Hellenic will gains over suffering and the wisdom of suffering through the image of beauty shown in its mirror. The noblest form of that other, Alexandrian type of 'Greek cheerfulness' is the cheerfulness of *theoretical man* which exhibits the same characteristics as I have just derived from the spirit of the un-Dionysiac: it fights against Dionysiac wisdom and art; it strives to dissolve myth; it puts in the place of metaphysical solace a form of earthly harmony, indeed its very own *deus ex machina*, namely the god of machines and smelting furnaces, i.e. the energies of the spirits of nature, understood and applied in the service of higher egotism; it believes in correcting the world through knowledge, in life led by science; and it is truly capable of confining the individual within the smallest circle of solvable tasks, in the midst of which he cheerfully says to life: 'I will you: you are worth understanding.'

#### NOTES

59. *Problemata* 19.48.922b18ff.

60. In his *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (3 vols., 1809–11), *Fifth Lecture*, Schlegel emphasizes the 'republican spirit' of ancient tragedy and its political content.

61. The daughters of Oceanus form the chorus of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. The title page of the original edition of *Birth of Tragedy* had a design depicting the moment when Prometheus is about to be freed from his bondage. (This design is reproduced on the front cover of *Nietzsche on Tragedy* by M. Silk and J. P. Stern (Cambridge University Press, 1981).)

62. What Nietzsche claims here as a property of ancient tragedy is described by Schiller as a specific feature of the use of the chorus in modern (as opposed to ancient) times.

63. In his essay 'Beethoven'.

130. Plato, *Timaeus* 22b4.



### 1875—George Macdonald. "The Elder Hamlet"

George Macdonald (1824–1905) was a Scottish author and poet and a Christian minister. He is best remembered for his works of fantasy. His novels include *Phantastes* (1858), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), and *Lilith* (1895).

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The ghost in *Hamlet* is as faithfully treated as any character in the play. Next to Hamlet himself, he is to me the most interesting person of the drama.

The rumour of his appearance is wrapped in the larger rumour of war. Loud preparations for uncertain attack fill the ears of "the subject of the land." The state is troubled. The new king has hardly compassed his election before his marriage with his brother's widow swathes the court in the dust-cloud of shame, which the merriment of its forced revelry can do little to dispel. A feeling is in the moral air to which the words of Francisco, the only words of significance he utters, give the key: "'Tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart." Into the frosty air, the pallid moonlight, the drunken shouts of Claudius and his court, the bellowing of the cannon from the rampart for the enlargement of the insane clamour that it may beat the drum of its own disgrace at the portals of heaven, glides the silent prisoner of hell, no longer a king of the day walking about his halls, "the observed of all observers," but a thrall of the night, wandering between the bell and the cock, like a jailer on each side of him. A poet tells the tale of the king who lost his garments and ceased to be a king: here is the king who has lost his body, and in the eyes of his court has ceased to be a man. Is the cold of the earth's night pleasant to him after the purging fire? What crimes had the honest ghost committed in his days of nature? He calls them foul crimes! Could such be his? Only who can tell how a ghost, with his doubled experience, may think of this thing or that? The

ghost and the fire may between them distinctly recognize that as a foul crime which the man and the court regarded as a weakness at worst, and indeed in a king laudable.

Alas, poor ghost! Around the house he flits, shifting and shadowy, over the ground he once paced in ringing armour—armed still, but his very armour a shadow! It cannot keep out the arrow of the cock's cry, and the heart that pierces is no shadow. Where now is the loaded axe with which, in angry dispute, he smote the ice at his feet that cracked to the blow? Where is the arm that heaved the axe? Wasting in the marble maw of the sepulchre, and the arm he carries now—I know not what it can do, but it cannot slay his murderer. For that he seeks his son's. Doubtless his new ethereal form has its capacities and privileges. It can shift its garb at will; can appear in mail or night-gown, unaided of armourer or tailor; can pass through Hades-gates or chamber-door with equal ease; can work in the ground like mole or pioneer, and let its voice be heard from the cellarage. But there is one to whom it cannot appear, one whom the ghost can see, but to whom he cannot show himself. She has built a doorless, windowless wall between them, and sees the husband of her youth no more. Outside her heart—that is the night in which he wanders, while the palace-windows are flaring, and the low wind throbs to the wassail shouts: within, his murderer sits by the wife of his bosom, and in the orchard the spilt poison is yet gnawing at the roots of the daisies.

Twice has the ghost grown out of the night upon the eyes of the sentinels. With solemn march, slow and stately, three times each night, has he walked by them; they, jellied with fear, have uttered no challenge. They seek Horatio, who the third night speaks to him as a scholar can. To the first challenge he makes no answer, but stalks away; to the second,

It lifted up its head, and did address  
Itself to motion, like as it would speak;

but the gaoler cock calls him, and the kingly shape

started like a guilty thing  
Upon a fearful summons;

and then

shrunk in haste away,  
And vanished from our sight.

Ah, that summons! at which majesty welks and shrivels, the king and soldier starts and cowers, and, armour and all, withers from the air!

But why has he not spoken before? why not now ere the cock could claim him? He cannot trust the men. His court has forsaken his memory—crowds with as eager discontent about the mildewed ear as ever about his wholesome brother, and how should he trust mere sentinels? There is but one who will heed his tale. A word to any other would but defeat his intent. Out of the multitude of courtiers and subjects, in all the land of Denmark, there is but one whom he can trust—his student-son. Him he has not yet found—the condition of a ghost involving strange difficulties.

Or did the horror of the men at the sight of him wound and repel him? Does the sense of regal dignity, not yet exhausted for all the fasting in fires, unite with that of grievous humiliation to make him shun their speech?

But Horatio—why does the ghost not answer him ere the time of the cock is come? Does he fold the cloak of indignation around him because his son's friend has addressed him as an intruder on the night, an usurper of the form that is his own? The companions of the speaker take note that he is offended and stalks away.

Much has the kingly ghost to endure in his attempt to reopen relations with the world he has left: when he has overcome his wrath and returns, that moment Horatio again insults him, calling him an illusion. But this time he will bear it, and opens his mouth to speak. It is too late; the cock is awake, and he must go. Then alas for the buried majesty of Denmark! with upheaved halberds they strike at the shadow, and would stop it if they might—usage so grossly unfitting that they are instantly ashamed of it themselves, recognizing the offence in the majesty of the offended. But he is already gone. The proud, angry king has found himself but a thing of nothing to his body-guard—for he has lost the body which was their guard. Still, not even yet has he learned how little it lies in the power of an honest ghost to gain credit for himself or his tale! His very privileges are against him.

All this time his son is consuming his heart in the knowledge of a mother capable of so soon and so utterly forgetting such a husband, and in pity and sorrow for the dead father who has had such a wife. He is thirty years of age, an obedient, honourable son—a man of thought, of faith, of aspiration. Him now the ghost seeks, his heart burning like a coal with the sense of unendurable wrong. He is seeking the one drop that can fall cooling on that heart—the sympathy, the answering rage and grief of his boy. But when at length he finds him, the generous, loving father has to see that son tremble like an aspen-leaf in his doubtful presence. He has exposed himself to the shame of eyes and the indignities of dullness, that he may pour the pent torrent of his wrongs into his ears, but his disfranchisement from the flesh tells against him even with his son: the young Hamlet is doubtful of the identity of the apparition with his father. After all the burning words of the phantom, the spirit he has seen may

yet be a devil; the devil has power to assume a pleasing shape, and is perhaps taking advantage of his melancholy to damn him.

Armed in the complete steel of a suit well known to the eyes of the sentinels, visionary none the less, with useless truncheon in hand, resuming the memory of old martial habits, but with quiet countenance, more in sorrow than in anger, troubled—not now with the thought of the hell-day to which he must sleepless return, but with that unceasing ache at the heart, which ever, as often as he is released into the cooling air of the upper world, draws him back to the region of his wrongs—where having fallen asleep in his orchard, in sacred security and old custom, suddenly, by cruel assault, he was flung into Hades, where horror upon horror awaited him—worst horror of all, the knowledge of his wife!—armed he comes, in shadowy armour but how real sorrow! Still it is not pity he seeks from his son: he needs it not—he can endure. There is no weakness in the ghost. It is but to the imperfect human sense that he is shadowy. To himself he knows his doom his deliverance; that the hell in which he finds himself shall endure but until it has burnt up the hell he has found within him—until the evil he was and is capable of shall have dropped from him into the lake of fire; he nerves himself to bear. And the cry of revenge that comes from the sorrowful lips is the cry of a king and a Dane rather than of a wronged man. It is for public justice and not individual vengeance he calls. He cannot endure that the royal bed of Denmark should be a couch for luxury and damned incest. To stay this he would bring the murderer to justice. There is a worse wrong, for which he seeks no revenge: it involves his wife; and there comes in love, and love knows no amends but amendment, seeks only the repentance tenfold more needful to the wronger than the wronged. It is not alone the father's care for the human nature of his son that warns him to take no measures against his mother; it is the husband's tenderness also for her who once lay in his bosom. The murdered brother, the dethroned king, the dishonoured husband, the tormented sinner, is yet a gentle ghost. Has suffering already begun to make him, like Prometheus, wise?

But to measure the gentleness, the forgiveness, the tenderness of the ghost, we must well understand his wrongs. The murder is plain; but there is that which went before and is worse, yet is not so plain to every eye that reads the story. There is that without which the murder had never been, and which, therefore, is a cause of all the wrong. For listen to what the ghost reveals when at length he has withdrawn his son that he may speak with him alone, and Hamlet has forestalled the disclosure of the murderer:

Ay, 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:  
 Oh, Hamlet, what a falling off was there!  
 From me, whose love was of that dignity  
 That it went hand in hand even with the vow  
 I made to her in marriage, and to decline  
 Upon a wretch, whose natural gifts were poor  
 To those of mine!  
 But virtue—as it never will be moved  
 Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,  
 So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,  
 Will sate itself in a celestial bed,  
 And prey on garbage.

Reading this passage, can any one doubt that the ghost charges his late wife with adultery, as the root of all his woes? It is true that, obedient to the ghost's injunctions, as well as his own filial instincts, Hamlet accuses his mother of no more than was patent to all the world; but unless we suppose the ghost misinformed or mistaken, we must accept this charge. And had Gertrude not yielded to the witchcraft of Claudius' wit, Claudius would never have murdered Hamlet. Through her his life was dishonoured, and his death violent and premature: unhuzled, disappointed, unaneled, he woke to the air—not of his orchard-blossoms, but of a prison-house, the lightest word of whose terrors would freeze the blood of the listener. What few men can say, he could—that his love to his wife had kept even step with the vow he made to her in marriage; and his son says of him—

so loving to my mother  
 That he might not between the winds of heaven  
 Visit her face too roughly;

and this was her return! Yet is it thus he charges his son concerning her:

But howsoever thou pursu'st 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.

And may we not suppose it to be for her sake in part that the ghost insists, with fourfold repetition, upon a sword-sworn oath to silence from Horatio and Marcellus?

Only once again does he show himself—not now in armour upon the walls, but in his gown and in his wife's closet.

Ever since his first appearance, that is, all the time filling the interval between the first and second acts, we may presume him to have haunted the palace unseen, waiting what his son would do. But the task has been more difficult than either had supposed. The ambassadors have gone to Norway and returned; but Hamlet has done nothing. Probably he has had no opportunity; certainly he has had no clear vision of duty. But now all through the second and third acts, together occupying, it must be remembered, only one day, something seems imminent. The play has been acted, and Hamlet has gained some assurance, yet the one chance presented of killing the king—at his prayers—he has refused. He is now in his mother's closet, whose eyes he has turned into her very soul. There, and then, the ghost once more appears—come, he says, to whet his son's almost blunted purpose. But, as I have said, he does not know all the disadvantages of one who, having forsaken the world, has yet business therein to which he would persuade; he does not know how hard it is for a man to give credence to a ghost; how thoroughly he is justified in delay, and the demand for more perfect proof. He does not know what good reasons his son has had for uncertainty, or how much natural and righteous doubt has had to do with what he takes for the blunting of his purpose. Neither does he know how much more tender his son's conscience is than his own, or how necessary it is to him to be sure before he acts. As little perhaps does he understand how hateful to Hamlet is the task laid upon him—the killing of one wretched villain in the midst of a corrupt and contemptible court, one of a world of whose women his mother may be the type!

Whatever the main object of the ghost's appearance, he has spoken but a few words concerning the matter between him and Hamlet, when he turns abruptly from it to plead with his son for his wife. The ghost sees and mistakes the terror of her looks; imagines that, either from some feeling of his presence, or from the power of Hamlet's words, her conscience is thoroughly roused, and that her vision, her conception of the facts, is now more than she can bear. She and her fighting soul are at odds. She is a kingdom divided against itself. He fears the consequences. He would not have her go mad. He would not have her die yet. Even while ready to start at the summons of that hell to which she has sold him, he forgets his vengeance on her seducer in his desire to comfort her. He dares not, if he could, manifest himself to her: what word of consolation could she hear from *his* lips? Is not the thought of him her one despair? He turns to his son for help: he cannot console his wife; his son must take his place. Alas! even now he thinks better of her than she deserves; for it is only the fancy of her son's madness that is terrifying her: he gazes on the



apparition of which she sees nothing, and from his looks she anticipates an ungovernable outbreak.

But look; amazement on thy mother sits!  
 Oh; step between her and her fighting soul  
 Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works.  
 Speak to her, Hamlet.

The call to his son to soothe his wicked mother is the ghost's last utterance. For a few moments, sadly regardful of the two, he stands—while his son seeks in vain to reveal to his mother the presence of his father—a few moments of piteous action, all but ruining the remnant of his son's sorely-harassed self-possession—his whole concern his wife's distress, and neither his own doom nor his son's duty; then, as if lost in despair at the impassable gulf betwixt them, revealed by her utter incapacity for even the imagination of his proximity, he turns away, and steals out at the portal. Or perhaps he has heard the black cock crow, and is wanted beneath: his turn has come.

Will the fires ever cleanse *her*? Will his love ever lift him above the pain of its loss? Will eternity ever be bliss, ever be endurable to poor *King Hamlet*?

Alas! even the memory of the poor ghost is insulted. Night after night on the stage his effigy appears—cadaverous, sepulchral—no longer as Shakspeare must have represented him, aerial, shadowy, gracious, the thin corporeal husk of an eternal—shall I say ineffaceable?—sorrow! It is no hollow monotone that can rightly upbear such words as his, but a sound mingled of distance and wind in the pine-tops, of agony and love, of horror and hope and loss and judgment—a voice of endless and sweetest inflection, yet with a shuddering echo in it as from the caves of memory, on whose walls are written the eternal blazon that must not be to ears of flesh and blood. The spirit that can assume form at will must surely be able to bend that form to completest and most delicate expression, and the part of the ghost in the play offers work worthy of the highest artist. The would-be actor takes from it vitality and motion, endowing it instead with the rigidity of death, as if the soul had resumed its cast-off garment, the stiffened and mouldy corpse—whose frozen deadness it could ill model to the utterance of its lively will!



**1880—Algernon Charles Swinburne.**  
**From “Hamlet,” in *A Study of Shakespeare***

Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909) was a Victorian-era English poet and critic. Though his works have gone in and out of critical favor,

some of his verse remains well-regarded, including *Atlanta in Calydon* (1865) and *Poems and Ballads* (published in three series: 1866, 1878, and 1889).

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Having now come perforce to the inevitable verge of *Hamlet*, I hasten to declare that I can advance no pretension to compete with the claim of that “literary man” who became immortal by dint of one dinner with a bishop, and in right of that last glass poured out for him in sign of amity by “Sylvester Blougram, styled *in partibus Episcopus*, necnon the deuce knows what.” I do not propose to prove my perception of any point in the character of Hamlet “unseized by the Germans yet.” I can only determine, as the Church Catechism was long since wont to bid me, “to keep my hands from picking and stealing, and my tongue” not only “from evil-speaking, lying, and slandering”—though this itself is a form of abstinence not universally or even commonly practised among the rampant rout of rival commentators—but also, now as ever throughout this study, from all conscious repetition of what others have said before me.

In *Hamlet*, as it seems to me, we set foot as it were on the bridge between the middle and the final period of Shakespeare. That priceless waif of piratical salvage which we owe to the happy rapacity of a hungry publisher is of course more accurately definable as the first play of *Hamlet* than as the first edition of the play. And this first *Hamlet*, on the whole, belongs altogether to the middle period. The deeper complexities of the subject are merely indicated. Simple and trenchant outlines of character are yet to be supplanted by features of subtler suggestion and infinite interfusion. Hamlet himself is almost more of a satirist than a philosopher: Asper and Macilente, Felice and Malevole, the grim studies after Hamlet unconsciously or consciously taken by Jonson and Marston, may pass as wellnigh passable imitations, with an inevitable streak of caricature in them, of the first Hamlet; they would have been at once puerile and ghastly travesties of the second. The Queen, whose finished figure is now something of a riddle, stands out simply enough in the first sketch as confidant of Horatio if not as accomplice of Hamlet. There is not more difference between the sweet quiet flow of those plain verses which open the original play within the play and the stiff sonorous tramp of their substitutes, full-charged with heavy classic artillery of Phoebus and Neptune and Tellus and Hymen, than there is between the straightforward agents of their own destiny whom we meet in the first *Hamlet* and the obliquely moving patients who veer sideways to their doom in the second.

This minor transformation of style in the inner play, made solely with the evident view of marking the distinction between its duly artificial forms of speech and the duly natural forms of speech passing between the spectators, is but one among innumerable indications which only a purblind perversity of prepossession can overlook of the especial store set by Shakespeare himself

on this favourite work, and the exceptional pains taken by him to preserve it for aftertime in such fullness of finished form as might make it worthiest of profound and perpetual study by the light of far other lamps than illuminate the stage. Of all vulgar errors the most wanton, the most wilful, and the most resolutely tenacious of life, is that belief bequeathed from the days of Pope, in which it was pardonable, to the days of Mr. Carlyle, in which it is not excusable, to the effect that Shakespeare threw off *Hamlet* as an eagle may moult a feather or a fool may break a jest; that he dropped his work as a bird may drop an egg or a sophist a fallacy; that he wrote "for gain, not glory," or that having written *Hamlet* he thought it nothing very wonderful to have written. For himself to have written, he possibly, nay probably, did not think it anything miraculous; but that he was in the fullest degree conscious of its wonderful positive worth to all men for all time, five have the best evidence possible—his own; and that not by mere word of mouth but by actual stroke of hand. Ben Jonson might shout aloud over his own work on a public stage, "By God 'tis good," and so for all its real goodness and his real greatness make sure that both the workman and his work should be less unnaturally than unreasonably laughed at; Shakespeare knew a better way of showing confidence in himself, but he showed not a whit less confidence. Scene by scene, line for line, stroke upon stroke and touch after touch, he went over all the old laboured ground again; and not to ensure success in his own day and fill his pockets with contemporary pence, but merely and wholly with a purpose to make it worthy of himself and his future students. Pence and praise enough it had evidently brought him in from the first. No more palpable proof of this can be desired than the instantaneous attacks on it, the jeers, howls, hoots and hisses of which a careful ear may catch some far faint echo even yet; the fearful and furtive yelp from beneath of the masked and writhing poeticule, the shrill reverberation all around it of plagiarism and parody. Not one single alteration in the whole play can possibly have been made with a view to stage effect or to present popularity and profit; or we must suppose that Shakespeare, however great as a man, was naturally even greater as a fool. There is a class of mortals to whom this inference is always grateful—to whom the fond belief that every great man must needs be a great fool would seem always to afford real comfort and support: happy, in Prior's phrase, could their inverted rule prove every great fool to be a great man. Every change in the text of *Hamlet* has impaired its fitness for the stage and increased its value for the closet in exact and perfect proportion. Now, this is not a matter of opinion—of Mr. Pope's opinion or Mr. Carlyle's; it is a matter of fact and evidence. Even in Shakespeare's time the actors threw out his additions; they throw out these very same additions in our own. The one especial speech, if any one such especial speech there be, in which the personal genius of Shakespeare soars up to the very highest of its height and strikes down to the very deepest of its depth, is passed over by modern actors; it was cut away by

Hemings and Condell. We may almost assume it as certain that no boards have ever echoed—at least, more than once or twice—to the supreme soliloquy of Hamlet. Those words which combine the noblest pleading ever proffered for the rights of human reason with the loftiest vindication ever uttered of those rights, no mortal ear within our knowledge has ever heard spoken on the stage. A convocation even of all priests could not have been more unhesitatingly unanimous in its rejection than seems to have been the hereditary verdict of all actors. It could hardly have been found worthier of theological than it has been found of theatrical condemnation. Yet, beyond all question, magnificent as is that monologue on suicide and doubt which has passed from a proverb into a byword, it is actually eclipsed and distanced at once on philosophic and on poetical grounds by the later soliloquy on reason and resolution.

That Shakespeare was in the genuine sense—that is, in the best and highest and widest meaning of the term—a free thinker, this otherwise practically and avowedly superfluous effusion of all inmost thought appears to me to supply full and sufficient evidence for the conviction of every candid and rational man. To that loftiest and most righteous title which any just and reasoning soul can ever deserve to claim, the greatest save one of all poetic thinkers has thus made good his right for ever.

I trust it will be taken as no breach of my past pledge to abstain from all intrusion on the sacred ground of Gigadibs and the Germans, if I venture to indicate a touch inserted by Shakespeare for no other perceptible or conceivable purpose than to obviate by anticipation the indomitable and ineradicable fallacy of criticism which would find the keynote of Hamlet's character in the quality of irresolution. I may observe at once that the misconception involved in such a reading of the riddle ought to have been evident even without this episodic stroke of illustration. In any case it should be plain to any reader that the signal characteristic of Hamlet's inmost nature is by no means irresolution or hesitation or any form of weakness, but rather the strong conflux of contending forces. That during four whole acts Hamlet cannot or does not make up his mind to any direct and deliberate action against his uncle is true enough; true, also, we may say, that Hamlet had somewhat more of mind than another man to make up, and might properly want somewhat more time than might another man to do it in; but not, I venture to say in spite of Goethe, through innate inadequacy to his task and unconquerable weakness of the will; not, I venture to think in spite of Hugo, through inmedicable scepticism of the spirit and irremediable propensity to nebulous intellectual refinement. One practical point in the action of the play precludes us from accepting so ready a solution of the riddle as is suggested either by the simple theory of half-heartedness or by the simple hypothesis of doubt. There is absolutely no other reason, we might say there was no other excuse, for the introduction or intrusion of an else superfluous episode into a play which was already, and which remains even after all possible excisions, one of the

longest plays on record. The compulsory expedition of Hamlet to England, his discovery by the way of the plot laid against his life, his interception of the King's letter and his forgery of a substitute for it against the lives of the King's agents, the ensuing adventure of the sea-fight, with Hamlet's daring act of hot-headed personal intrepidity, his capture and subsequent release on terms giving no less patent proof of his cool-headed and ready-witted courage and resource than the attack had afforded of his physically impulsive and even impetuous hardihood—all this serves no purpose whatever but that of exhibiting the instant and almost unscrupulous resolution of Hamlet's character in time of practical need. But for all that he or Hamlet has got by it, Shakespeare might too evidently have spared his pains; and for all this voice as of one crying in a wilderness, Hamlet will too surely remain to the majority of students, not less than to all actors and all editors and all critics, the standing type and embodied emblem of irresolution, half-heartedness, and doubt.

That Hamlet should seem at times to accept for himself, and even to enforce by reiteration of argument upon his conscience and his reason, some such conviction or suspicion as to his own character, tells much rather in disfavour than in favour of its truth. A man whose natural temptation was to swerve, whose inborn inclination was to shrink and skulk aside from duty and from action, would hardly be the first and last person to suspect his own weakness, the one only unbiased judge and witness of sufficiently sharp-sighted candour and accuracy to estimate aright his poverty of nature and the malformation of his mind. But the high-hearted and tender-conscienced Hamlet, with his native bias towards introspection intensified and inflamed and directed and dilated at once by one imperative pressure and oppression of unavoidable and unalterable circumstance, was assuredly and exactly the one only man to be troubled by any momentary fear that such might indeed be the solution of his riddle, and to feel or to fancy for the moment some kind of ease and relief in the sense of that very trouble. A born doubter would have doubted even of Horatio; hardly can all positive and almost palpable evidence of underhand instigation and inspired good intentions induce Hamlet for some time to doubt even of Ophelia.



### 1884—Matthew Arnold. “Hamlet Once More”

Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) was an English poet and cultural critic. He was particularly influential as a literary critic, arguing for the necessity of a more objective approach to all works. This stance was first formalized and published in his *Essays in Criticism* (1865).

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The *Essays* (of Montaigne) had already passed through many editions in French, and were known to Shakspeare in that language. Their publication in English was an event in the brilliant and intellectual London world, then keenly interested in the playhouses; and Shakspeare, in revising his *Hamlet* in 1604, gives proof of the actual occupation of his patrons with the Englished Montaigne, and confirms, too, the fact of his own occupation with the *Essays* previously.

For me the interest of this discovery does not lie in its showing that Shakspeare thought Montaigne a dangerous author, and meant to give in *Hamlet* a shocking example of what Montaigne's teaching led to. It lies in its explaining how it comes about that *Hamlet*, in spite of the prodigious mental and poetic power shown in it, is really so tantalising and ineffective a play. To the common public *Hamlet* is a famous piece by a famous poet, with crime, a ghost, battle, and carnage; and that is sufficient. To the youthful enthusiast *Hamlet* is a piece handling the mystery of the universe, and having throughout cadences, phrases, and words full of divinest Shakspearian magic; and that, too, is sufficient. To the pedant, finally, *Hamlet* is an occasion for airing his psychology; and what does pedant require more? But to the spectator who loves true and powerful drama, and can judge whether he gets it or not, *Hamlet* is a piece which opens, indeed, simply and admirably, and then: "The rest is puzzle!"

The reason is, apparently, that Shakspeare conceived this play with his mind running on Montaigne, and placed its action and its hero in Montaigne's atmosphere and world. What is that world? It is the world of man viewed as a being *ondoyant et divers*, balancing and indeterminate, the plaything of cross motives and shifting impulses, swayed by a thousand subtle influences, physiological and pathological. Certainly the action and hero of the original Hamlet story are not such as to compel the poet to place them in this world and no other, but they admit of being placed there, Shakspeare resolved to place them there, and they lent themselves to his resolve. The resolve once taken to place the action in this world of problem, the problem became brightened by all the force of Shakspeare's faculties, of Shakspeare's subtlety. *Hamlet* thus comes at last to be not a drama followed with perfect comprehension and profoundest emotion, which is the ideal for tragedy, but a problem soliciting interpretation and solution.



### 1884—Mark Twain.

#### From *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Mark Twain (1835–1910), the great American novelist and humorist, is best known for his novels *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

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It was after sun-up now, but we went right on and didn't tie up. The king and the duke turned out by and by looking pretty rusty; but after they'd jumped overboard and took a swim it chipped them up a good deal. After breakfast the king he took a seat on the corner of the raft, and pulled off his boots and rolled up his britches, and let his legs dangle in the water, so as to be comfortable, and lit his pipe, and went to getting his *Romeo and Juliet* by heart. When he had got it pretty good him and the duke begun to practise it together. The duke had to learn him over and over again how to say every speech; and he made him sigh, and put his hand on his heart, and after a while he said he done it pretty well; "only," he says, "you mustn't bellow out *Romeo!* that way, like a bull—you must say it soft and sick and languishy, so—R-o-o-meo! that is the idea; for Juliet's a dear sweet mere child of a girl, you know, and she doesn't bray like a jackass."

Well, next they got out a couple of long swords that the duke made out of oak laths, and begun to practise the sword-fight—the duke called himself Richard III.; and the way they laid on and pranced around the raft was grand to see. But by and by the king tripped and fell overboard, and after that they took a rest, and had a talk about all kinds of adventures they'd had in other times along the river.

After dinner the duke says:

"Well, Capet, we'll want to make this a first-class show, you know, so I guess we'll add a little more to it. We want a little something to answer encores with, anyway."

"What's onkores, Bilgewater?"

The duke told him, and then says:

"I'll answer by doing the Highland fling or the sailor's hornpipe; and you—well, let me see—oh, I've got it—you can do Hamlet's soliloquy."

"Hamlet's which?"

"Hamlet's soliloquy, you know; the most celebrated thing in Shakespeare. Ah, it's sublime, sublime! Always fetches the house. I haven't got it in the book—I've only got one volume—but I reckon I can piece it out from memory. I'll just walk up and down a minute, and see if I can call it back from recollection's vaults."

So he went to marching up and down, thinking, and frowning horrible every now and then; then he would hoist up his eyebrows; next he would squeeze his hand on his forehead and stagger back and kind of moan; next he would sigh, and next he'd let on to drop a tear. It was beautiful to see him. By and by he got it. He told us to give attention. Then he strikes a most noble attitude, with one leg shoved forwards, and his arms stretched away up, and his head tilted back, looking up at the sky; and then he begins to rip and rave and grit his teeth; and after that, all through his speech, he howled, and spread around, and swelled up his chest, and just knocked the spots out of any acting ever I see before. This is the speech—I learned it, easy enough, while he was learning it to the king:

To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin  
That makes calamity of so long life;  
For who would fardels bear, till Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane,  
But that the fear of something after death  
Murders the innocent sleep,  
Great nature's second course,  
And makes us rather sling the arrows of outrageous fortune  
Than fly to others that we know not of.  
There's the respect must give us pause:  
Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst;  
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The law's delay, and the quietus which his pangs might take,  
In the dead waste and middle of the night, when churchyards yawn  
In customary suits of solemn black,  
But that the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler  
returns,  
Breathes forth contagion on the world,  
And thus the native hue of resolution, like the poor cat i' the adage,  
Is sicklied o'er with care,  
And all the clouds that lowered o'er our housetops,  
With this regard their currents turn awry,  
And lose the name of action.  
'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. But soft you, the fair  
Ophelia:  
Ope not thy ponderous and marble jaws,  
But get thee to a nunnery—go!

Well, the old man he liked that speech, and he mighty soon got it so he could do it first rate. It seemed like he was just born for it; and when he had his hand in and was excited, it was perfectly lovely the way he would rip and tear and rair up behind when he was getting it off.

The first chance we got, the duke he had some show bills printed; and after that, for two or three days as we floated along, the raft was a most uncommon lively place, for there warn't nothing but sword-fighting and rehearsing—as the duke called it—going on all the time. One morning, when we was pretty well down the state of Arkansaw, we come in sight of a little one-horse town in a big bend; so we tied up about three-quarters of a mile above it, in the mouth of a crick which was shut in like a tunnel by the cypress trees, and all of us but Jim took the canoe and went down there to see if there was any chance in that place for our show.



We struck it mighty lucky; there was going to be a circus there that afternoon, and the country people was already beginning to come in, in all kinds of old shackly wagons, and on horses. The circus would leave before night, so our show would have a pretty good chance. The duke he hired the court house, and we went around and stuck up our bills. They read like this:

Shaksperean Revival!!!  
 Wonderful Attraction!  
 For One Night Only!  
 The world renowned tragedians,  
 David Garrick the younger, of Drury Lane Theatre, London,  
 and Edmund Kean the elder, of the Royal Haymarket Theatre,  
 Whitechapel, Pudding Lane, Piccadilly, London, and the  
 Royal Continental Theatres, in their sublime  
 Shaksperean Spectacle entitled  
 The Balcony Scene  
 in  
 Romeo and Juliet!!!

Romeo	Mr. Garrick
Juliet	Mr. Kean

Assisted by the whole strength of the company!  
 New costumes, new scenery, new appointments!

Also:  
 The thrilling, masterly, and blood-curdling  
 Broad-sword conflict  
 In Richard III.!!!

Richard III	Mr. Garrick
Richmond	Mr. Kean

also:  
 (by special request)  
 Hamlet's Immortal Soliloquy!!  
 By the Illustrious Kean!  
 Done by him 300 consecutive nights in Paris!  
 For One Night Only,  
 On account of imperative European engagements!  
 Admission 25 cents; children and servants, 10 cents.



## 1886—Anatole France. “Hamlet at the Comedie-Française”

Anatole France (1844–1924) was the pen name of the French author Jacques Anatole François Thibault. His work includes *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard* (1881) and *La Revolte des Anges* (1914).

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“Good-night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!” That is what, on Tuesday, at midnight, we said with Horatio to young Hamlet, as we were leaving the Theatre-Français. And, surely, we ought to wish a good-night to him who had caused us to pass so delightful an evening. Yes, Prince Hamlet is a sweet prince. He is handsome and he is unhappy; he knows everything and he can do nothing. He is to be envied and to be pitied. He is worse and better than any of us. He is a man, he is man, he is the whole of man. And there were, I swear to you, at least twenty persons in the house who had that feeling. “Good-night, sweet prince!” we cannot leave you without having our heads full of you, and for the last three days I have had no other thoughts than yours.

I felt, when I saw you, a sad joy, my Prince. And that is more than a joyous joy. I will whisper to you that the house seemed to me just a little heedless and frivolous; but we must not complain too much of that and we must not be at all astonished at it. It was a house made up of French men and French women. You were not in evening dress, you had no amorous intrigue in the world of high finance, and you did not wear a gardenia in your button-hole. That is why the ladies coughed a little, as they ate iced fruits in their boxes. Your adventures could not interest them. They are not fashionable adventures; they are only human adventures. You force people to think, and that is a wrong we will not pardon you here. However, there were here and there throughout the house some spirits whom you deeply moved. In speaking to them of yourself you spoke to them of themselves. That is why they prefer you to all the other beings who, like you, have been created by genius. A lucky chance placed me in the house beside M. Auguste Dorchain. He understands you, my Prince, just as he understands Racine, because he is a poet. I believe that I also understand you a little, because I have just come from the sea.

Oh! do not be afraid that I am going to say that you are two oceans. That is all words, words, and you do not care about words. No, I only mean that I understand you because, after two months of rest and quiet amidst wide horizons, I have become very simple and very accessible to what is truly beautiful, great, and profound. In our Paris, in winter, we readily acquire a taste for pretty things, for fashionable affectation, and the intricate refinements of the coteries. But one’s perception is elevated and purified in the fruitful idleness of rural walks and amid the broad horizons of sea and fields. When we come back from them we are quite ready for intercourse with the wild genius of a Shakespeare. That is

why you have been welcome, Prince Hamlet. It is why all your thoughts wander confusedly upon my lips, and envelop me with terror, poetry, and sadness. You saw, of course, that in the *Revue bleue* and elsewhere the question of the origin of your melancholy has been raised. It has been judged to be so deep that even the most frightful domestic catastrophes were incapable of having formed it in all its extent. A very distinguished political economist, M. Emile de Laveleye, thinks that it must be the sadness of a political economist. And he has written an article with the sole object of proving this theory. He intimates that he and his friend, Lanfrey, experienced a similar melancholy after the *coup d'état* of 1851, and that you, Prince Hamlet, must have suffered, even more than they did, from the terrible condition to which the usurper Claudius had reduced the affairs of Denmark.

In truth, I believe that you were deeply concerned for the fate of your country, and I applaud the words used by Fortinbras when he commanded four captains to bear your body like a soldier to the stage. "Had Hamlet lived," he exclaimed, "he would have proved most royally." But I do not think your melancholy was quite that of M. Emile de Laveleye. I believe that it was nobler and more intelligent. I believe that it was inspired by a keen perception of destiny. Not Denmark only, but the whole world appeared gloomy to you. You had faith in nothing, not even, as M. de Laveleye has, in the principles of public law. Let those who doubt this recall the fine and bitter prayer which left your lips when already growing cold in death.

O God! Horatio, what a wounded name,  
 Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me.  
 If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
 Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
 And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
 To tell my story.

These were your last words. He to whom they were addressed had not, like you, a family poisoned by crimes; he was not, like you, an assassin. His was an unfettered, wise, and faithful nature. He was a happy man, if such there be. But you, Prince Hamlet, knew that there never was one. You knew that all is evil in the universe. We must out with it, you are a pessimist. Doubtless, your destiny drove you to despair; it was tragic. But your nature was consonant with your destiny. That is what renders you so admirable; you were formed to taste misfortune, and you had full opportunity for exercising your taste. You were well served, Prince. And how you relish the evil in which you are steeped! What subtlety of taste! Oh! you are a connoisseur, a *gourmet* in sufferings.

Of such a nature did the great Shakespeare give you birth. And it seems to me that he was hardly an optimist himself at the time he created you. From 1601

to 1608, he, with his enchanted hands, gave life to what is, I think, a pretty large crowd of afflicted or violent shades. It was then that he showed Desdemona perishing through Iago, and the blood of a fatherly old king staining the little hands of Lady Macbeth, and poor Cordelia, and you, his favourite, and Timon of Athens.

Yes, even Timon! There is decided reason for believing that Shakespeare was a pessimist like you. What will his colleague, M. Moreau, the author of the second *Falcon*, say about it, he who, I am told, maltreats the poor pessimists so violently every evening at the Vaudeville. Oh! he gives them a bad quarter of an hour every day, I assure you. I pity them. There are, indeed, happy people everywhere who jest at them without pity. In their place I would not know where to hide myself. But Hamlet ought to give them courage. They have Job and Shakespeare on their side. That redresses the balance a little. So that M. Paul Bourget is saved this time. And it is you who have done it, Prince Hamlet.

I have under my eyes, as I write, an old German engraving, which represents you, but in which I can hardly recognise you. It represents you as you appeared in the Berlin theatre about 1780. You did not then wear that solemn mourning of which your mother speaks, that doublet, those hose, that mantle, that cap with which Delacroix so nobly clothed you when he fixed your type in his awkward but sublime drawings, and which M. Mounet-Sully wears with so virile a grace and so many poetic attitudes.

No! you appeared before the good people of Berlin in the eighteenth century in a costume which would seem very strange to us to-day. You were clad—my engraving proves it—in the latest French fashion. Your hair was elaborately dressed and powdered; you wore an embroidered collar, satin knee-breeches, silk stockings, buckled shoes, and a little mantle in the Court style, in short the whole mourning costume of the courtiers of Versailles. I was forgetting your Henri IV. hat, the true hat of the nobility in the time of the States-General. Thus equipped, with your sword at your side, you lie at Ophelia's feet, Ophelia who, upon my word, is exceedingly pretty in her hooped gown and lofty head-dress *à la Marie-Antoinette*, which is surmounted by a great plume of ostrich feathers. All the other personages are dressed in a corresponding style. They are present, with you, at the tragedy of Gonzaga and Baptista. Your beautiful Louis XV. armchair is empty and we can see all the flowers of its upholstery. Already you creep on the ground, you spy on the king's face for the mute confession of the crime which you are charged to avenge. The king also wears, just as Louis XVI. did, a splendid Henri IV. hat. Perhaps you think that I am going to smile and to scoff, and to boast about the progress of our decorations and our costumes. You are mistaken. Most certainly, if you are no longer dressed in the fashion of my old print, and no longer look like the Comte de Provence wearing mourning for the Dauphin, and if your Ophelia is no longer dressed like Mesdames, I do not regret it in the least. Far from that, I like you much

better as you are now. But dress is nothing to you, you can wear any costume you please; they will all suit you if they are beautiful. You are of all times and of all countries. Your soul is of the same age as all our souls. We live together, Prince Hamlet, and you are what we are, a man in the midst of universal woe. Your words and your actions have been cavilled at. You have been shown to be inconsistent with yourself. How are we to understand this incomprehensible personage? So they have asked. He thinks in turn like a monk of the Middle Ages and like a scholar of the Renaissance; his mind is philosophic and yet it is full of impishness. He has a horror of lies and his life is only one long lie. He is irresolute, that is clear, and yet certain critics have pronounced him to be full of decision, and we cannot entirely contradict them. Lastly, my Prince, they have said that you were a warehouse of thoughts, a heap of contradictions, and not a human being. But that, on the contrary, is the sign of your profound humanity. You are prompt and slow, audacious and timid, kind and cruel; you believe and you doubt, you are wise and, above all, you are mad. In a word, you live. Which of us does not resemble you in something? Which of us thinks without contradictions and acts without incoherence? Which of us is not mad? Which of us may not say to you with a mixture of pity, sympathy, admiration, and horror: "Goodnight, sweet prince!"



### 1897—Oscar Wilde. "Letter to Lord Alfred Douglas"

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) was an Irish playwright, novelist, poet, and short-story writer. His sharp wit helped make him one of the most successful playwrights in late Victorian London, and he was a celebrity in his day.

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I know of nothing in all Drama more incomparable from the point of view of Art, or more suggestive in its subtlety of observation, than Shakespeare's drawing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They are Hamlet's college friends. They have been his companions. They bring with them memories of pleasant days together. At the moment when they come across him in the play he is staggering under the weight of a burden intolerable to one of his temperament. The dead have come armed out of the grave to impose on him a mission at once too great and too mean for him. He is a dreamer, and he is called upon to act. He has the nature of the poet and he is asked to grapple with the common complexities of cause and effect, with life in its practical realisation, of which he knows nothing,

not with life in its ideal essence, of which he knows much. He has no conception of what to do, and his folly is to feign folly. Brutus used madness as a cloak to conceal the sword of his purpose, the dagger of his will, but to Hamlet madness is a mere mask for the hiding of weakness. In the making of mows and jests he sees a chance of delay. He keeps playing with action, as an artist plays with a theory. He makes himself the spy of his proper actions, and listening to his own words knows them to be but "words, words, words." Instead of trying to be the hero of his own history, he seeks to be the spectator of his own tragedy. He disbelieves in everything, including himself, and yet his doubt helps him not, as it comes not from scepticism but from a divided will.

Of all this, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz realise nothing. They bow and smirk and smile, and what the one says the other echoes with sicklier iteration. When at last, by means of the play within the play and the puppets in their dalliance, Hamlet "catches the conscience" of the King, and drives the wretched man in terror from his throne, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz see no more in his conduct than a rather painful breach of court-etiquette. That is as far as they can attain to in "the contemplation of the spectacle of life with appropriate emotions." They are close to his very secret and know nothing of it. Nor would there be any use in telling them. They are the little cups that can hold so much and no more. Towards the close it is suggested that, caught in a cunning spring set for another, they have met, or may meet with a violent and sudden death. But a tragic ending of this kind, though touched by Hamlet's humour with something of the surprise and justice of comedy, is really not for such as they. They never die. Horatio who, in order to "report Hamlet and his cause aright to the unsatisfied,"

Absents him from felicity a while

And in this harsh world draws his breath in pain,

dies, though not before an audience, and leaves no brother. But Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are as immortal as Angelo and Tartuffe, and should rank with them. They are what modern life has contributed to the antique ideal of friendship. He who writes a new *De Amicitia* must find a niche for them and praise them in Tusculan prose. They are types fixed for all time. To censure them would show a lack of appreciation. They are merely out of their sphere: that is all. In sublimity of soul there is no contagion. High thoughts and high emotions are by their very existence isolated. What Ophelia herself could not understand was not to be realised by "Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz," by "Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern."



# HAMLET

## IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



Readers a long time from now will likely remember the “myriad-minded” character of the showy procession and lengthy record that is twentieth-century *Hamlet* criticism. Modern scholars have been industrious; modern critics have been ingenious; and the modern age has produced a succession of new media, from the motion picture at the beginning of the century to hypertext Internet sites at its end, that have given new life to Shakespeare’s play.

At the Paris Exposition in 1900, a film of *Hamlet* was shown at one of the first sound cinemas. The actress Sarah Bernhardt produced the fight scene between Hamlet and Laertes; Edison cylinder recordings captured the sound of swords clashing in this brief, modest production. (Twentieth-century efforts to dramatize the play on film culminated in Kenneth Branagh’s popular, acclaimed, and star-laden four-hour motion picture in 1996.) The most influential Shakespeare reception of the time, however, took place in more traditional literary and academic spheres. English writers such as George Bernard Shaw, G. K. Chesterton, and Walter de la Mare (in addition to Oscar Wilde, at the end of the nineteenth century) offered trenchant if isolated insights.

More importantly, the scholar and lecturer A.C. Bradley more broadly interpreted *Hamlet* for his age, as well as ages following. Bradley defined Shakespeare’s art by the structural complexities and psychological insights of his tragedies. He also played a significant role in making Shakespeare a university mainstay in the developing field of English literature. Bradley’s *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) was arguably the first example of sustained academic criticism of Shakespeare, characterized by its scrutiny of the text and careful evaluation of evidence. In many ways Bradley was the final heir of the “character criticism” that dominated much of the nineteenth century. In the selections included here, however, Bradley set himself against the “Schlegel-Coleridge theory” that Hamlet is a victim of his own excessive reflection. Admitting that Hamlet delays in part because he is “deterred by moral scruples,” Bradley nevertheless described such reflection as merely a symptom of Hamlet’s true malady—melancholy, a habitual feeling of “disgust at life and everything in it, himself



included.” Bradley asserted that Hamlet’s awareness of Gertrude’s true nature stimulates this condition, which he took pains to distinguish from both Hamlet’s delicate temperament and his feigned insanity. Later critics drew on this psychological and philosophical legacy, such as the philosopher Stanley Cavell in his Shakespearean writings and G. K. Hunter in his essay “The Heroism of Hamlet.”

If Bradley helped to determine the nature of Shakespearean criticism in this “age of analysis,” the writings and theories of Sigmund Freud also contributed mightily to this focus. Hamlet’s divided consciousness gave Freud a rich model for consideration: In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) Freud connected the prince’s madcap antics with the concealing work of one’s dream life; he thus equated the “prison” of the Danish court with the ego’s repression of human urges. Three years earlier, Freud had already seen Hamlet through this lens of desire, explaining in a letter that Hamlet delays killing Claudius because subconsciously he identifies with his father’s murderer. For Freud, Hamlet himself “had contemplated the same deed against his father out of passion for his mother.” Freud’s theory would become known as the Oedipal complex, but he identified it originally and most clearly with the character of Hamlet. The Freudian critic Ernest Jones developed this connection in *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949, but drawn from an article written much earlier), and in the relatively recent work *After Oedipus: Shakespeare and Psychoanalysis* (1993), Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard suggested this approach is still of interest. Critics such as Norman Holland and Arthur Kirsch have also explored issues of incest and narcissism in *Hamlet*, and others have followed the “post-Freudian” thinker Jacques Lacan in revising Freud’s theories with a new attention to linguistically centered (and de-centered) identity formation.

The Freudian interpretation of *Hamlet* found its most popular and lasting expression in the stage and screen performances of Laurence Olivier. He was just one of a series of strong twentieth-century actors to play the prince in the theater, including John Barrymore, John Gielgud, and Richard Burton, but only Olivier fully succeeded with a film version. And what a success it was: Olivier’s *Hamlet* won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1948, and it is possibly the most acclaimed, most popular Shakespeare film of all time. This fact makes Olivier’s bold innovations all the more impressive: The film opens with a voice-over speaking of a “man who could not make up his mind,” followed by the on-screen appearance of lines of text (often minimized or even deleted in productions) in which Hamlet discusses “the vicious mole of nature” in people. The transformation of soliloquies into interior monologues (via further voice-overs), the restless camera movement among the obscure staircases of Elsinore, and the conspicuous setting of his mother’s bed when Hamlet confronts Gertrude in her chamber all evoke the dark, sexualized mental landscapes of Freud’s Oedipal interpretation.

Strong critical reactions to the influential emphases of Bradley and Freud soon arose, particularly in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Counterarguments particularly took issue with the focus on psychological readings and the tendency to internalize and dehistoricize Shakespeare's text. E. E. Stoll and Dover Wilson insisted that Elizabethan theatrical conventions and political allusions helped to explain Hamlet's character and behavior better than Bradley's subtle analyses, while H. D. F. Kitto and Gilbert Murray connected *Hamlet* to even earlier influences, namely, classical religious rituals and Greek tragedy such as Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy. Eschewing literary contexts altogether, Harley Granville-Barker reminded readers of *Hamlet's* dramatic origins and the importance of its stage practices.

According to other critics, Bradley erred in two rather contrary ways. First, his critical interests expanded the text into something it was not. The play itself did not provide a presumed supernarrative before and behind the manifest events of *Hamlet*, argued A. J. A. Waldock in *"Hamlet": A Study in Critical Method* (1931). Likewise, L. C. Knight memorably addressed Bradley's tendency to hunt waywardly for such clues in "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" (1933). Second, critics said, Bradley erred by giving too much attention to character, leading to a too-narrow, reduced estimation of the play itself as a poetic, symbolic creation. G. Wilson Knight, a disciple of Bradley's in certain ways, represented this reaction best: Knight focused more generally on theme and on the "dramatic environment" and "visionary unit" produced by the entire work of poetic art. He found the themes of romantic cynicism and a consciousness of death essential to understanding the play. Caroline Spurgeon supported this focus: She observed in *Shakespeare's Imagery* (1935) that *Hamlet's* dominant metaphors are those of sickness and disease.

C. S. Lewis followed Knight's defense of the text. The title of his British Academy lecture, "Hamlet: the Prince or the Poem?" signaled his wish to draw critics away from the slumber of character study back to the central question of genre. Lewis also extended Knight's interest in metaphysical and specifically Christian elements in Shakespeare's work. Knight, however, blamed Hamlet himself as the flawed, frankly malevolent cause of Elsinore's corruption (a view shared by Rebecca West), whereas Lewis believed the tragic hero of *Hamlet* to be man generally, marred by original sin and unable to understand himself or his surrounding universe.

Peter Alexander in his mid-century criticism similarly generalized Hamlet's character, but he reached conclusions different from both Knight and Lewis. To Alexander, Hamlet represented a noble, civil, and active "complete man." Paul Gottschalk in *The Meanings of Hamlet: Modes of Literary Interpretation Since Bradley* described the play as a "universal anagoge" in its capacity to illuminate, for some critics at least, broad human experience or the "moral life of man." The midcentury literary critic William Empson, however, saw a less metaphysical,

more pragmatic reason for Hamlet's behavior. He believed that Shakespeare rewrote the old (lost) play *Hamlet* because he was asked to, as the original version had been a huge magnet for audiences. The real "Hamlet problem," Empson asserted, was that the material in general and Hamlet's delay in particular were so familiar to Shakespeare's contemporary audience. Shakespeare addressed this problem, said Empson, by making Hamlet ask in soliloquies what his audiences were asking: Why was he delaying his revenge?

Knight's defense of deep structures and his attention to religious motifs are traceable in the mythopoetic criticism of Northrop Frye, one of the century's greatest literary critics. At the same time, Knight's treatment of the Shakespearean text as an inviolable poem, defined by image and symbol, reflected the growing influence of the aesthetic values of T. S. Eliot and the school of New Criticism that he inspired. The young Eliot, no doubt aware of the buzz he would create with such a view, had famously declared in his essay "Hamlet" (1919) that Shakespeare's masterpiece was in fact an artistic failure. Why? Because it had no "objective correlative," a term Eliot defined as a "set of objects, a situation, a chain of events" that represent the play's particular, overriding emotion. This critical denunciation, however, did not stop Eliot from alluding to *Hamlet* in his lyric poetry, particularly "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (in which the unheroic speaker contrasts himself with the prince) and *The Waste Land*.

Really, Eliot's allusions are unsurprising: Nearly every major writer of the early twentieth century engaged in various ways with Shakespeare and his canonical Dane. Thomas Hardy seemed to make a Hamlet out of Shakespeare himself when calling the playwright "[b]right baffling Soul" who "[s]till shalt remain at heart unread eternally." James Joyce, in his modernist masterpiece *Ulysses*, included a profound bit of literary criticism (in addition to a variety of other forms of writing) when the character Stephen Daedalus sits in the Dublin library and broods upon estranged fathers and sons in *Hamlet*, in Shakespeare's own life, and ultimately in his own. In the context of references to Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf is better known today for her feminist imagining of Shakespeare's sister in "A Room of One's Own." But throughout her writings Woolf regularly invoked Shakespeare, such as in this passage from her essay "A Sketch from the Past": "From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is a hidden pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. . . . we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself."

English writers creatively reenvisioned Shakespeare's play even more frequently in the second half of the twentieth century. "Who could mime anything new from this heap of / Old British rubbish?" asked the poet U. A.

Fanthorpe in "Robert Lindsay's Hamlet." The actor does so in the poem, and by writing the poem Fanthorpe managed to do so, too. A fellow poet, Stevie Smith, characteristically favored parody when she converted Hamlet's most vengeful speech into an early bird's soliloquy: "It is the very bewitching hour of eight / Which is the moment when my new day begins. . . ." No doubt the wittiest, most inventive parodist of *Hamlet* during the past half-century has been the English playwright Tom Stoppard. The young Stoppard had found Olivier's film version "boring," but a few years later he was inspired by the performance of a 24-year-old Peter O'Toole at Bristol's Old Vic Theatre. In 1965, Stoppard achieved his first and most lasting mark as a playwright with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Influenced by Samuel Beckett's sense of tragic absurdity and the meta-theater of Pirandello, Stoppard's play subversively made title characters out of the bit players in Shakespeare's original play. In an interview Stoppard once said that he was fascinated by the inference that *Hamlet's* Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "don't really know what they're doing" and "the little they are told is mainly lies."

Internationally, too, *Hamlet* frequently influenced modern writers. It became for many a symbol of the twentieth century's trials and confusions, and specifically it served as an object of meditation for those who encountered the political brutalities of fascism or Stalinism. German writer Bertolt Brecht used *Hamlet* to expound upon his theory of theatrical alienation in "A Short Organum for the Theatre." (According to Brecht's analysis, young Hamlet has obtained the gift of reason at Wittenberg, but he is unable to use it in the feudal culture of Denmark. Refusing the bloody command of the ghost and nearly escaping to England, Hamlet encounters on the Danish border another warrior, Fortinbras. Overcome by yet another figure of violence, Hamlet relents, returns to Elsinore, and succumbs to the "piece of barbaric butchery" that concludes the play.) Brecht saw in Hamlet's deadly, pitiless environment the "dark and bloody period in which I am writing," a Europe caught up in Hitler's savagery. In particular, Russian artists responded to the sinister claustrophobia of *Hamlet*, from the writers Osip Mandelstam and Boris Pasternak (whose poem "Hamlet" from his novel *Doctor Zhivago* is included here) to Grigori Kozintsev's memorable 1964 Soviet film, *Hamlet*.

An earlier counterpart and fellow witness, the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova famously asked why her century was worse than all others. In her early poem "Hamlet" she gave voice to an offended Ophelia. It is as if Akhmatova were foreseeing, across continents, the development of the work of feminist critics decades later. Among these are Carol Thomas Neely, Kay Stanton, Rebecca Smith, and Carolyn Heilbrun, whose revisionist study of Gertrude (1957) is included here. These readers of *Hamlet* analyzed the presence and concerns of the play's female characters, which they considered neglected or under-read, or concentrated on the play's representation of gender issues in general.

The second half of the century saw an even greater flowering of critical approaches to *Hamlet*. Deconstructionist or poststructuralist critics such as Howard Felperin and Terence Hawkes uncovered the “textual coordinates” of Shakespeare’s literary creations, which, they said, make his works indeterminate and ultimately inescapable. Marxist, Cultural Materialist, and New Historicist critics such as Terry Eagleton, Margot Heinemann, Jonathan Dollimore, and Stephen Greenblatt sought, in their different ways, to identify Renaissance plays as cultural productions that reflected limited perspectives (even as critics’ own insights are limited) and were grounded in local knowledge and local ideological tensions.

The remaining essays in this section are meant to provide a range of postwar reactions to Shakespeare’s finally ineffable play. Harold Goddard considered how the earlier characters of Hal, Falstaff, and Brutus reappear in aspects of Hamlet’s character, and he explored how a person’s understanding of *Hamlet* is unavoidably complicated by his or her knowledge of Shakespeare’s later tragedies. Stephen Booth, writing at a time of critical and cultural changes in 1969, cast a wary eye at the many “ideal forms toward which *Hamlet* seems to be moving.” He proposed instead to “talk about what the play *does* do” and what it “undeniably is: a succession of actions upon the understanding of an audience.” Margaret Ferguson reflected on some of the linguistic and poststructuralist currents of the 1980s, whereas Graham Bradshaw expressed (in a 1990 excerpt presented here) the increasing skepticism that certain critics felt toward these earlier currents. Consciously looking back to earlier critics such as Samuel Johnson, Harold Bloom focused on character and personality in Shakespeare’s works.

### 1901—G. K. Chesterton. “The True Hamlet”

G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) was one of England’s most recognizable and quotable men of letters in the early twentieth century. A defender of “orthodoxy” against literary opponents such as H.G. Wells, he wrote essays, poems, biographies, literary criticism, and journalism.

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A recent critic enunciates a view of Hamlet which flies flat in the face of every accepted theory; he maintains that Hamlet was not irresolute, not over-intellectual, not procrastinating, not weak. The challenge, erroneous as it may be, is spirited, ingenious and well-reasoned, and it can do nothing but honour to Shakespeare. The more varied are the versions of friends and enemies, the more flatly irreconcilable are the opinions of various men about Hamlet, the more he resembles a real man. The characters of fiction, mysterious as they are, are far less mysterious than the figures of history. Men have agreed about Hamlet vastly more than they have agreed about Caesar or Mahomet or Cromwell or Mr. Gladstone or Cecil Rhodes. Nobody supposes that Mr. Gladstone was a

solar myth; nobody has started the theory that Mr. Rhodes is only the hideous phantom of an idle dream. Yet hardly three men agree about either of them, hardly anyone knows that some new and suggestive view of them might not be started at any moment. If Hamlet can be thus surprised, if he can be thus taken in the rear, it is a great tribute to the solidity of the figure. If from another standpoint he appears like another statue, it shows at least that the figure is made of marble and not of cardboard. Neither the man who thinks Lord Beaconsfield a hero nor the man who thinks him a snob doubts his existence. It is a great tribute to literature if neither the man who thinks Hamlet a weakling, nor the man who thinks him a hero ever thinks of doubting Hamlet's existence.

Personally, I think the critic absolutely right in denouncing the idea that Hamlet was a "witty weakling". There is a great difference between a weakness which is at liberty and a strength which is rusted and clogged. Hamlet was not a weak man fundamentally. Shakespeare never forgets to remind us that he had an elemental force and fire in him, liable to burst out and strike everyone with terror.

Yet have I something in me dangerous  
Which let thy wisdom fear.

But Hamlet was a man in whom the faculty of action had been clogged, not by the smallness of his moral nature, but by the greatness of his intellectual. Actions were really important to him, only they were not quite so dazzling and dramatic as thoughts. He belonged to a type of man which some men will never understand, the man for whom what happens inside his head does actually and literally happen; for whom ideas are adventures, for whom metaphors are living monsters, for whom an intellectual parallel has the irrevocable sanctity of a marriage ceremony. Hamlet failed, but through the greatness of his upper, not the weakness of his lower, storey. He was a giant, but he was top-heavy.

But while I warmly agree in holding that the moral greatness of Hamlet is enormously underrated, I cannot agree that Hamlet was a moral success. If this is true, indeed, the whole story loses its central meaning; if the hero was a success, the play is a failure. Surely no one who remembers Hamlet's tremendous speech, beginning:

O what a rogue and peasant slave am I,

can share the critic's conclusion:

He is not here condemning himself for inaction, there is no cause for the reproach, he is using the resources of passion and eloquence to spur himself to action.

It is difficult for me to imagine anyone reading that appalling cry out of the very hell of inutility and think that Hamlet is not condemning himself for inaction. Hamlet may, of course, be only casually mentioning that he is a moral coward; for the matter of that, the Ghost may be only cracking a joke when he says he has been murdered. But if ever there was sincerity in any human utterance, there is in the remorse of Hamlet.

The truth is that Shakespeare's Hamlet is immeasurably vaster than any mere ethical denunciation or ethical defence. Figures like this, scribbled in a few pages of pen and ink, can claim, like living human beings, to be judged by Omniscience. To call Hamlet a "witty weakling" is entirely to miss the point, which is his greatness; to call him a triumphant hero is to miss a point quite as profound. It is the business of art to seize these nameless points of greatness and littleness; the truth is not so much that art is immoral as that art has to single out sins that are not to be found in any decalogue and virtues that cannot be named in any allegory. But upon the whole it is always more indulgent than philanthropy. Falstaff was neither brave nor honest, nor chaste, nor temperate, nor clean, but he had the eighth cardinal virtue for which no name has ever been found. Hamlet was not fitted for this world; but Shakespeare does not dare to say whether he was too good or too bad for it.



### 1902—Walter de la Mare. "Polonius," "Ophelia," and "Hamlet"

Often associated with the Georgian poets, Walter de la Mare (1873–1956) is best remembered for his poem "The Listeners" and his children's stories. He also wrote short stories and novels, edited anthologies, and worked for many years for Standard Oil in London.

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#### "Polonius"

There haunts in Time's bare house an active ghost,  
 Enamoured of his name, Polonius.  
 He moves small fingers much, and all his speech  
 Is like a sampler of precisest words,  
 Set in the pattern of a simpleton.  
 His mirth floats eerily down chill corridors;  
 His sigh—it is a sound that loves a keyhole;  
 His tenderness a faint court-tarnished thing;  
 His wisdom prates as from a wicker cage;  
 His very belly is a pompous nought;

His eye a page that hath forgot his errand.  
Yet in his bran—his spiritual bran—  
Lies hid a child's demure, small, silver whistle  
Which, to his horror, God blows, unawares,  
And sets men staring. It is sad to think,  
Might he but don indeed thin flesh and blood,  
And pace important to Law's inmost room,  
He would see, much marvelling, one immensely wise,  
Named Bacon, who, at sound of his youth's step,  
Would turn and call him Cousin—for the likeness.

### **“Ophelia”**

There runs a crisscross pattern of small leaves  
Espalier, in a fading summer air,  
And there Ophelia walks, an azure flower,  
Whom wind, and snowflakes, and the sudden rain  
Of love's wild skies have purified to heaven.  
There is a beauty past all weeping now  
In that sweet, crooked mouth, that vacant smile;  
Only a lonely grey in those mad eyes,  
Which never on earth shall learn their loneliness.  
And when amid startled birds she sings lament,  
Mocking in hope the long voice of the stream,  
It seems her heart's lute hath a broken string.  
Ivy she hath, that to old ruin clings;  
And rosemary, that sees remembrance fade;  
And pansies, deeper than the gloom of dreams;  
But ah! if utterable, would this earth  
Remain the base, unreal thing it is?  
Better be out of sight of peering eyes;  
Out—out of hearing of all-useless words,  
Spoken of tedious tongues in heedless ears.  
And lest, at last, the world should learn heart-secrets;  
Lest that sweet wolf from some dim thicket steal;  
Better the glassy horror of the stream.

### **“Hamlet”**

Umbrageous cedars murmuring symphonies  
Stooped in late twilight o'er dark Denmark's Prince:  
He sat, his eyes companioned with dream—  
Lustrous large eyes that held the world in view  
As some entranced child's a puppet show.



Darkness gave birth to the all-trembling stars,  
 And a far roar of long-drawn cataracts,  
 Flooding immeasurable night with sound.  
 He sat so still, his very thoughts took wing,  
 And, lightest Ariels, the stillness haunted  
 With midge-like measures; but, at last, even they  
 Sank 'neath the influences of his night.  
 The sweet dust shed faint perfume in the gloom;  
 Through all wild space the stars' bright arrows fell  
 On the lone Prince—the troubled son of man—  
 On Time's dark waters in unearthly trouble:  
 Then, as the roar increased, and one fair tower  
 Of cloud took sky and stars with majesty,  
 He rose, his face a parchment of old age,  
 Sorrow hath scribbled o'er, and o'er, and o'er.



1904—A. C. Bradley.  
 From *Shakespearean Tragedy*

One of the twentieth century's most influential literary critics of Shakespeare, A. C. Bradley (1851–1935) played a large role in making Shakespeare a valid field for academic study as the discipline of English literature developed. His lectures from his five-year stint as Professor of Poetry at Oxford University eventually became chapters in *Shakespearean Tragedy*, which has been reprinted numerous times. He focused especially on Shakespeare's characters, with emphasis on the "high" tragedies of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*.

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Suppose you were to describe the plot of *Hamlet* to a person quite ignorant of the play, and suppose you were careful to tell your hearer nothing about Hamlet's character, what impression would your sketch make on him? Would he not exclaim: 'What a sensational story! Why, here are some eight violent deaths, not to speak of adultery, a ghost, a mad woman, and a fight in a grave! If I did not know that the play was Shakespeare's, I should have thought it must have been one of those early tragedies of blood and horror from which he is said to have redeemed the stage'? And would he not then go on to ask: 'But why in the world did not Hamlet obey the Ghost at once, and so save seven of those eight lives?'

The exclamation and this question both show the same thing, that the whole story turns upon the peculiar character of the hero. For without this character the story would appear sensational and horrible; and yet the actual *Hamlet* is very far from being so, and even has a less terrible effect than *Othello*, *King Lear* or *Macbeth*. And again, if we had no knowledge of this character, the story would hardly be intelligible; it would at any rate at once suggest that wondering question about the conduct of the hero; while the story of any of the other three tragedies would sound plain enough and would raise no such question. It is further very probable that the main change made by Shakespeare in the story as already represented on the stage, lay in a new conception of Hamlet's character and so of the cause of his delay. And, lastly, when we examine the tragedy, we observe two things which illustrate the same point. First, we find by the side of the hero no other figure of tragic proportions, no one like Lady Macbeth or Iago, no one even like Cordelia or Desdemona; so that, in Hamlet's absence, the remaining characters could not yield a Shakespearean tragedy at all. And, secondly, we find among them two, Laertes and Fortinbras, who are evidently designed to throw the character of the hero into relief. Even in the situations there is a curious parallelism; for Fortinbras, like Hamlet, is the son of a king, lately dead, and succeeded by his brother; and Laertes, like Hamlet, has a father slain, and feels bound to avenge him. And with this parallelism in situation there is a strong contrast in character; for both Fortinbras and Laertes possess in abundance the very quality which the hero seems to lack, so that as we read, we are tempted to exclaim that either of them would have accomplished Hamlet's task in a day. Naturally, then, the tragedy of *Hamlet* with Hamlet left out has become the symbol of extreme absurdity; while the character itself has probably exerted a greater fascination, and certainly has been the subject of more discussion, than any other in the whole literature of the world.

Before, however, we approach the task of examining it, it is as well to remind ourselves that the virtue of the play by no means wholly depends on this most subtle creation. We are all aware of this, and if we were not so the history of *Hamlet*, as a stage-play, might bring the fact home to us. It is to-day the most popular of Shakespeare's tragedies on our stage; and yet a large number, perhaps even the majority of the spectators, though they may feel some mysterious attraction in the hero, certainly do not question themselves about his character or the cause of his delay, and would still find the play exceptionally effective, even if he were an ordinary brave young man and the obstacles in his path were purely external. And this has probably always been the case. *Hamlet* seems from the first to have been a favourite play; but until late in the eighteenth century, I believe, scarcely a critic showed that he perceived anything specially interesting in the character. Hanmer, in 1730, to be sure, remarks that 'there appears no reason at all in nature why this young prince did not put the usurper to death as soon as possible'; but it does not even cross his mind that this apparent

'absurdity' is odd and might possibly be due to some design on the part of the poet. He simply explains the absurdity by observing that, if Shakespeare had made the young man go 'naturally to work', the play would have come to an end at once! Johnson, in like manner, notices that 'Hamlet is, through the whole piece, rather an instrument than an agent', but it does not occur to him that this peculiar circumstance can be anything but a defect in Shakespeare's management of the plot. Seeing, they saw not. Henry Mackenzie, the author of *The Man of Feeling*, was, it would seem, the first of our critics to feel the 'indescribable charm' of Hamlet, and to divine something of Shakespeare's intention. 'We see a man', he writes, 'who in other circumstances would have exercised all the moral and social virtues, placed in a situation in which even the amiable qualities of his mind serve but to aggravate his distress and to perplex his conduct'.<sup>8</sup> How significant is the fact (if it be the fact) that it was only when the slowly rising sun of Romance began to flush the sky that the wonder, beauty and pathos of this most marvellous of Shakespeare's creations began to be visible! We do not know that they were perceived even in his own day, and perhaps those are not wholly wrong who declare that this creation, so far from being a characteristic product of the time, was a vision of

the prophetic soul  
Of the wide world dreaming on things to come.

But the dramatic splendour of the whole tragedy is another matter, and must have been manifest not only in Shakespeare's day but even in Hamner's.

It is indeed so obvious that I pass it by, and proceed at once to the central question of Hamlet's character. And I believe time will be saved, and a good deal of positive interpretation may be introduced, if, without examining in detail any one theory, we first distinguish classes or types of theory which appear to be in various ways and degrees insufficient or mistaken. And we will confine but attention to sane theories;—for on this subject, as on all questions relating to Shakespeare, there are plenty of merely lunatic views: the view, for example, that Hamlet, being a disguised woman in love with Horatio, could hardly help seeming unkind to Ophelia; or the view that, being a very clever and wicked young man who wanted to oust his innocent uncle from the throne, he 'faked' the Ghost with this intent.

But, before we come to our types of theory, it is necessary to touch on an idea, not unfrequently met with, which would make it vain labour to discuss or propose any theory at all. It is sometimes said that Hamlet's character is not only intricate but unintelligible. Now this statement might mean something quite unobjectionable and even perhaps true and important. It might mean that the character cannot be *wholly* understood. As we saw, there may be questions which we cannot answer with certainty now, because we have nothing but the text

to guide us, but which never arose for the spectators who saw *Hamlet* acted in Shakespeare's day; and we shall have to refer to such questions in these lectures. Again, it may be held without any improbability that, from carelessness or because he was engaged on this play for several years, Shakespeare left inconsistencies in his exhibition of the character which must prevent us from being certain of his ultimate meaning. Or, possibly, we may be baffled because he has illustrated in it certain strange facts of human nature, which he had noticed but of which we are ignorant. But then all this would apply in some measure to other characters in Shakespeare, and it is not this that is meant by the statement that Hamlet is unintelligible. What is meant is that Shakespeare *intended* him to be so, because he himself was feeling strongly, and wished his audience to feel strongly, what a mystery life is, and how impossible it is for us to understand it. Now here, surely, we have mere confusion of mind. The mysteriousness of life is one thing, the psychological unintelligibility of a dramatic character is quite another; and the second does not show the first, it shows only the incapacity or folly of the dramatist. If it did show the first, it would be very easy to surpass Shakespeare in producing a sense of mystery: we should simply have to portray an absolutely nonsensical character. Of course *Hamlet* appeals powerfully to our sense of the mystery of life, but so does *every* good tragedy; and it does so not because the hero is an enigma to us, but because, having a fair understanding of him, we feel how strange it is that strength and weakness should be so mingled in one soul, and that this soul should be doomed to such misery and apparent failure.

(1) To come, then, to our typical views, we may lay it down, first, that no theory will hold water which finds the cause of Hamlet's delay merely, or mainly, or even to any considerable extent, in external difficulties. Nothing is easier than to spin a plausible theory of this kind. What, it may be asked,<sup>9</sup> was Hamlet to do when the Ghost had left him with its commission of vengeance? The King was surrounded not merely by courtiers but by a Swiss body-guard: how was Hamlet to get at him? Was he then to accuse him publicly of the murder? If he did, what would happen? How would he prove the charge? All that he had to offer in proof was—a ghost-story! Others, to be sure, had seen the Ghost, but no one else had heard its revelations. Obviously, then, even if the court had been honest, instead of subservient and corrupt, it would have voted Hamlet mad, or worse, and would have shut him up out of harm's way. He could not see what to do, therefore, and so he waited. Then came the actors, and at once with admirable promptness he arranged for the play-scene, hoping that the King would betray his guilt to the whole court. Unfortunately the King did not. It is true that immediately afterwards Hamlet got his chance; for he found the King defenceless on his knees. But what Hamlet wanted was not a private revenge, to be followed by his own imprisonment or execution; it was public justice. So he spared the King; and, as he unluckily killed Polonius just afterwards, he had to consent to be despatched to England. But, on the voyage there, he discovered

the King's commission, ordering the King of England to put him immediately to death; and, with this in his pocket, he made his way back to Denmark. For now, he saw, the proof of the King's attempt to murder him would procure belief also for the story of the murder of his father. His enemy, however, was too quick for him, and his public arraignment of that enemy was prevented by his own death.

A theory like this sounds very plausible—so long as you do not remember the text. But no unsophisticated mind, fresh from the reading of *Hamlet*, will accept it; and, as soon as we begin to probe it, fatal objections arise in such numbers that I choose but a few, and indeed I think the first of them is enough.

(a) From beginning to end of the play, Hamlet never makes the slightest reference to any external difficulty. How is it possible to explain this fact in conformity with the theory? For what conceivable reason should Shakespeare conceal from us so carefully the key to the problem?

(b) Not only does Hamlet fail to allude to such difficulties, but he always assumes that he *can* obey the Ghost,<sup>10</sup> and he once asserts this in so many words ('Sith I have cause and will and strength and means To do't', IV. iv. 45).

(c) Again, why does Shakespeare exhibit Laertes quite easily raising the people against the King? Why but to show how much more easily Hamlet, whom the people loved, could have done the same thing, if that was the plan he preferred?

(d) Again, Hamlet did *not* plan the play-scene in the hope that the King would betray his guilt to the court. He planned it, according to his own account, in order to convince *himself* by the King's agitation that the Ghost had spoken the truth. This is perfectly clear from II. ii. 625 ff. and from III. ii. 80 ff. Some readers are misled by the words in the latter passage:

if his occulted guilt  
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,  
It is a damned ghost that we have seen.

The meaning obviously is, as the context shows, 'if his hidden guilt do not betray itself *on occasion of* one speech', viz., the 'dozen or sixteen lines' with which Hamlet has furnished the player, and of which only six are delivered, because the King does not merely show his guilt in his face (which was all Hamlet had hoped, III. ii. 90) but rushes from the room.

It may be as well to add that, although Hamlet's own account of his reason for arranging the play-scene may be questioned, it is impossible to suppose that, if his real design had been to provoke an open confession of guilt, he could have been unconscious of this design.

(e) Again, Hamlet never once talks, or shows a sign of thinking, of the plan of bringing the King to public justice; he always talks of using his 'sword' or his 'arm'. And this is so just as much *after* he has returned to Denmark with the

commission in his pocket as it was *before* this event. When he has told Horatio the story of the voyage, he does not say, 'Now I can convict him': he says, 'Now am I not justified in using this arm?'

This class of theory, then, we must simply reject. But it suggests two remarks. It is of course quite probable that, when Hamlet was 'thinking too precisely on the event', he was considering, among other things, the question how he could avenge his father without sacrificing his own life or freedom. And assuredly, also, he was anxious that his act of vengeance should not be misconstrued, and would never have been content to leave a 'wounded name' behind him. His dying words prove that.

(2) Assuming, now, that Hamlet's main difficulty—almost the whole of his difficulty—was internal, I pass to views which, acknowledging this, are still unsatisfactory because they isolate one element in his character and situation and treat it as the whole.

According to the first of these typical views, Hamlet was restrained by conscience or a moral scruple; he could not satisfy himself that it was right to avenge his father.

This idea, like the first, can easily be made to look very plausible if we vaguely imagine the circumstances without attending to the text. But attention to the text is fatal to it. For, on the one hand, scarcely anything can be produced in support of it, and, on the other hand, a great deal can be produced in its disproof. To take the latter point first, Hamlet, it is impossible to deny, habitually assumes, without any questioning, that he *ought* to avenge his father. Even when he doubts, or thinks that he doubts, the honesty of the Ghost, he expresses no doubt as to what his duty will be if the Ghost turns out honest: 'If he but blench I know my course'. In the two soliloquies where he reviews his position (II. ii., 'O what a rogue and peasant slave am I', and IV. iv., 'How all occasions do inform against me') he reproaches himself bitterly for the neglect of his duty. When he reflects on the possible causes of this neglect he never mentions among them a moral scruple. When the Ghost appears in the Queen's chamber he confesses, conscience-stricken, that, lapsed in time and passion, he has let go by the acting of its command; but he does not plead that his conscience stood in his way. The Ghost itself says that it comes to whet his 'almost blunted purpose'; and conscience may unsettle a purpose but does not blunt it. What natural explanation of all this can be given on the conscience theory?

And now what can be set against this evidence? One solitary passage.<sup>11</sup> Quite late, after Hamlet has narrated to Horatio the events of his voyage, he asks him (V. ii. 63):

Does it not, thinks't thee, stand me now upon—  
He that hath kill'd my king and whored my mother,  
Popp'd in between the election and my hopes,

Thrown out his angle for my proper life,  
 And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience  
 To quit him with this arm? and is't not to be damn'd  
 To let this canker of our nature come  
 In further evil?

Here, certainly, is a question of conscience in the usual present sense of the word; and, it may be said, does not this show that all along Hamlet really has been deterred by moral scruples? But I ask first how, in that case, the facts just adduced are to be explained: for they must be explained, not ignored. Next, let the reader observe that even if this passage did show that *one* hindrance to Hamlet's action was his conscience, it by no means follows that this was the sole or the chief hindrance. And, thirdly, let him observe, and let him ask himself whether the coincidence is a mere accident, that Hamlet is here almost repeating the words he used in vain self-reproach some time before (IV. iv. 56):

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?

Is it not clear that he is speculating just as vainly now, and that this question of conscience is but one of his many unconscious excuses for delay? And, lastly, is it not so that Horatio takes it? He 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.

In other words, 'Enough of this endless procrastination. What is wanted is not reasons for the deed, but the deed itself'. What can be more significant?

Perhaps, however, it may be answered: 'Your explanation of this passage may be correct, and the facts you have mentioned do seem to be fatal to the theory of conscience in its usual form. But there is another and subtler theory of conscience. According to it, Hamlet, so far as his explicit consciousness went, was sure that he ought to obey the Ghost; but in the depths of his nature, and unknown to himself, there was a moral repulsion to the deed. The conventional moral ideas of his time, which he shared with the Ghost, told him plainly that he ought to avenge his father; but a deeper conscience in him, which was in advance of his time, contended with these explicit conventional ideas. It is because this deeper conscience remains below the surface that he fails to recognise it, and fancies he is hindered by cowardice or sloth or passion or what not; but it emerges into light

in that speech to Horatio. And it is just because he has this nobler moral nature in him that we admire and love him'.

Now I at once admit not only that this view is much more attractive and more truly tragic than the ordinary conscience theory, but that it has more verisimilitude. But I feel no doubt that it does not answer to Shakespeare's meaning, and I will simply mention, out of many objections to it, three which seem to be fatal. (a) If it answers to Shakespeare's meaning, why in the world did he conceal that meaning until the last Act? The facts adduced above seem to show beyond question that, on the hypothesis, he did so. That he did so is surely next door to incredible. In any case, it certainly requires an explanation, and certainly has not received one. (b) Let us test the theory by reference to a single important passage, that where Hamlet finds the King at prayer and spares him. The reason Hamlet gives himself for sparing the King is that, if he kills him now, he will send him to heaven, whereas he desires to send him to hell. Now, this reason may be an unconscious excuse, but is it believable that, if the real reason had been the stirrings of his deeper conscience, *that* could have masked itself in the form of a desire to send his enemy's soul to hell? Is not the idea quite ludicrous? (c) The theory requires us to suppose that, when the Ghost enjoins Hamlet to avenge the murder of his father, it is laying on him a duty which *we* are to understand to be no duty but the very reverse. And is not that supposition wholly contrary to the natural impression which we all receive in reading the play? Surely it is clear that, whatever we in the twentieth century may think about Hamlet's duty, we are meant in the play to assume that he *ought* to have obeyed the Ghost.

The conscience theory, then, in either of its forms we must reject. But it may remind us of points worth noting. In the first place, it is certainly true that Hamlet, in spite of some appearances to the contrary, was, as Goethe said, of a most moral nature, and had a great anxiety to do right. In this anxiety he resembles Brutus, and it is stronger in him than in any of the later heroes. And, secondly, it is highly probable that in his interminable broodings the kind of paralysis with which he was stricken masked itself in the shape of conscientious scruples as well as in many other shapes. And, finally, in his shrinking from the deed there was probably, together with much else, something which may be called a moral, though not a conscientious, repulsion: I mean a repugnance to the idea of falling suddenly on a man who could not defend himself. This, so far as we can see, was the only plan that Hamlet ever contemplated. There is no positive evidence in the play that he regarded it with the aversion that any brave and honourable man, one must suppose, would feel for it; but, as Hamlet certainly was brave and honourable, we may presume that he did so.

(3) We come next to what may be called the sentimental view of Hamlet, a view common both among his worshippers and among his defamers. Its germ may perhaps be found in an unfortunate phrase of Goethe's (who of course is not responsible for the whole view): 'a lovely, pure and most moral nature, *without the*



*strength of nerve which forms a hero*, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away'. When this idea is isolated, developed and popularised, we get the picture of a graceful youth, sweet and sensitive, full of delicate sympathies and yearning aspirations, shrinking from the touch of everything gross and earthly; but frail and weak, a kind of Werther, with a face like Shelley's and a voice like Mr. Tree's. And then we ask in tender pity, how could such a man perform the terrible duty laid on him?

How, indeed! And what a foolish Ghost even to suggest such a duty! But this conception, though not without its basis in certain beautiful traits of Hamlet's nature, is utterly untrue. It is too kind to Hamlet on one side, and it is quite unjust to him on another. The 'conscience' theory at any rate leaves Hamlet a great nature which you can admire and even revere. But for the 'sentimental' Hamlet you can feel only pity not unmingled with contempt. Whatever else he is, he is no *hero*.

But consider the text. This shrinking, flower-like youth—how could he possibly have done what we *see* Hamlet do? What likeness to him is there in the Hamlet who, summoned by the Ghost, bursts from his terrified friends with the cry:

Unhand me, gentlemen!

By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me;

the Hamlet who scarcely once speaks to the King without an insult, or to Polonius without a gibe; the Hamlet who storms at Ophelia and speaks daggers to his mother; the Hamlet who, hearing a cry behind the arras, whips out his sword in an instant and runs the eavesdropper through; the Hamlet who sends his 'school-fellows' to their death and never troubles his head about them more; the Hamlet who is the first man to board a pirate ship, and who fights with Laertes in the grave; the Hamlet of the catastrophe, an omnipotent fate, before whom all the court stands helpless, who, as the truth breaks upon him, rushes on the King, drives his foil right through his body,<sup>12</sup> then seizes the poisoned cup and forces it violently between the wretched man's lips, and in the throes of death has force and fire enough to wrest the cup from Horatio's hand ('By heaven, I'll have it!') lest he should drink and die? This man, the Hamlet of the play, is a heroic, terrible figure. He would have been formidable to Othello or Macbeth. If the sentimental Hamlet had crossed him, he would have hurled him from his path with one sweep of his arm.

This view, then, or any view that approaches it, is grossly unjust to Hamlet, and turns tragedy into mere pathos. But, on the other side, it is too kind to him. It ignores the hardness and cynicism which were indeed no part of his nature, but yet, in this crisis of his life, are indubitably present and painfully marked. His sternness, itself left out of sight by this theory, is no defect; but he is much more

than stern. Polonius possibly deserved nothing better than the words addressed to his corpse:

Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!  
 I took thee for thy better: take thy fortune:  
 Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger;

yet this was Ophelia's father, and, whatever he deserved, it pains us, for Hamlet's own sake, to hear the words:

This man shall set me packing:  
 I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room.

There is the same insensibility in Hamlet's language about the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; and, observe, their deaths were not in the least required by his purpose. Grant, again, that his cruelty to Ophelia was partly due to misunderstanding, partly forced on him, partly feigned; still one surely cannot altogether so account for it, and still less can one so account for the disgusting and insulting grossness of his language to her in the play-scene. I know this is said to be merely an example of the custom of Shakespeare's time. But it is not so. It is such language as you will find addressed to a woman by no other hero of Shakespeare's, not even in that dreadful scene where Othello accuses Desdemona. It is a great mistake to ignore these things, or to try to soften the impression which they naturally make on one. That this embitterment, callousness, grossness, brutality, should be induced on a soul so pure and noble is profoundly tragic; and Shakespeare's business was to show this tragedy, not to paint an ideally beautiful soul unstained and undisturbed by the evil of the world and the anguish of conscious failure.<sup>13</sup>

(4) There remains, finally, that class of view which may be named after Schlegel and Coleridge. According to this, *Hamlet* is the tragedy of reflection. The cause of the hero's delay is irresolution; and the cause of this irresolution is excess of the reflective or speculative habit of mind. He has a general intention to obey the Ghost, but 'the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought'. He is 'thought-sick.' 'The whole', says Schlegel, 'is intended to show how a calculating consideration which aims at exhausting, so far as human foresight can, all the relations and possible consequences of a deed, cripples<sup>14</sup> the power of acting. . . . Hamlet is a hypocrite towards himself; his far-fetched scruples are often mere pretexts to cover his want of determination. . . . He has no firm belief in himself or in anything else. . . . He loses himself in labyrinths of thought'. So Coleridge finds in Hamlet 'an almost enormous intellectual activity and a proportionate aversion to real action consequent upon it' (the aversion, that is to say, is consequent on the activity). Professor Dowden objects to this

view, very justly, that it neglects the emotional side of Hamlet's character, 'which is quite as important as the intellectual'; but, with this supplement, he appears on the whole to adopt it. Hamlet, he says, 'loses a sense of fact because with him each object and event transforms and expands itself into an idea. . . . He cannot steadily keep alive within himself a sense of the importance of any positive, limited thing,—a deed, for example'. And Professor Dowden explains this condition by reference to Hamlet's life. 'When the play opens he has reached the age of thirty years . . . and he has received culture of every kind except the culture of active life. During the reign of the strong-willed elder Hamlet there was no call to action for his meditative son. He has slipped on into years of full manhood still a haunter of the university, a student of philosophies, an amateur in art, a ponderer on the things of life and death, who has never formed a resolution or executed a deed' (*Shakspeare, his Mind and Art*, 4th ed., pp. 132, 133).

On the whole, the Schlegel-Coleridge theory (with or without Professor Dowden's modification and amplification) is the most widely received view of Hamlet's character. And with it we come at last into close contact with the text of the play. It not only answers, in some fundamental respects, to the general impression produced by the drama, but it can be supported by Hamlet's own words in his soliloquies—such words, for example, as those about the native hue of resolution, or those about the craven scruple of thinking too precisely on the event. It is confirmed, also, by the contrast between Hamlet on the one side and Laertes and Fortinbras on the other; and, further, by the occurrence of those words of the King to Laertes (IV. vii. 119 f.), which, if they are not in character, are all the more important as showing what was in Shakespeare's mind at the time:

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 sigh  
 That hurts by easing.

And, lastly, even if the view itself does not suffice, the *description* given by its adherents of Hamlet's state of mind, as we see him in the last four Acts, is, on the whole and so far as it goes, a true description. The energy of resolve is dissipated in an endless brooding on the deed required. When he acts, his action does not proceed from this deliberation and analysis, but is sudden and impulsive, evoked by an emergency in which he has no time to think. And most of the reasons he assigns for his procrastination are evidently not the true reasons, but unconscious excuses.

Nevertheless this theory fails to satisfy. And it fails not merely in this or that detail, but as a whole. We feel that its Hamlet does not fully answer to our imaginative impression. He is not nearly so inadequate to this impression as the sentimental Hamlet, but still we feel he is inferior to Shakespeare's man and does him wrong. And when we come to examine the theory we find that it is partial and leaves much unexplained. I pass that by for the present, for we shall find, I believe, that the theory is also positively misleading, and that in a most important way. And of this I proceed to speak.

Hamlet's irresolution, or his aversion to real action, is, according to the theory, the *direct* result of 'an almost enormous intellectual activity' in the way of 'a calculating consideration which attempts to exhaust all the relations and possible consequences of a deed'. And this again proceeds from an original one-sidedness of nature, strengthened by habit, and, perhaps, by years of speculative inaction. The theory describes, therefore, a man in certain respects like Coleridge himself, on one side a man of genius, on the other side, the side of will, deplorably weak, always procrastinating and avoiding unpleasant duties, and often reproaching himself in vain; a man, observe, who at *any* time and in *any* circumstances would be unequal to the task assigned to Hamlet. And thus, I must maintain, it degrades Hamlet and travesties the play. For Hamlet, according to all the indications in the text, was not naturally or normally such a man, but rather, I venture to affirm, a man who at any *other* time and in any *other* circumstances than those presented would have been perfectly equal to his task; and it is, in fact, the very cruelty of his fate that the crisis of his life comes on him at the one moment when he cannot meet it, and when his highest gifts, instead of helping him, conspire to paralyse him. This aspect of the tragedy the theory quite misses; and it does so because it misconceives the cause of that irresolution which, on the whole, it truly describes. For the cause was not directly or mainly an habitual excess of reflectiveness. The direct cause was a state of mind quite abnormal and induced by special circumstances,—a state of profound melancholy. Now, Hamlet's reflectiveness doubtless played a certain part in the *production* of that melancholy, and was thus one indirect contributory cause of his irresolution. And, again, the melancholy, once established, displayed, as one of its *symptoms*, an excessive reflection on the required deed. But excess of reflection was not, as the theory makes it, the *direct* cause of the irresolution at all; nor was it the *only* indirect cause; and in the Hamlet of the last four Acts it is to be considered rather a symptom of his state than a cause of it.

These assertions may be too brief to be at once clear, but I hope they will presently become so.

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## 4

'Melancholy', I said, not dejection, nor yet insanity. That Hamlet was not far from insanity is very probable. His adoption of the pretence of madness may well have been due in part to fear of the reality; to an instinct of self-preservation, a fore-feeling that the pretence would enable him to give some utterance to the load that pressed on his heart and brain, and a fear that he would be unable altogether to repress such utterance. And if the pathologist calls his state melancholia, and even proceeds to determine its species, I see nothing to object to in that; I am grateful to him for emphasizing the fact that Hamlet's melancholy was no mere common depression of spirits; and I have no doubt that many readers of the play would understand it better if they read an account of melancholia in a work on mental diseases. If we like to use the word 'disease' loosely, Hamlet's condition may truly be called diseased. No exertion of will could have dispelled it. Even if he had been able at once to do the bidding of the Ghost he would doubtless have still remained for some time under the cloud. It would be absurdly unjust to call *Hamlet* a study of melancholy, but it contains such a study.

But this melancholy is something very different from insanity, in anything like the usual meaning of that word. No doubt it might develop into insanity. The longing for death might become an irresistible impulse to self-destruction; the disorder of feeling and will might extend to sense and intellect; delusions might arise; and the man might become, as we say, incapable and irresponsible. But Hamlet's melancholy is some way from this condition. It is a totally different thing from the madness which he feigns; and he never, when alone or in company with Horatio alone, exhibits the signs of that madness. Nor is the dramatic use of this melancholy, again, open to the objections which would justly be made to the portrayal of an insanity which brought the hero to a tragic end. The man who suffers as Hamlet suffers—and thousands go about their business suffering thus in greater or less degree—is considered irresponsible neither by other people nor by himself: he is only too keenly conscious of his responsibility. He is therefore, so far, quite capable of being a tragic agent, which an insane person, at any rate according to Shakespeare's practice, is not. And, finally, Hamlet's state is not one which a healthy mind is unable sufficiently to imagine. It is probably not further from average experience, nor more difficult to realise, than the great tragic passions of Othello, Antony or Macbeth.

Let me try to show now, briefly, how much this melancholy accounts for.

It accounts for the main fact, Hamlet's inaction. For the *immediate* cause of that is simply that his habitual feeling is one of disgust at life and everything in it, himself included,—a disgust which varies in intensity, rising at times into a longing for death, sinking often into weary apathy, but is never dispelled for more than brief intervals. Such a state of feeling is inevitably adverse to *any* kind of decided action; the body is inert, the mind indifferent or worse; its

response is, 'it does not matter', 'it is not worth while', 'it is no good'. And the action required of Hamlet is very exceptional. It is violent, dangerous, difficult to accomplish perfectly, on one side repulsive to a man of honour and sensitive feeling, on another side involved in a certain mystery (here come in thus, in their subordinate place, various causes of inaction assigned by various theories). These obstacles would not suffice to prevent Hamlet from acting, if his state were normal; and against them there operate, even in his morbid state, healthy and positive feelings, love of his father, loathing of his uncle, desire of revenge, desire to do duty. But the retarding motives acquire an unnatural strength because they have an ally in something far stronger than themselves, the melancholic disgust and apathy; while the healthy motives, emerging with difficulty from the central mass of diseased feeling, rapidly sink back into it and 'lose the name of action'. We see them doing so; and sometimes the process is quite simple, no analytical reflection on the deed intervening between the outburst of passion and the relapse into melancholy.<sup>24</sup> But this melancholy is perfectly consistent also with that incessant dissection of the task assigned, of which the Schlegel-Coleridge theory makes so much. For those endless questions (as we may imagine them), 'Was I deceived by the Ghost? How am I to do the deed? When? Where? What will be the consequence of attempting it—success, my death, utter misunderstanding, mere mischief to the State? Can it be right to do it, or noble to kill a defenceless man? What is the good of doing it in such a world as this?'—all this, and whatever else passed in a sickening round through Hamlet's mind, was not the healthy and right deliberation of a man with such a task, but otiose thinking hardly deserving the name of thought, an unconscious weaving of pretexts for inaction, aimless tossings on a sick bed, symptoms of melancholy which only increased it by deepening self-contempt.

Again, (*a*) this state accounts for Hamlet's energy as well as for his lassitude, those quick decided actions of his being the outcome of a nature normally far from passive, now suddenly stimulated, and producing healthy impulses which work themselves out before they have time to subside. (*b*) It accounts for the evidently keen satisfaction which some of these actions give to him. He arranges the play-scene with lively interest, and exults in its success, not really because it brings him nearer to his goal, but partly because it has hurt his enemy and partly because it has demonstrated his own skill (III. ii. 286–304). He looks forward almost with glee to countermining the Kings designs in sending him away (III. iv. 209), and looks back with obvious satisfaction, even with pride, to the address and vigour he displayed on the voyage (V. ii. 1–55). These were not *the* action on which his morbid self-feeling had centred; he feels in them his old force, and escapes in them from his disgust. (*c*) It accounts for the pleasure with which he meets old acquaintances, like his 'school-fellows' or the actors. The former observed (and we can observe) in him a 'kind of joy' at first, though it is followed by 'much forcing of his disposition' as he attempts to keep this joy and

his courtesy alive in spite of the misery which so soon returns upon him and the suspicion he is forced to feel. (*d*) It accounts no less for the painful features of his character as seen in the play, his almost savage irritability on the one hand, and on the other his self-absorption, his callousness, his insensibility to the fates of those whom he despises, and to the feelings even of those whom he loves. These are frequent symptoms of such melancholy, and (*e*) they sometimes alternate, as they do in Hamlet, with bursts of transitory, almost hysterical, and quite fruitless emotion. It is to these last (of which a part of the soliloquy, 'O what a rogue', gives a good example) that Hamlet alludes when, to the Ghost, he speaks of himself as 'lapsed in *passion*', and it is doubtless partly his conscious weakness in regard to them that inspires his praise of Horatio as a man who is not 'Passion's slave'.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, Hamlet's melancholy accounts for two things which seem to be explained by nothing else. The first of these is his apathy or 'lethargy'. We are bound to consider the evidence which the text supplies of this, though it is usual to ignore it. When Hamlet mentions, as one possible cause of his inaction, his 'thinking too precisely on the event', he mentions another, 'bestial oblivion'; and the thing against which he inveighs in the greater part of that soliloquy (IV. iv.) is not the excess or the misuse of reason (which for him here and always is god-like), but this *bestial* oblivion or '*dullness*', this 'letting all *sleep*', this allowing of heaven-sent reason to 'fust unused':

What is a man,  
If his chief good and market of his time  
Be but to *sleep* and feed? a *beast*, no more.<sup>26</sup>

So, in the soliloquy in II. ii. he accuses himself of being 'a *dull* and muddy-mettled rascal', who 'peaks [mopes] like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of his cause', dully indifferent to his cause.<sup>27</sup> So, when the Ghost appears to him the second time, he accuses himself of being tardy and lapsed in *time*; and the Ghost speaks of his purpose being almost *blunted*, and bids him not to *forget* (cf. 'oblivion'). And so, what is emphasised in those undramatic but significant speeches of the player-king and of Claudius is the mere dying away of purpose or of love.<sup>28</sup> Surely what all this points to is not a condition of excessive but useless mental activity (indeed there is, in reality, curiously little about that in the text), but rather one of dull, apathetic, brooding gloom, in which Hamlet, so far from analysing his duty, is not thinking of it at all, but for the time literally *forgets* it. It seems to me we are driven to think of Hamlet *chiefly* thus during the long time which elapsed between the appearance of the Ghost and the events presented in the Second Act. The Ghost, in fact, had more reason than we suppose at first for leaving with Hamlet as his parting injunction the command, 'Remember me',

and for greeting him, on re-appearing, with the command, 'Do not forget'.<sup>29</sup> These little things in Shakespeare are not accidents.

The second trait which is fully explained only by Hamlet's melancholy is his own inability to understand why he delays. This emerges in a marked degree when an occasion like the player's emotion or the sight of Fortinbras's army stings Hamlet into shame at his inaction. 'Why,' he asks himself in genuine bewilderment, 'do I linger? Can the cause be cowardice? Can it be sloth? Can it be thinking too precisely of the event? And does *that* again mean cowardice? What is it that makes me sit idle when I feel it is shameful to do so, and when I have *cause, and will, and strength, and means*, to act?' A man irresolute merely because he was considering a proposed action too minutely would not feel this bewilderment. A man might feel it whose conscience secretly condemned the act which his explicit consciousness approved; but we have seen that there is no sufficient evidence to justify us in conceiving Hamlet thus. These are the questions of a man stimulated for the moment to shake off the weight of his melancholy, and, because for the moment he is free from it, unable to understand the paralysing pressure which it exerts at other times.

I have dwelt thus at length on Hamlet's melancholy because, from the psychological point of view, it is the centre of the tragedy, and to omit it from consideration or to underrate its intensity is to make Shakespeare's story unintelligible. But the psychological point of view is not equivalent to the tragic; and, having once given its due weight to the fact of Hamlet's melancholy, we may freely admit, or rather may be anxious to insist, that this pathological condition would excite but little, if any, tragic interest if it were not the condition of a nature distinguished by that speculative genius on which the Schlegel-Coleridge type of theory lays stress. Such theories misinterpret the connection between that genius and Hamlet's failure, but still it is this connection which gives to his story its peculiar fascination and makes it appear (if the phrase may be allowed) as the symbol of a tragic mystery inherent in human nature. Wherever this mystery touches us, wherever we are forced to feel the wonder and awe of man's godlike 'apprehension' and his 'thoughts that wander through eternity', and at the same time are forced to see him powerless in his petty sphere of action, and powerless (it would appear) from the very divinity of his thought, we remember Hamlet. And this is the reason why, in the great ideal movement which began towards the close of the eighteenth century, this tragedy acquired a position unique among Shakespeare's dramas, and shared only by Goethe's *Faust*. It was not that *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's greatest tragedy or most perfect work of art; it was that *Hamlet* most brings home to us at once the sense of the soul's infinity, and the sense of the doom which not only circumscribes that infinity but appears to be its offspring.



## NOTES

8. *The Mirror*, 18th April, 1780, quoted by Furness, *Variorum Hamlet*, ii. 148. In the above remarks I have relied mainly on Furness's collection of extracts from early critics.

9. I do not profess to reproduce any one theory, and, still less, to do justice to the ablest exponent of this kind of view, Werder (*Vorlesungen über Hamlet*, 1875), who, by no means, regards Hamlet's difficulties as *merely* external.

10. I give one instance. When he spares the King, he speaks of killing him when he is drunk asleep, when he is in his rage, when he is awake in bed, when he is gaming, as if there were in none of these cases the least obstacle (III. iii. 89 ff.).

11. It is surprising to find quoted, in support of the conscience view, the line 'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all', and to observe the total misinterpretation of the soliloquy *To be or not to be*, from which the line comes. In this soliloquy Hamlet is not thinking of the duty laid upon him at all. He is debating the question of suicide. No one oppressed by the ills of life, he says, would continue to bear them if it were not for speculation about his possible fortune in another life. And then, generalising, he says (what applies to himself, no doubt, though he shows no consciousness of the fact) that such speculation or reflection makes men hesitate and shrink like cowards from great actions and enterprises. 'Conscience' does not mean moral sense or scrupulosity, but this reflection on the *consequences* of action. It is the same thing as the 'craven scruple of thinking too precisely on the event' of the speech in IV. iv. As to this use of 'conscience,' see Schmidt, *s.v.* and the parallels there given. The *Oxford Dictionary* also gives many examples of similar uses of 'conscience', though it unfortunately lends its authority to the misinterpretation criticised.

12. The King does not die of the *poison* on the foil, like Laertes and Hamlet. They were wounded before he was, but they die after him.

13. I may add here a word on one small matter. It is constantly asserted that Hamlet wept over the body of Polonius. Now, if he did, it would make no difference to my point in the paragraph above but there is no warrant in the text for the assertion. It is based on some words of the Queen (IV. i. 24), in answer to the King's question, 'Where is he 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; he weeps for what is done.

But the Queen, as was pointed out by Doering, is trying to screen her son. She has already made the false statement that when Hamlet, crying, 'A rat! a rat!', ran his rapier through the arras, it was because he heard *something stir* there, whereas we know that what he heard was a man's voice crying 'What ho! help, help, help!' And in this scene she has come straight from the interview with her son, terribly agitated, shaken with 'sighs' and 'profound heaves,' in the night (line 30). Now we know what Hamlet said to the body, and of the body, in that interview; and there is assuredly no sound of tears in the voice that said those things and others. The only sign of relenting is in the words (III. iv. 171):

For this same lord,  
I do repent: but heaven hath pleased it so,

To punish me with this and this with me,  
That I must be their scourge and minister.

His mother's statement, therefore, is almost certainly untrue, though it may be to her credit. (It is just conceivable that Hamlet wept at III. iv. 130, and that the Queen supposed he was weeping for Polonius.)

Perhaps, however, he may have wept over Polonius's body afterwards? Well, in the *next* scene (IV. ii.) we see him *alone* with the body, and are therefore likely to witness his genuine feelings. And his first words are, 'Safely stowed'!

14. Not 'must cripple', as the English translation has it.

24. *E.g.* in the transition from desire for vengeance into the wish never to have been born; in the soliloquy, 'O what a rogue'; in the scene at Ophelia's grave. The Schlegel-Coleridge theory does not account for the psychological movement in these passages.

25. Hamlet's violence at Ophelia's grave, though probably intentionally exaggerated, is another example of this want of self-control. The Queen's description of him (V. i. 307),

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,

may be true to life, though it is evidently prompted by anxiety to excuse his violence on the ground of his insanity.

26. Throughout, I italicise to show the connection of ideas.

27. Cf. *Measure for Measure*, IV. iv. 23, 'This deed . . . makes me unpregnant and dull to all proceedings'.

28. III. ii. 196 ff., IV. vii. 111 ff.: *e.g.*,

Purpose is but the slave to *memory*,  
Of violent birth but poor validity.

29. So, before, he had said to him:

And duller should'st thou be than the fat weed  
That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,  
Would'st thou not stir in this.

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### 1909—Anna Akhmatova. "Reading *Hamlet*"

Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966) was one of Russia's greatest poets in the twentieth century. Throughout her life she endured many hardships both personal and literary, and her great lyric cycle *Requiem* is a sober

witness to the Stalinist terrors. She often inspired other Russian poets, including Osip Mandelstam and Boris Pasternak.

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A barren patch to the right of the cemetery,  
beyond it, a river flashing blue.  
You said: 'Go, get thee to a nunnery  
or get a fool to marry you . . .'

Princes always speak like that,  
but I've remembered the words.  
As an ermine mantle let them stream  
behind him, for thousands of years.

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### 1919—T. S. Eliot. "Hamlet and His Problems"

T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) was a poet, playwright, and literary and cultural critic. He helped to define High Modernism and, to an even greater degree, the influential critical movement known as the New Criticism. Eliot received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948.

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Few critics have even admitted that *Hamlet* the play is the primary problem, and Hamlet the character only secondary. And Hamlet the character has had an especial temptation for that most dangerous type of critic; the critic with a mind which is naturally of the creative order, but which through some weakness in creative power exercises itself in criticism instead. These minds often find in Hamlet a vicarious existence for their own artistic realization. Such a mind had Goethe, who made of Hamlet a Werther; and such had Coleridge, who made of Hamlet a Coleridge; and probably neither of these men in writing about Hamlet remembered that his first business was to study a work of art. The kind of criticism that Goethe and Coleridge produced, in writing of *Hamlet*, is the most misleading kind possible. For they both possessed unquestionable critical insight, and both make their critical aberrations the more plausible by the substitution—of their own *Hamlet* for Shakespeare's—which their creative gift effects. We should be thankful that Walter Pater did not fix his attention on this play.

Two writers of our own time, Mr. J. M. Robertson and Professor Stoll of the University of Minnesota, have issued small books which can be praised for moving in the other direction. Mr. Stoll performs a service in recalling to our

attention the labours of the critics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,<sup>1</sup> observing that

they knew less about psychology than more recent *Hamlet* critics, but they were nearer in spirit to Shakespeare's art; and as they insisted on the importance of the effect of the whole rather than on the importance of the leading character, they were nearer, in their old-fashioned way, to the secret of dramatic art in general.

*Qua* work of art, the work of art cannot be interpreted, there is nothing to interpret: we can only criticise it according to standards, in comparison to other works of art and for "interpretation" the chief task is the presentation of relevant historical facts which the reader is not assumed to know. Mr. Robertson points out, very pertinently, how critics have failed in their "interpretation" of *Hamlet* by ignoring what ought to be very obvious; that *Hamlet* is a stratification, that it represents the efforts of a series of men, each making what he could out of the work of his predecessors. The *Hamlet* of Shakespeare will appear to us very differently if, instead of treating the whole action of the play as due to Shakespeare's design, we perceive his *Hamlet* to be superposed upon much cruder material which persists even in the final form.

We know that there was an older play by Thomas Kyd, that extraordinary dramatic (if not poetic) genius who was in all probability the author of two plays so dissimilar as *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Arden of Feversham*; and what this play was like we can guess from three clues: from *The Spanish Tragedy* itself, from the tale of Belleforest upon which Kyd's *Hamlet* must have been based, and from a version acted in Germany in Shakespeare's lifetime which bears strong evidence of having been adapted from the earlier, not from the later, play. From these three sources it is clear that in the earlier play the motive was a revenge-motive simply; that the action or delay is caused, as in *The Spanish Tragedy*, solely by the difficulty of assassinating a monarch surrounded by guards; and that the "madness" of Hamlet was feigned in order to escape suspicion, and successfully. In the final play of Shakespeare, on the other hand, there is a motive which is more important than that of revenge, and which explicitly "blunts" the latter; the delay in revenge is unexplained on grounds of necessity or expediency; and the effect of the "madness" is not to lull but to arouse the king's suspicion. The alteration is not complete enough, however, to be convincing. Furthermore, there are verbal parallels so close to *The Spanish Tragedy* as to leave no doubt that in places Shakespeare was merely *revising* the text of Kyd. And finally there are unexplained scenes—the Polonius-Laertes and the Polonius-Reynaldo scenes—for which there is little excuse; these scenes are not in the verse style of Kyd, and not beyond doubt in the style of Shakespeare. These Mr. Robertson believes to be scenes in the original play of Kyd reworked by a third hand, perhaps Chapman,

before Shakespeare touched the play. And he concludes, with very strong show of reason, that the original play of Kyd was, like certain other revenge plays, in two parts of five acts each. The upshot of Mr. Robertson's examination is, we believe, irrefragable: that Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, so far as it is Shakespeare's, is a play dealing with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son, and that Shakespeare was unable to impose this motive successfully upon the "intractable" material of the old play.

Of the intractability there can be no doubt. So far from being Shakespeare's masterpiece, the play is most certainly an artistic failure. In several ways the play is puzzling, and disquieting as is none of the others. Of all the plays it is the longest and is possibly the one on which Shakespeare spent most pains; and yet he has left in it superfluous and inconsistent scenes which even hasty revision should have noticed. The versification is variable. Lines like

Look, the morn, in russet mantle clad,  
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill,

are of the Shakespeare of *Romeo and Juliet*. The lines in Act v, sc. ii,

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting  
That would not let me sleep . . .  
Up from my cabin,  
My sea-gown scarf'd about me, in the dark  
Grop'd I to find out them: had my desire;  
Finger'd their packet;

are of his mature period. Both workmanship and thought are in an unstable position. We are surely justified in attributing the play, with that other profoundly interesting play of "intractable" material and astonishing versification, *Measure for Measure*, to a period of crisis, after which follow the tragic successes which culminate in *Coriolanus*. *Coriolanus* may be not as "interesting" as *Hamlet*, but it is, with *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare's most assured artistic success. And probably more people have thought *Hamlet* a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art. It is the "Mona Lisa" of literature.

The grounds of *Hamlet's* failure are not immediately obvious. Mr. Robertson is undoubtedly correct in concluding that the essential emotion of the play is the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother:

"[Hamlet's] tone is that of one who has suffered tortures on  
the score of his mother's degradation. . . . The guilt of a mother is an

almost intolerable motive for drama, but it had to be maintained and emphasized to supply a psychological solution, or rather a hint of one."

This, however, is by no means the whole story. It is not merely the "guilt of a mother" that cannot be handled as Shakespeare handled the suspicion of Othello, the infatuation of Antony, or the pride of Coriolanus. The subject might conceivably have expanded into a tragedy like these, intelligible, self-complete, in the sunlight. *Hamlet*, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art. And when we search for this feeling, we find it, as in the sonnets, very difficult to localize. You cannot point to it in the speeches; indeed, if you examine the two famous soliloquies you see the versification of Shakespeare, but a content which might be claimed by another, perhaps by the author of the *Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois*, Act V, sc. i. We find Shakespeare's *Hamlet* not in the action, not in any quotations that we might select, so much as in an unmistakable tone which is unmistakably not in the earlier play.

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. If you examine any of Shakespeare's more successful tragedies, you will find this exact equivalence; you will find that the state of mind of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep has been communicated to you by a skilful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions; the words of Macbeth on hearing of his wife's death strike us as if, given the sequence of events, these words were automatically released by the last event in the series. The artistic "inevitability" lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*. Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in *excess* of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author is genuine to this point: that Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem. Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her. It is thus a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action. None of the possible actions can satisfy it; and nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet for him. And it must be noticed that the very nature of the *données* of the problem precludes objective equivalence. To have heightened the criminality of Gertrude would have been to provide the formula for a totally different emotion in Hamlet; it

is just *because* her character is so negative and insignificant that she arouses in Hamlet the feeling which she is incapable of representing.

The "madness" of Hamlet lay to Shakespeare's hand; in the earlier play a simple ruse, and to the end, we may presume, understood as a ruse by the audience. For Shakespeare it is less than madness and more than feigned. The levity of Hamlet, his repetition of phrase, his puns, are not part of a deliberate plan of dissimulation, but a form of emotional relief. In the character Hamlet it is the buffoonery of an emotion which can find no outlet in action; in the dramatist it is the buffoonery of an emotion which he cannot express in art. The intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has known; it is doubtless a subject of study for pathologists. It often occurs in adolescence: the ordinary person puts these feelings to sleep, or trims down his feelings to fit the business world; the artist keeps them alive by his ability to intensify the world to his emotions. The Hamlet of Laforgue is an adolescent; the Hamlet of Shakespeare is not, he has not that explanation and excuse. We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble puzzle; under compulsion of what experience he attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible, we cannot ever know. We need a great many facts in his biography; and we should like to know whether, and when, and after or at the same time as what personal experience, he read Montaigne, II. xii, *Apologie de Raimond Sebond*.

We should have, finally, to know something which is by hypothesis unknowable, for we assume it to be an experience which, in the manner indicated, exceeded the facts. We should have to understand things which Shakespeare did not understand himself.

#### NOTES

1. I have never, by the way, seen a cogent refutation of Thomas Rymer's objections to *Othello*.



### 1922—James Joyce. From *Ulysses*

One of Ireland's greatest writers, James Joyce (1882-1941) was the author of *The Dubliners*, a collection of stories; the loose memoir *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; the iconoclastic *Ulysses* (which a Modern Library poll judged the best novel of the twentieth century); and the even more challenging novel *Finnegans Wake*. His polyglot training,

intense study of the history of the English language, and general scholarship made him a shrewd reader of Shakespeare.

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Urbane, to comfort them, the quaker librarian purred:

—And we have, have we not, those priceless pages of *Wilhelm Meister*. A great poet on a great brother poet. A hesitating soul taking arms against a sea of troubles, torn by conflicting doubts, as one sees in real life.

He came a step a sinkapace forward on neatsleather creaking and a step backward a sinkapace on the solemn floor.

A noiseless attendant setting open the door but slightly made him a noiseless beck.

—Directly, said he, creaking to go, albeit lingering. The beautiful ineffectual dreamer who comes to grief against hard facts. One always feels that Goethe's judgments are so true. True in the larger analysis.

Twicreakingly analysis he corantoed off. Bald, most zealous by the door he gave his large ear all to the attendant's words: heard them: and was gone.

Two left.

(. . .)

—Our young Irish bards, John Eglington censured, have yet to create a figure which the world will set beside Saxon Shakespeare's Hamlet though I admire him, as old Ben did, on this side idolatry.

—All these questions are purely academic, Russell oracled out of his shadow. I mean, whether Hamlet is Shakespeare or James I or Essex. Clergymen's discussions of the historicity of Jesus. Art has to reveal to us ideas, formless spiritual essences. The supreme question about a work of art is out of how deep a life does it spring. The painting of Gustave Moreau is the painting of ideas. The deepest poetry of Shelley, the words of Hamlet bring our minds into contact with the eternal wisdom, Plato's world of ideas. All the rest is the speculation of schoolboys for schoolboys.

(. . .)

From these words Mr Best turned an unoffending face to Stephen.

—Mallarmé, don't you know, he said, has written those wonderful prose poems Stephen MacKenna used to read to me in Paris. The one about *Hamlet*. He says: *il se promène, lisant au livre de lui-même*, don't you



know, *reading the book of himself*. He describes *Hamlet* given in a French town, don't you know, a provincial town. They advertised it.

His free hand graciously wrote tiny signs in air.

*HAMLET*

*ou*

*LE DISTRAIT*

*Pièce de Shakespeare*

He repeated to John Eglinton's newgathered frown:

—*Pièce de Shakespeare*, don't you know. It's so French. The French point of view. *Hamlet ou . . .*

—The absentminded beggar, Stephen ended.

John Eglinton laughed.

—Yes, I suppose it would be, he said. Excellent people, no doubt, but distressingly shortsighted in some matters.

Sumptuous and stagnant exaggeration of murder.

—A deathsman of the soul Robert Greene called him, Stephen said. Not for nothing was he a butcher's son, wielding the sledged poleaxe and spitting in his palms. Nine lives are taken off for his father's one. Our Father who art in purgatory. Khaki Hamlets don't hesitate to shoot. The bloodboltered shambles in act five is a forecast of the concentration camp sung by Mr Swinburne.

Cranly, I his mute orderly, following battles from afar.

*Whelps and dams of murderous foes whom none  
But we had spared . . .*

Between the Saxon smile and yankee yawp. The devil and the deep sea.

—He will have it that *Hamlet* is a ghoststory, John Eglinton said for Mr Best's behoof. Like the fat boy in *Pickwick* he wants to make our flesh creep.

*List! List! O List!*

My flesh hears him: creeping, hears.

*If thou didst ever . . .*

—What is a ghost? Stephen said with tingling energy. One who has faded into impalpability through death, through absence, through

change of manners. Elizabethan London lay as far from Stratford as corrupt Paris lies from virgin Dublin. Who is the ghost from *limbo patrum*, returning to the world that has forgotten him? Who is King Hamlet?

John Eglinton shifted his spare body, leaning back to judge.  
Lifted.

—It is this hour of a day in mid June, Stephen said, begging with a swift glance their hearing. The flag is up on the playhouse by the bankside. The bear Sackerson growls in the pit near it, Paris garden. Canvasclimbers who sailed with Drake chew their sausages among the groundlings.

Local colour.

Work in all you know. Make them accomplices.

—Shakespeare has left the huguenot's house in Silver street and walks by the swanmews along the riverbank. But he does not stay to feed the pen chivying her game of cygnets towards the rushes. The swan of Avon has other thoughts.

Composition of place. Ignatius Loyola, make haste to help me!

—The play begins. A player comes on under the shadow, made up in the castoff mail of a court buck, a wellset man with a bass voice. It is the ghost, the king, a king and no king, and the player is Shakespeare who has studied *Hamlet* all the years of his life which were not vanity in order to play the part of the spectre. He speaks the words to Burbage, the young player who stands before him beyond the rack of cerecloth, calling him by a name:

*Hamlet, I am thy father's spirit*

bidding him list. To a son he speaks, the son of his soul, the prince, young Hamlet and to the son of his body, Hamnet Shakespeare, who has died in Stratford that his namesake may live for ever.

—Is it possible that that player Shakespeare, a ghost by absence, and in the vesture of buried Denmark, a ghost by death, speaking his own words to his own son's name (had Hamnet Shakespeare lived he would have been prince Hamlet's twin), is it possible, I want to know, or probable that he did not draw or foresee the logical conclusion of those premises: you are the dispossessed son: I am the murdered father: your mother is the guilty queen, Ann Shakespeare, born Hathaway?

—But this prying into the family life of a great man, Russell began impatiently.

Art thou there, truepenny?

—Interesting only to the parish clerk. I mean, we have the plays. I mean when we read the poetry of *King Lear* what is it to us how the poet lived? As for living our servants can do that for us, Villiers de l'Isle has said. Peeping and prying into greenroom gossip of the day, the poet's drinking, the poet's debts. We have *King Lear*: and it is immortal.

Mr Best's face, appealed to, agreed.

(...)

—Do you mean to fly in the face of the tradition of three centuries? John Eglinton's carping voice asked. Her ghost at least has been laid for ever. She died, for literature at least, before she was born.

—She died, Stephen retorted, sixtyseven years after she was born. She saw him into and out of the world. She took his first embraces. She bore his children and she laid pennies on his eyes to keep his eyelids closed when he lay on his deathbed.

Mother's deathbed. Candle. The sheeted mirror. Who brought me into this world lies there, bronzelidded, under few cheap flowers. *Liliata rutilantium*.

I wept alone.

John Eglinton looked in the tangled glowworm of his lamp.

—The world believes that Shakespeare made a mistake, he said, and got out of it as quickly and as best he could.

—Bosh! Stephen said rudely. A man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery.

Portals of discovery opened to let in the quaker librarian, softcreekfooted, bald, eared and assiduous.

—A shrew, John Eglinton said shrewdly, is not a useful portal of discovery, one should imagine. What useful discovery did Socrates learn from Xanthippe?

—Dialectic, Stephen answered: and from his mother how to bring thoughts into the world. What he learnt from his other wife Myrto (*absit nomen!*), Socratididion's Epipsychidion, no man, not a woman, will ever know. But neither the midwife's lore nor the caudlelectures saved him from the archons of Sinn Fein and their noggin of hemlock.

—But Ann Hathaway? Mr Best's quiet voice said forgetfully. Yes, we seem to be forgetting her as Shakespeare himself forgot her.

His look went from brooder's beard to carper's skull, to remind, to chide them not unkindly, then to the baldpink lollard costard, guiltless though maligned.

—He had a good groatsworth of wit, Stephen said, and no truant memory. He carried a memory in his wallet as he trudged to

Romeville whistling *The girl I left behind me*. If the earthquake did not time it we should know where to place poor Wat, sitting in his form, the cry of hounds, the studded bridle and her blue windows. That memory, *Venus and Adonis*, lay in the bedchamber of every light-of-love in London. Is Katharine the shrew illfavoured? Hortensio calls her young and beautiful. Do you think the writer of *Antony and Cleopatra*, a passionate pilgrim, had his eyes in the back of his head that he chose the ugliest doxy in all Warwickshire to lie withal? Good: he left her and gained the world of men. But his boywomen are the women of a boy. Their life, thought, speech are lent them by males. He chose badly? He was chosen, it seems to me. If others have their will Ann hath a way. By cock, she was to blame. She put the comether on him, sweet and twentysix. The greyeyed goddess who bends over the boy Adonis, stooping to conquer, as prologue to the swelling act, is a boldfaced Stratford wench who tumbles in a cornfield a lover younger than herself.

And my turn? When?

(. . .)

Coffined thoughts around me, in mummycases, embalmed in spice of words. Thoth, god of libraries, a birdgod, moonycrowned. And I heard the voice of that Egyptian highpriest. *In painted chambers loaded with tilebooks*.

They are still. Once quick in the brains of men. Still: but an itch of death is in them, to tell me in my ear a maudlin tale, urge me to wreak their will.

—Certainly, John Eglinton mused, of all great men he is the most enigmatic. We know nothing but that he lived and suffered. Not even so much. Others abide our question. A shadow hangs over all the rest.

—But *Hamlet* is so personal, isn't it? Mr Best pleaded. I mean, a kind of private paper, don't you know, of his private life. I mean, I don't care a button, don't you know, who is killed or who is guilty . . .

He rested an innocent book on the edge of the desk, smiling his defiance. His private papers in the original. *Ta an bad ar an tir. Taim imo shagart*. Put beurla on it, littlejohn.

Quoth littlejohn Eglinton:

—I was prepared for paradoxes from what Malachi Mulligan told us but I may as well warn you that if you want to shake my belief that Shakespeare is Hamlet you have a stern task before you.

Bear with me.

Stephen withstood the bane of miscreant eyes glinting stern under wrinkled brows. A basilisk. *E quando vede l'uomo l'attosca*. Messer Brunetto, I thank thee for the word.

—As we, or mother Dana, weave and unweave our bodies, Stephen said, from day to day, their molecules shuttled to and fro, so does the artist weave and unweave his image. And as the mole on my right breast is where it was when I was born, though all my body has been woven of new stuff time after time, so through the ghost of the unquiet father the image of the unliving son looks forth. In the intense instant of imagination, when the mind, Shelley says, is a fading coal, that which I was is that which I am and that which in possibility I may come to be. So in the future, the sister of the past, I may see myself as I sit here now but by reflection from that which then I shall be.

Drummond of Hawthornden helped you at that stile.

—Yes, Mr Best said youngly. I feel Hamlet quite young. The bitterness might be from the father but the passages with Ophelia are surely from the son.

Has the wrong sow by the lug. He is in my father. I am in his son.

—That mole is the last to go, Stephen said, laughing.

John Eglinton made a nothing pleasing mow.

—If that were the birthmark of genius, he said, genius would be a drug in the market. The plays of Shakespeare's later years which Renan admired so much breathe another spirit.

—The spirit of reconciliation, the quaker librarian breathed.

—There can be no reconciliation, Stephen said, if there has not been a sundering. Said that.

—If you want to know what are the events which cast their shadow over the hell of time of *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, look to see when and how the shadow lifts. What softens the heart of a man, shipwrecked in storms dire, Tried, like another Ulysses, Pericles, prince of Tyre?

Head, redconecapped, buffeted, brineblinded.

—A child, a girl, placed in his arms, Marina.

—The leaning of sophists towards the bypaths of apocrypha is a constant quantity, John Eglinton detected. The highroads are dreary but they lead to the town.

Good Bacon: gone musty. Shakespeare Bacon's wild oats.

(. . .)

The benign forehead of the quaker librarian enkindled rosily with hope.

—I hope Mr Dedalus will work out his theory for the enlightenment of the public. And we ought to mention another Irish commentator, Mr George Bernard Shaw. Nor should we forget Mr Frank Harris. His articles on Shakespeare in the *Saturday Review* were surely brilliant. Oddly enough he too draws for us an unhappy relation with the dark lady of the sonnets. The favoured rival is William Herbert, earl of Pembroke. I own that if the poet must be rejected such a rejection would seem more in harmony with—what shall I say?—our notions of what ought not to have been.

Felicitously he ceased and held a meek head among them, auk's egg, prize of their fray.

He thous and thees her with grave husbandwords. Dost love, Miriam? Dost love thy man?

—That may be too, Stephen said. There's a saying of Goethe's which Mr Magee likes to quote. Beware of what you wish for in youth because you will get it in middle life. Why does he send to one who is a *buonaroba*, a bay where all men ride, a maid of honour with a scandalous girlhood, a lordling to woo for him? He was himself a lord of language and had made himself a coistrel gentleman and he had written *Romeo and Juliet*. Why? Belief in himself has been untimely killed. He was overborne in a cornfield first (ryefield, I should say) and he will never be a victor in his own eyes after nor play victoriously the game of laugh and lie down. Assumed dongiovannism will not save him. No later undoing will undo the first undoing. The tusk of the boar has wounded him there where love lies ableeding. If the shrew is worsted yet there remains to her woman's invisible weapon. There is, I feel in the words, some goad of the flesh driving him into a new passion, a darker shadow of the first, darkening even his own understanding of himself. A like fate awaits him and the two rages commingle in a whirlpool.

They list. And in the porches of their ears I pour.

—The soul has been before stricken mortally, a poison poured in the porch of a sleeping ear. But those who are done to death in sleep cannot know the manner of their quell unless their Creator endow their souls with that knowledge in the life to come. The poisoning and the beast with two backs that urged it King Hamlet's ghost could not know of were he not endowed with knowledge by his creator. That is why the speech (his lean unlovely English) is always turned elsewhere, backward. Ravisher and ravished, what he would but would not, go with him from Lucrece's bluecircled ivory globes to Imogen's breast, bare, with its mole cinquespotted. He goes back, weary of the creation he has piled up to hide him from himself, an old dog licking an old sore. But, because loss is his gain, he passes on towards eternity in undiminished personality,

untaught by the wisdom he has written or by the laws he has revealed. His beaver is up. He is a ghost, a shadow now, the wind by Elsinore's rocks or what you will, the sea's voice, a voice heard only in the heart of him who is the substance of his shadow, the son consubstantial with the father.

—Amen! was responded from the doorway.

Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?

*Entr'acte.*

A ribald face, sullen as a dean's, Buck Mulligan came forward, then blithe in motley, towards the greeting of their smiles. My telegram.

(. . .)

—A father, Stephen said, battling against hopelessness, is a necessary evil. He wrote the play in the months that followed his father's death. If you hold that he, a greying man with two marriageable daughters, with thirtyfive years of life, *nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*, with fifty of experience, is the beardless undergraduate from Wittenberg then you must hold that his seventyyear old mother is the lustful queen. No. The corpse of John Shakespeare does not walk the night. From hour to hour it rots and rots. He rests, disarmed of fatherhood, having devised that mystical estate upon his son. Boccaccio's Calandrino was the first and last man who felt himself with child. Fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystical estate, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten. On that mystery and not on the madonna which the cunning Italian intellect flung to the mob of Europe the church is founded and founded irremovably because founded, like the world, macro- and microcosm, upon the void. Upon incertitude, upon unlikelihood. *Amor matris*, subjective and objective genitive, may be the only true thing in life. Paternity may be a legal fiction. Who is the father of any son that any son should love him or he any son?

What the hell are you driving at?

I know. Shut up. Blast you. I have reasons.

*Amplius. Adhuc. Iterum. Postea.*

Are you condemned to do this?

—They are sundered by a bodily shame so steadfast that the criminal annals of the world, stained with all other incests and bestialities, hardly record its breach. Sons with mothers, sires with daughters, lesbic sisters, loves that dare not speak their name, nephews with grandmothers, jailbirds with keyholes, queens with prize bulls. The

son unborn mars beauty: born, he brings pain, divides affection, increases care. He is a new male: his growth is his father's decline, his youth his father's envy, his friend his father's enemy.

In rue Monsieur-le-Prince I thought it.

—What links them in nature? An instant of blind rut.

Am I a father? If I were?

Shrunken uncertain hand.

—Sabellius, the African, subtlest heresiarch of all the beasts of the field, held that the Father was Himself His Own Son. The bulldog of Aquin, with whom no word shall be impossible, refutes him. Well: if the father who has not a son be not a father can the son who has not a father be a son? When Rutlandbaconsouthamptonshakespeare or another poet of the same name in the comedy of errors wrote *Hamlet* he was not the father of his own son merely but, being no more a son, he was and felt himself the father of all his race, the father of his own grandfather, the father of his unborn grandson who, by the same token, never was born, for nature, as Mr Magee understands her, abhors perfection.

Eglintoneyes, quick with pleasure, looked up shybrightly. Gladly glancing, a merry puritan, through the twisted eglantine.

Flatter. Rarely. But flatter.

—Himself his own father, Sonmulligan told himself. Wait. I am big with child. I have an unborn child in my brain. Pallas Athena! A play! The play's the thing! Let me parturiate!

He clasped his paunchbrow with both birthaiding hands.

—As for his family, Stephen said, his mother's name lives in the forest of Arden. Her death brought from him the scene with Volumnia in *Coriolanus*. His boyson's death is the deathscene of young Arthur in *King John*. Hamlet, the black prince, is Hamnet Shakespeare. Who the girls in *The Tempest*, in *Pericles*, in *Winter's Tale* are we know. Who Cleopatra, fleshpot of Egypt, and Cressid and Venus are we may guess. But there is another member of his family who is recorded.

—The plot thickens, John Eglinton said.

The quaker librarian, quaking, tiptoed in, quake, his mask, quake, with haste, quake, quack.

Door closed. Cell. Day.

They list. Three. They.

I you he they.

Come, mess.

(. . .)



—Why? Stephen answered himself. Because the theme of the false or the usurping or the adulterous brother or all three in one is to Shakespeare, what the poor are not, always with him. The note of banishment, banishment from the heart, banishment from home, sounds uninterruptedly from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* onward till Prospero breaks his staff, buries it certain fathoms in the earth and drowns his book. It doubles itself in the middle of his life, reflects itself in another, repeats itself, protasis, epitasis, catastasis, catastrophe. It repeats itself again when he is near the grave, when his married daughter Susan, chip of the old block, is accused of adultery. But it was the original sin that darkened his understanding, weakened his will and left in him a strong inclination to evil. The words are those of my lords bishops of Maynooth. An original sin and, like original sin, committed by another in whose sin he too has sinned. It is between the lines of his last written words, it is petrified on his tombstone under which her four bones are not to be laid. Age has not withered it. Beauty and peace have not done it away. It is in infinite variety everywhere in the world he has created, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, twice in *As You Like It*, in *The Tempest*, in *Hamlet*, in *Measure for Measure*—and in all the other plays which I have not read.

He laughed to free his mind from his mind's bondage.

Judge Eglinton summed up.

—The truth is midway, he affirmed. He is the ghost and the prince. He is all in all.

—He is, Stephen said. The boy of act one is the mature man of act five. All in all. In *Cymbeline*, in *Othello* he is bawd and cuckold. He acts and is acted on. Lover of an ideal or a perversion, like José he kills the real Carmen. His unremitting intellect is the hornmad Iago ceaselessly willing that the Moor in him shall suffer.

—Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuck Mulligan clucked lewdly. O word of fear!

Dark dome received, reverbed.

—And what a character is Iago! undaunted John Eglinton exclaimed. When all is said Dumas *fils* (or is it Dumas *père*?) is right. After God Shakespeare has created most.

—Man delights him not nor woman neither, Stephen said. He returns after a life of absence to that spot of earth where he was born, where he has always been, man and boy, a silent witness and there, his journey of life ended, he plants his mulberrytree in the earth. Then dies. The motion is ended. Gravediggers bury Hamlet *père* and Hamlet *fils*. A king and a prince at last in death, with incidental music. And, what though murdered and betrayed, bewept by all frail tender hearts

for, Dane or Dubliner, sorrow for the dead is the only husband from whom they refuse to be divorced. If you like the epilogue look long on it: prosperous Prospero, the good man rewarded, Lizzie, grandpa's lump of love, and nuncle Richie, the bad man taken off by poetic justice to the place where the bad niggers go. Strong curtain. He found in the world without as actual what was in his world within as possible. Maeterlinck says: *If Socrates leave his house today he will find the sage seated on his doorstep. If Judas go forth tonight it is to Judas his steps will tend.* Every life is many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love, but always meeting ourselves. The playwright who wrote the folio of this world and wrote it badly (He gave us light first and the sun two days later), the lord of things as they are whom the most Roman of catholics call *dio boia*, hangman god, is doubtless all in all in all of us, ostler and butcher, and would be bawd and cuckold too but that in the economy of heaven, foretold by Hamlet, there are no more marriages, glorified man, an androgynous angel, being a wife unto himself.

—*Eureka!* Buck Mulligan cried. *Eureka!*

Suddenly happied he jumped up and reached in a stride John Eglinton's desk.

—May I? he said. The Lord has spoken to Malachi.

He began to scribble on a slip of paper.

Take some slips from the counter going out.

—Those who are married, Mr Best, douce herald, said, all save one, shall live. The rest shall keep as they are.

He laughed, unmarried, at Eglinton Johannes, of arts a bachelor.

Unwed, unfancied, ware of wiles, they fingerponder nightly each his variorum edition of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

—You are a delusion, said roundly John Eglinton to Stephen. You have brought us all this way to show us a French triangle. Do you believe your own theory?

—No, Stephen said promptly.

—Are you going to write it? Mr Best asked. You ought to make it a dialogue, don't you know, like the Platonic dialogues Wilde wrote.

John Eclecticon doubly smiled.

—Well, in that case, he said, I don't see why you should expect payment for it since you don't believe it yourself. Dowden believes there is some mystery in *Hamlet* but will say no more. Herr Bleibtreu, the man Piper met in Berlin, who is working up that Rutland theory, believes that the secret is hidden in the Stratford monument. He is going to visit the present duke, Piper says, and prove to him that his

ancestor wrote the plays. It will come as a surprise to his grace. But he believes his theory.

I believe, O Lord, help my unbelief. That is, help me to believe or help me to unbelieve? Who helps to believe? *Egomen*. Who to unbelieve? Other chap.

—You are the only contributor to *Dana* who asks for pieces of silver. Then I don't know about the next number. Fred Ryan wants space for an article on economics.

Fraidrine. Two pieces of silver he lent me. Tide you over. Economics.

—For a guinea, Stephen said, you can publish this interview.



### 1930—G. Wilson Knight. “The Embassy of Death: An Essay on Hamlet”

An English literary critic and professor, G. Wilson Knight (1897–1985) was most interested in the “mystic symbolism” and “poetry of vision” in Shakespeare’s work. His often-anthologized essay on Hamlet appeared in his influential study of Shakespearean tragedy, *The Wheel of Fire*.

It is usual in Shakespeare’s plays for the main theme to be reflected in subsidiary incidents, persons, and detailed suggestion throughout. Now the theme of *Hamlet* is death. Life that is bound for the disintegration of the grave, love that does not survive the loved one’s life—both, in their insistence on death as the primary fact of nature, are branded on the mind of Hamlet, burned into it, searing it with agony. The bereavement of Hamlet and his consequent mental agony bordering on madness is mirrored in the bereavement of Ophelia and her madness. The death of the Queen’s love is reflected in the swift passing of the love of the Player-Queen, in the ‘Murder of Gonzago.’ Death is over the whole play. Polonius and Ophelia die during the action, and Ophelia is buried before our eyes. Hamlet arranges the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The plot is set in motion by the murder of Hamlet’s father, and the play opens with the apparition of the Ghost:

What may this mean,  
That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel  
Revisit’st thus the glimpses of the moon,  
Making night hideous; and we fools of nature

So horridly to shake our dispositions  
 With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls? (I. iv. 51)

Those first scenes strike the note of the play—Death. We hear of terrors beyond the grave, from the Ghost (I. v.) and from the meditations of Hamlet (III. i.). We hear of horrors in the grave from Hamlet whose mind is obsessed with hideous thoughts of the body's decay. Hamlet's dialogue with the King about the dead Polonius (IV. iii. 17) is painful; and the graveyard meditations, though often beautiful, are remorselessly realistic. Hamlet holds Yorick's skull:

*Hamlet:* . . . Now, get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come; make her laugh at that.

Prithee, Horatio, tell me one thing.

*Horatio:* What's that, my lord?

*Hamlet:* Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' the earth?

*Horatio:* E'en so.

*Hamlet:* And smelt so? pah! (V. i. 211)

The general thought of death, intimately related to the predominating human theme, the pain in Hamlet's mind, is thus suffused through the whole play. And yet the play, as a whole, scarcely gives us that sense of blackness and the abysses of spiritual evil which we find in *Macbeth*; nor is there the universal gloom of *King Lear*. This is due partly to the difference in the technique of *Hamlet* from that of *Macbeth* or *King Lear*. *Macbeth*, the protagonist and heroic victim of evil, rises gigantic from the murk of an evil universe; *Lear*, the king of suffering, towers over a universe that itself toils in pain. Thus in *Macbeth* and *King Lear* the predominating imaginative atmospheres are used not to contrast with the mental universe of the hero, but to aid and support it, as it were, with similarity, to render realistic the extravagant and daring effects of volcanic passion to which the poet allows his protagonist to give voice. We are forced by the attendant personification, the verbal colour, the symbolism and events of the play as a whole, to feel the hero's suffering, to see with his eyes. But in *Hamlet* this is not so. We need not see through Hamlet's eyes. Though the idea of death is recurrent through the play, it is not implanted in the minds of other persons as is the consciousness of evil throughout *Macbeth* and the consciousness of suffering throughout *King Lear*. Except for the original murder of Hamlet's father, the *Hamlet* universe is one of healthy and robust life, good-nature, humour, romantic strength, and welfare: against this background is the figure of Hamlet pale with the consciousness of death. He is the ambassador of death walking amid life. The effect is at first one of separation. Nevertheless it is to be noted that the consciousness of death, and consequent bitterness, cruelty, and inaction, in Hamlet not only grows in his own

mind disintegrating it as we watch, but also spreads its effects outward among the other persons like a blighting disease, and, as the play progresses, by its very passivity and negation of purpose, insidiously undermines the health of the state, and adds victim to victim until at the end the stage is filled with corpses. It is, as it were, a nihilistic birth in the consciousness of Hamlet that spreads its deadly venom around. That Hamlet is originally blameless, that the King is originally guilty, may well be granted. But, if we refuse to be diverted from a clear vision by questions of praise and blame, responsibility and causality, and watch only the actions and reactions of the persons as they appear, we shall observe a striking reversal of the usual commentary.

If we are to attain a true interpretation of Shakespeare we must work from a centre of consciousness near that of the creative instinct of the poet. We must think less in terms of causality and more in terms of imaginative impact. Now Claudius is not drawn as wholly evil—far from it. We see the government of Denmark working smoothly. Claudius shows every sign of being an excellent diplomatist and king. He is troubled by young Fortinbras, and dispatches ambassadors to the sick King of Norway demanding that he suppress the raids of his nephew. His speech to the ambassadors bears the stamp of clear and exact thought and an efficient and confident control of affairs:

. . . and we here dispatch  
 You, good Cornelius, and you, Voltimand,  
 For bearers of this greeting to old Norway;  
 Giving to you no further personal power  
 To business with the king, more than the scope  
 Of these delated articles allow.  
 Farewell, and let your haste commend your duty. (I. ii. 33)

The ambassadors soon return successful. Claudius listens to their reply, receives the King of Norway's letter, and hears that young Fortinbras desires a free pass through Denmark to lead his soldiers against the Poles. Claudius answers:

It likes us well;  
 And at our more consider'd time we'll read,  
 Answer, and think upon this business.  
 Meantime we thank you for your well-took labour:  
 Go to your rest; at night we'll feast together:  
 Most welcome home! (II. ii. 80)

Tact has found an easy settlement where arms and opposition might have wasted the strength of Denmark. Notice his reservation of detailed attention when once he knows the main issues are clear; the courteous yet dignified attitude

to his subordinates and the true leader's consideration for their comfort; and the invitation to the feast. The impression given by these speeches is one of quick efficiency—the efficiency of the man who can dispose of business without unnecessary circumstance, and so leaves himself time for enjoying the good things of life: a man kindly, confident, and fond of pleasure.

Throughout the first half of the play Claudius is the typical kindly uncle, besides being a good king. His advice to Hamlet about his exaggerated mourning for his father's death is admirable common sense:

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. 101)

It is the advice of worldly common sense opposed to the extreme misery of a sensitive nature paralysed by the facts of death and unfaithfulness. This contrast points the relative significance of the King and his court to Hamlet. They are of the world—with their crimes, their follies, their shallownesses, their pomp and glitter; they are of humanity, with all its failings, it is true, but yet of humanity. They assert the importance of human life, they believe in it, in themselves. Whereas Hamlet is inhuman, since he has seen through the tinsel of life and love, he believes in nothing, not even himself, except the memory of a ghost, and his black-robed presence is a reminder to everyone of the fact of death. There is no question but that Hamlet is right. The King's smiles hide murder, his mother's love for her new consort is unfaithfulness to Hamlet's father, Ophelia has deserted Hamlet at the hour of his need. Hamlet's philosophy may be inevitable, blameless, and irrefutable. But it is the negation of life. It is death. Hence Hamlet is a continual fear to Claudius, a reminder of his crime. It is a mistake to consider Claudius as a hardened criminal. When Polonius remarks on the hypocrisy of mankind, he murmurs to himself:

O, 'tis too true!  
How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!  
The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art,  
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it  
Than is my deed to my most painted word:  
O heavy burthen! (III. i. 49)

Again, Hamlet's play wrenches his soul with remorse—primarily not fear of Hamlet, as one might expect, but a genuine remorse—and gives us that most

beautiful prayer of a stricken soul beginning, 'O, my offence is rank, it smells to Heaven' (III. iii. 36):

. . . 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?

He fears that his prayer is worthless. He is still trammelled by the enjoyment of the fruits of his crime. 'My fault is past,' he cries. But what does that avail, since he has his crown and his queen still, the prizes of murder? His dilemma is profound and raises the problem I am pointing in this essay. Claudius, as he appears in the play, is not a criminal. He is—strange as it may seem—a good and gentle king, enmeshed by the chain of causality linking him with his crime. And this chain he might, perhaps, have broken except for Hamlet, and all would have been well. Now, granted the presence of Hamlet—which Claudius at first genuinely desired, persuading him not to return to Wittenberg as he wished—and granted the fact of his original crime which cannot now be altered, Claudius can hardly be blamed for his later actions. They are forced on him. As King, he could scarcely be expected to do otherwise. Hamlet is a danger to the state, even apart from his knowledge of Claudius' guilt. He is an inhuman—or superhuman—presence, whose consciousness—somewhat like Dostoevsky's Stavrogin—is centred on death. Like Stavrogin, he is feared by those around him. They are always trying in vain to find out what is wrong with him. They cannot understand him. He is a creature of another world. As King of Denmark he would have been a thousand times more dangerous than Claudius. The end of Claudius' prayer is pathetic:

What then? What rests?  
 Try what repentance can: what can it not?  
 Yet what can it when one can not repent?  
 O wretched state! O bosom black as death!  
 O limed soul, that, struggling to be free,  
 Art more engag'd! Help, angels! make assay!  
 Bow, stubborn knees; and, heart with strings of steel,  
 Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe!  
 All may be well. (III. iii. 64)

Set against this lovely prayer—the fine flower of a human soul in anguish—is the entrance of Hamlet, the late joy of torturing the King's conscience still written on his face, his eye a-glitter with the intoxication of conquest, vengeance in his

mind; his purpose altered only by the devilish hope of finding a more damning moment in which to slaughter the King, next hastening to his mother to wring her soul too. Which then, at this moment in the play, is nearer the Kingdom of Heaven? Whose words would be more acceptable of Jesus' God? Which is the embodiment of spiritual good, which of evil? The question of the relative morality of Hamlet and Claudius reflects the ultimate problem of this play.

Other eminently pleasant traits can be found in Claudius. He hears of Hamlet's murder of Polonius:

O Gertrude, come away!  
The sun no sooner shall the mountains touch,  
But we will ship him hence: and this vile deed  
We must, with all our majesty and skill,  
Both countenance and excuse. (IV. i. 28)

Though a murderer himself, he has a genuine horror of murder. This does not ring hypocritical. He takes the only possible course. Hamlet is a danger:

His liberty is full of threats to all. (IV. i. 14)

To hurry him from Denmark is indeed necessary: it is the only way of saving himself, and, incidentally, the best line of action in the interests of the state. During the scene of Ophelia's madness (IV. v.) Claudius shows a true and sensitive concern, exclaiming, 'How do you, pretty lady?' and 'Pretty Ophelia!' and after he has told Horatio to look after her, he speaks in all sincerity to his Queen:

O, this is the poison of deep grief; it springs  
All from her father's death. O Gertrude, Gertrude,  
When sorrows come, they come not single spies,  
But in battalions. First, her father slain:  
Next, your son gone; and he most violent author  
Of his most just remove . . . (IV. v. 76)

He continues the catalogue of ills. The people are dissatisfied, Laertes has returned. The problems are overwhelming. When Laertes enters, Claudius rouses our admiration by his cool reception of him:

What is the cause, Laertes,  
That thy rebellion looks so giant-like?  
Let him go, Gertrude; do not fear our person:  
There's such divinity doth hedge a king,



That treason can but peep to what it would,  
 Acts little of his will. Tell me, Laertes,  
 Why thou art thus incens'd. Let him go, Gertrude.  
 Speak, man. (IV. v. 120)

When he hears of Hamlet's return he plots treachery with Laertes. Everything considered, one can hardly blame him. He has, it is true, committed a dastardly murder, but in the play he gives us the impression of genuine penitence and a host of good qualities. After the murder of Polonius we certainly feel that both the King and the Queen are sane and doing their level best to restrain the activities of a madman. That is the impression given by the play at this point, as we read. If we think in terms of logic, we remember at once that we must side with Hamlet; and we perhaps remember the continual and sudden emergences of a different Hamlet, a Hamlet loving and noble and sane. But intermittent madness is more dangerous by far than obvious insanity. At the best we only prove that Hamlet's madness is justifiable, a statement which makes nonsense; for Hamlet's behaviour, so utterly out of harmony with his environment of eminently likeable people, in that relation may well be called a kind of madness. Whatever it is, it is extremely dangerous and powerful.

I have concentrated on Claudius' virtues. They are manifest. So are his faults—his original crime, his skill in the less admirable kind of policy, treachery, and intrigue. But I would point clearly that, in the movement of the play, his faults are forced on him, and he is distinguished by creative and wise action, a sense of purpose, benevolence, a faith in himself and those around him, by love of his Queen:

... and for myself—  
 My virtue or my plague, be it either which—  
 She's so conjunctive to my life and soul,  
 That as the star moves not but in his sphere,  
 I could not but by her. (IV. vii. 12)

In short, he is very human. Now these are the very qualities Hamlet lacks. Hamlet is inhuman. He has seen through humanity. And this inhuman cynicism, however justifiable in this case on the plane of causality and individual responsibility, is a deadly and venomous thing. Instinctively the creatures of earth, Laertes, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, league themselves with Claudius: they are of his kind. They sever themselves from Hamlet. Laertes sternly warns Ophelia against her intimacy with Hamlet, so does Polonius. They are, in fact, all leagued against him, they are puzzled by him or fear him: he has no friend except Horatio, and Horatio, after the Ghost scenes, becomes a queer shadowy character who rarely gets beyond 'E'en so, my lord', 'My lord—', and

such-like phrases. The other persons are firmly drawn, in the round, creatures of flesh and blood. But Hamlet is not of flesh and blood, he is a spirit of penetrating intellect and cynicism and misery, without faith in himself or anyone else, murdering his love of Ophelia, on the brink of insanity, taking delight in cruelty, torturing Claudius, wringing his mother's heart, a poison in the midst of the healthy bustle of the court. He is a superman among men. And he is a superman because he has walked and held converse with death, and his consciousness works in terms of death and the negation of cynicism. He has seen the truth, not alone of Denmark, but of humanity, of the universe: and the truth is evil. Thus Hamlet is an element of evil in the state of Denmark. The poison of his mental existence spreads outwards among things of flesh and blood, like acid eating into metal. They are helpless before his very inactivity and fall one after the other, like victims of an infectious disease. They are strong with the strength of health—but the demon of Hamlet's mind is a stronger thing than they. Futilely they try to get him out of their country; anything to get rid of him, he is not safe. But he goes with a cynical smile, and is no sooner gone than he is back again in their midst, meditating in graveyards, at home with death. Not till it has slain all, is the demon that grips Hamlet satisfied. And last it slays Hamlet himself:

The spirit that I have seen  
May be the Devil . . . (II. ii. 635)

It was.

It was the devil of the knowledge of death, which possesses Hamlet and drives him from misery and pain to increasing bitterness, cynicism, murder, and madness. He has truly bought converse with his father's spirit at the price of enduring and spreading Hell on earth. But however much we may sympathize with Ophelia, with Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, the Queen, and Claudius, there is one reservation to be made. It is Hamlet who is right. What he says and thinks of them is true, and there is no fault in his logic. His mother is certainly faithless, and the prettiness of Ophelia does in truth enclose a spirit as fragile and untrustworthy as her earthly beauty; Polonius is 'a foolish prating knave'; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are time-servers and flatterers; Claudius, whose benevolence hides the guilt of murder, is, by virtue of that fact, 'a damned smiling villain'. In the same way the demon of cynicism which is in the mind of the poet and expresses itself in the figures of this play, has always this characteristic: it is right. One cannot argue with the cynic. It is unwise to offer him battle. For in the warfare of logic it will be found that he has all the guns.

In this play we are confronted by a curious problem of technique. I pointed out early in this section that the effects are gained by contrast, and it will be seen from my analysis that this contrast has its powerful imaginative effects. But it is also disconcerting. Though we instinctively tend at first to adopt the viewpoint

of Hamlet himself, we are not forced to do so throughout. My analysis has shown that other methods of approach are possible; and, if they are possible, they are, in objective drama, legitimate. It is, clearly, necessary that we should be equally prepared to adopt the point of view of either side, otherwise we are offering a biased interpretation. And though the Hamlet-theme preponderates over that of any one other individual in the play, it will be clear that Hamlet has set in contrast to him all the other persons: they are massed against him. In the universe of this play—whatever may have happened in the past—he is the only discordant element, the only hindrance to happiness, health, and prosperity: a living death in the midst of life. Therefore a balanced judgement is forced to pronounce ultimately in favour of life as contrasted with death, for optimism and the healthily second-rate, rather than the nihilism of the superman: for he is not, as the plot shows, safe; and he is not safe, primarily because he is right—otherwise Claudius could soon have swept him from his path. If we think primarily of the state of Denmark during the action of the play, we are bound to applaud Claudius, as he appears before us: he acts throughout with a fine steadiness of purpose. By creating normal and healthy and lovable persons around his protagonist, whose chief peculiarity is the abnormality of extreme melancholia, the poet divides our sympathies. The villain has become a kindly uncle, the princely hero is the incarnation of cynicism. It is true that if Hamlet had promptly avenged his father, taken the throne, forgotten his troubles, resumed a healthy outlook on life, he would have all our acclamations. Laertes entering in wrath at the death of his father, daring ‘damnation’ (IV. v. 132) and threatening Claudius, comes on us like a blast of fresh air, after the stifling, poisonous atmosphere of Hamlet’s mind. Laertes and Hamlet struggling at Ophelia’s grave are like symbols of life and death contending for the prize of love. Laertes is brave in his course of loyalty. But to expect such a course from Hamlet is to misunderstand him quite and his place in the play. The time is out of joint, he is thrown out of any significant relation with his world. He cannot bridge the gulf by rational action. Nor can he understand the rest any more than they understand him. His ideals—which include an insistent memory of death—are worth nothing to them, and, most maddening fact of all, they get on perfectly well as they are—or would do if Hamlet were out of the way. Thus, through no fault of his own, Hamlet has been forced into a state of evil: Claudius, whose crime originally placed him there, is in a state of healthy and robust spiritual life. Hamlet, and we too, are perplexed.

So Hamlet spends a great part of his time in watching, analysing, and probing others. He unhesitatingly lances each in turn in his weakest spot. He is usually quite merciless. But all he actually accomplishes is to torment them all, terrorize them. They are dreadfully afraid of him. Hamlet is so powerful. He is, as it were, the channel of a mysterious force, a force which derives largely from his having seen through them all. In contact with him they know their own faults: neither

they nor we should know them otherwise. He exposes faults everywhere. Yet he is not tragic in the usual Shakespearian sense; there is no surge and swell of passion pressing onward through the play to leave us, as in *King Lear*, with the mighty crash and backwash of a tragic peace. There is not this direct rhythm in Hamlet—there is no straight course. Instead of being dynamic, the force of Hamlet is, paradoxically, static. Its poison is the poison of negation, nothingness, threatening a world of positive assertion. This element is not, however, the whole of Hamlet. He can speak lovingly to his mother at one moment, and the next, in an excess of revulsion, torment her with a withering and brutal sarcasm. One moment he can cry:

I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers  
 Could not, with all their quantity of love,  
 Make up my sum. (V. i. 291)

Shortly after he scorns himself for his outbreak. His mind reflects swift changes. He may for a moment or two see with the eyes of humour, gentleness, love—then suddenly the whole universe is blackened, goes out, leaves utter vacancy. This is, indeed, the secret of the play's fascination and its lack of unified and concise poetic statement. Hamlet is a dualized personality, wavering, oscillating between grace and the hell of cynicism. The plot reflects this see-saw motion; it lacks direction, pivoting on Hamlet's incertitude, and analysis holds the fascination of giddiness. Nor can Hamlet feel anything passionately for long, since passion implies purpose, and he has no one purpose for any length of time. One element in Hamlet, and that a very important one, is the negation of any passion whatsoever. His disease—or vision—is primarily one of negation, of death. Hamlet is a living death in the midst of life; that is why the play sounds the note of death so strong and sombre at the start. The Ghost was conceived throughout as a portent not kind but sinister. That sepulchral cataclysm at the beginning is the key to the whole play. *Hamlet* begins with an explosion in the first act; the rest of the play is the reverberation thereof. From the first act onwards Hamlet is, as it were, blackened, scorched by that shattering revelation. The usual process is reversed and the climax is at the start. Hamlet, already in despair, converses early with death: through the remaining acts he lives within that death, remembering the Ghost, spreading destruction wherever he goes, adding crime to crime,<sup>1</sup> like Macbeth, and becoming more and more callous, until his detestable act of sending his former friends to unmerited death 'not shriving-time allow'd' (V. ii. 47). Finally 'this fell sergeant, death' (V. ii. 350) arrests him too. This is his mysterious strength, ghost-begotten, before which the rest succumb. That is why this play is so rich in death—why its meaning is analysed by Hamlet in soliloquy, why Hamlet is so fascinated by the skulls the Grave-digger unearths; why so many 'casual slaughters' and 'deaths put on by cunning and forced cause'

(V. ii. 393) disrupt the action, till we are propelled to the last holocaust of mortality and Fortinbras' comment:

This quarry cries on havoc. O proud death,  
 What feast is toward in thine eternal cell,  
 That thou so many princes at a shot  
 So bloodily hast struck? (V. ii. 378)

The Ghost may or may not have been a 'goblin damned'; it certainly was no 'spirit of health' (I. iv. 40). The play ends with a dead march. The action grows out of eternity, closes in it. The ominous discharge of ordnance thus reverberates three times: once, before Hamlet sees the Ghost, and twice in Act V. The eternity of death falls as an abyss at either end, and Hamlet crosses the stage of life aureoled in its ghostly luminance. Now this contrast between Hamlet and his world is of extreme importance, for it is repeated in different forms in the plays to follow. *Hamlet* contains them all in embryo. They are to reflect the contest between (i) human life, and (ii) the principle of negation. That principle may be subdivided into love-cynicism and death-consciousness, which I elsewhere call 'hate' and 'evil', respectively. *Troilus and Cressida* is concerned with love alone; *Othello*—and also *King Lear*—with love until the end, which, by the tragic climax, throws the love problem into relation with eternity. *Measure for Measure* is concerned with both death and love. In *Macbeth*, the death-consciousness, as in *Hamlet*, works chaos and destruction on earth. As Hamlet does not know why he cannot, or does not, slay Claudius, so Macbeth is quite unable to understand why he murders Duncan. The analogy is close, since the slaying of Claudius is, to Hamlet at least, an act in the cause of life. In *Timon of Athens* the contrast is especially clear. First we have the world of humanity in all its glitter and superficial delight: repelled thence the hero moves, as it were, with full purposive assurance, within the halls of death. In the curious juxtaposition of Hamlet and his environment we shall find much of what follows implicit, but not unless we concentrate on the main elements of Hamlet's mental pain without letting our sympathy for him as the hero blur our vision of the gentler qualities of other persons. If in our attempt to see with Hamlet's eyes, we are prepared to regard Claudius as the blackest of criminals, Gertrude as an adulteress, Polonius as a fool, and Ophelia as a deceit and a decoy—there is no other way—we only blur our vision of them and consequently our understanding of him. The technique of *Hamlet* is not as that of *Macbeth* or *King Lear*, or *Timon of Athens*. We are forced by the poet to suffer the terrors of Macbeth, the agonies of Lear, the hate of Timon. But *Hamlet* has no dominating atmosphere, no clear purposive technique to focus our vision. Macbeth and Lear, in their settings, are normal; Hamlet, in his, abnormal. Hamlet is a creature of a different world, a different kind of poetic vision, from the other persons: he is incommensurable with them—himself of quality akin

to Macbeth and Lear, he is let loose in the world of Hotspur and Henry V. He is thus too profound to be consistently lovable. Therefore, unless we forget or cut or distort some of the most significant parts of the play—as is so often done—we cannot feel the disgust and nausea that Hamlet feels at the wise and considerate Claudius, the affectionate mother, Gertrude, the eminently lovable old Polonius, and the pathetic Ophelia. Now the technical problem here reflects a universal problem: that of a mind of ‘more than ordinary sensibility’ revolted by an insensate but beautiful world which denies his every aspiration. Which is right? The question is asked in *Hamlet* not by discourse of reason or argument, but by two different modes of poetic vision and technique: one for Hamlet, one for the other persons. They are placed together, and our sympathies are divided.

A comprehensive view of the whole throws the play into significant relation with human affairs. Claudius is a murderer. The ghost of the dead king will not tolerate that he so easily avoid the consequences proper to crime, so readily build both firmly and well on a basis of evil. This spirit speaks to Hamlet alone both because he is his son and because his consciousness is already tuned to sympathize with death. Two things he commands Hamlet: (i) vengeance, and (ii) remembrance. The latter, but not the former, is, from the first, branded most deep on Hamlet’s mind—this is apparent from his soliloquy, ‘Remember thee! Ay, thou poor ghost . . .’ (I. v. 95). Hamlet’s soul is wrung with compassion’s agony. He does not obey the command:

Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing  
To what I shall unfold. (I. v. 5)

The contrast between pity and revenge is clearly pointed later:

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. 126)

While Hamlet pities he cannot revenge, for his soul is then sick with knowledge of death and that alone. Now, at the start, we hear that

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. (I. iv. 90)

Claudius must be cast out, as a thing unclean—that is the Ghost’s command. Were Hamlet the possessor of spiritual harmony, he might have struck once, and restored perfect health to Denmark. That would have been a creative act, in the cause of life. But pity enlists Hamlet in the cause not of life, but of death; and we are shown how sickness and death-consciousness cannot heal sickness,

cannot prescribe to life. Hence Hamlet's disordered soul symbolizes itself in acts of destruction: he thinks so closely in terms of death that he can perform no life-bringing act. So thoughts of the King's eternal damnation prevent Hamlet from the life-bringing act of slaying him as he prays. The destructive symbols of his inner disintegration are evident in the innocent blood he sheds, passing by the thing of guilt. Himself the ambassador of death, tormented with 'thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls' (I. iv. 56), in that dread eminence he deals destruction around him. The lesson of the play as a whole is something like this—Had Hamlet forgotten both the Ghost's commands, it would have been well, since Claudius is a good king, and the Ghost but a minor spirit; had he remembered both it would have been still better—Hamlet would probably have felt his fetters drop from his soul, he would have stepped free, then—but not till then—have been a better king than Claudius, and, finally, the unrestful spirit would know peace. But, remembering only the Ghost's command to remember, he is paralysed, he lives in death, in pity of hideous death, in loathing of the life that breeds it. His acts, like Macbeth's, are a commentary on his negative consciousness: he murders all the wrong people, exults in cruelty, grows more and more dangerous. At the end, fate steps in, forces him to perform the act of creative assassination he has been, by reason of his inner disintegration, unable to perform. Not Hamlet, but a greater principle than he or the surly Ghost, puts an end to this continual slaughter.

But we properly know Hamlet himself only when he is alone with death: then he is lovable and gentle, then he is beautiful and noble, and, there being no trivial things of life to blur our mortal vision, our minds are tuned to the exquisite music of his soul. We know the real Hamlet only in his address to the Ghost, in his 'To be or not to be . . .' soliloquy, in the lyric prose of the Graveyard scene:

Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft . . .  
(V. i. 206)

These touch a melody that holds no bitterness. Here, and when he is dying, we glimpse, perhaps, a thought wherein death, not life, holds the deeper assurance for humanity. Then we will understand why Hamlet knows death to be felicity:

Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain  
To tell my story . . . (V. ii. 361)

The story of a 'sweet prince' (V. ii. 373) wrenched from life and dedicate alone to Death.

## NOTE

1. An exaggeration. Hamlet's 'crimes' are, properly, two only. See my essay 'Hamlet Reconsidered' (1947).



1951—William Empson,  
 “Hamlet When New” from *The Sewanee Review*

William Empson (1906–1984) was a professor at Sheffield University, a poet, and one of the finest literary critics of his time. Two of his best-known books are *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and *Some Versions of Pastoral*.

*Hamlet When New (Part I)*

One feels that the mysteries of Hamlet are likely to be more or less exhausted, and I have no great novelty to offer here, but it has struck me, in the course of trying to present him in lectures, that the enormous panorama of theory and explanation falls into a reasonable proportion if viewed, so to speak, from Pisgah, from the point of discovery by Shakespeare. To do that should also have a relation with the impressions of a fresh mind, meeting the basic legend of the play at any date. I was led to it from trying to answer some remarks of Hugh Kingsmill, in *The Return of William Shakespeare*, who said that Hamlet is a ridiculously theatrical and therefore unreal figure, almost solely concerned with scoring off other people, which the dialogue lets him do much too easily, and attractive to actors only because “they have more humiliations than other men to avenge.” A number of critics seems to have felt like this, though few have said it so plainly; the feeling tends to make one indifferent to the play, and overrides any “solution of its problems,” but when followed up it leads to more interesting country. I discussed it in my book *Complex Words*, pp. 66–9, by the way, but only so far as suited the theme of the book, a theme I am ignoring here. It seems to give a rather direct route to a reconsideration of the origins, along which one might even take fresh troops into the jungle warfare over the text.

The experts mostly agree that Kyd wrote a play on Hamlet about 1587, very like his surviving *Spanish Tragedy* except that it was about a son avenging a father instead of a father avenging a son. The only record of a performance of it is in 1594, under conditions which make it likely to have become the property of Shakespeare's company; jokes about it survive from 1589, 1596, and 1601, the later two regarding it as a standard out-of-date object. A keen sense of changing fashion has to be envisaged; when Shakespeare's company were seduced into



performing *Richard II* for the Essex rebels they said they would have to be paid because it was too old to draw an audience, and it wasn't half as old as *Hamlet*. A gradual evolution of *Hamlet*, which some critics have imagined, isn't likely under these conditions. We have to consider why Shakespeare re-wrote a much-laughed-at old play, and was thus led on into his great Tragic Period, and the obvious answer is that he was told to; somebody in the Company thumbed over the texts in the ice-box and said "This used to be a tremendous draw, and it's coming round again; look at Marston. All you have to do is just go over the words so that it's *life-like* and they can't laugh at it." Kyd had a powerful but narrow, one might say miserly, theatrical talent, likely to repeat a success, so his *Hamlet* probably had a Play-within-the-Play like the *Spanish Tragedy*; we know from a joke it had a Ghost; and he would have almost all the rest of the story as we know it from the sources. For all we know, when Shakespeare created a new epoch and opened a new territory to the human mind, he did nothing but alter the dialogue for this structure, not even adding a scene. The trouble with this kind of critical approach, as the experienced reader will already be feeling with irritation, is that it can be used to say "That is why the play is so muddled and bad." On the contrary, I think, if taken firmly enough it shows how, at the time, such a wonderful thing as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* could be conceived and accepted.

The real "Hamlet problem," it seems clear, is a problem about his first audiences. This is not to deny (as Professor Stoll has sometimes done) that Hamlet himself is a problem; he must be one, because he says he is; and he is a magnificent one, which has been exhaustively examined in the last hundred and fifty years. What is peculiar is that he does not seem to have become one till towards the end of the eighteenth century; even Dr. Johnson, who had a strong natural grasp of human difficulties, writes about Hamlet as if there was no problem at all. We are to think, apparently, that Shakespeare wrote a play which was extremely successful at the time (none more so, to judge by the references), and continued to hold the stage, and yet that nearly two hundred years had to go by before anyone had even a glimmering of what it was about. This is a good story, but surely it is rather too magical. Indeed, as the Hamlet Problem has developed, yielding increasingly subtle and profound reasons for his delay, there has naturally developed in its wake a considerable backwash from critics who say "But how can such a drama as you describe conceivably have been written by an Elizabethan, for an Elizabethan audience?" Some kind of mediating process is really required here; one needs to explain how the first audiences could take a more interesting view than Dr. Johnson's, without taking an improbably profound one.

The political atmosphere may be dealt with first. Professor Stoll has successfully argued that even the theme of delay need not be grasped at all by an audience, except as a convention; however, Mr. Dover Wilson has pointed out that the first audiences had a striking example before them in Essex, who was,

or had just been, refusing to make up his mind in a public and alarming manner; his attempt at revolt might have caused civil war. Surely one need not limit it to Essex; the Queen herself had long used vacillation as a major instrument of policy, but the habit was becoming unnerving because though presumably dying she still refused to name a successor, which in itself might cause civil war. Her various foreign wars were also dragging on indecisively. A play about a prince who brought disaster by failing to make up his mind was bound to ring straight on the nerves of the audience when Shakespeare rewrote *Hamlet*; it is not a question of intellectual subtlety but of what they were being forced to think about already. It seems to me that there are relics of this situation in the text, which critics have not considered in the light of their natural acting power. The audience is already in the grip of a convention by which Hamlet can chat directly to them about the current War of the Theatres in London, and then the King advances straight down the apron-stage and urges the audience to kill Hamlet:

*Do it, England,*  
For like the hectic in my blood he rages,  
*And thou must cure me.*

None of them could hear that without feeling it was current politics, however obscure; and the idea is picked up again, for what seems nowadays only an opportunist joke, when the Grave-digger says that Hamlet's madness won't matter in England, where all the men are as mad as he. Once the idea has been planted so firmly, even the idea that England is paying Danegeld may take on some mysterious weight. Miss Spurgeon and Mr. Wilson Knight have maintained that the reiterated images of disease somehow imply that Hamlet himself is a disease, and this gives a basis for it. Yet the audience might also reflect that the character does what the author is doing—altering an old play to fit an immediate political purpose. This had to be left obscure, but we can reasonably presume an idea that the faults of Hamlet (which are somehow part of his great virtues) are not only specific but topical—“so far from being an absurd old play, it is just what you want, if you can see what is at the bottom of it.” The insistence on the danger of civil war, on the mob that Laertes does raise, and that Hamlet could raise but won't, and that Fortinbras at the end takes immediate steps to quiet, is rather heavy in the full text though nowadays often cut. Shakespeare could at least feel, when the old laughingstock was dragged out and given to him as a new responsibility, that delay when properly treated need not be dull; considered politically, the urgent thing might be not to let it get too exciting.

Such may have been his first encouraging reflection, but the political angle was not the first problem of the assignment, the thing he had to solve before he could face an audience; it was more like an extra gift which the correct solution tossed into his hand. The current objection to the old play *Hamlet*, which must

have seemed very hard to surmount, can be glimpsed in the surviving references to it. It was thought absurdly theatrical. Even in 1589 the phrase “whole Hamlets, I should say handfuls, of tragical speeches” treats Hamlet as incessantly wordy, and the phrase of 1596, “as pale as the vizard of the ghost which cried so miserably at the Theatre, like an oyster wife, Hamlet Revenge,” gets its joke from the idea that her dismal bawling may start again at any moment, however sick of her you are (presumably she is crying her wares up and down the street). The objection is not against melodrama, which they liked well enough, but against delay. You had a hero howling out “Revenge” all through the play, and everybody knew he wouldn’t get his revenge till the end. This structure is at the mercy of anybody in the audience who cares to shout “Hurry Up,” because then the others feel they must laugh, however sympathetic they are; or rather, they felt that by the time Shakespeare re-wrote *Hamlet*, whereas ten years earlier they would only have wanted to say “Shush.” This fact about the audience, I submit, is the basic fact about the re-writing of Hamlet.

The difficulty was particularly sharp for Shakespeare’s company, which set out to be less ham than its rivals, and the Globe Theatre itself, only just built, asked for something impressively new. And yet there was a revival of the taste for Revenge Plays in spite of a half-resentful feeling that they had become absurd. Now Kyd had been writing before the accidental Destruction of the Spanish Armada, therefore while facing a more immediate probability of conquest with rack and fire; the position had remained dangerous, and the Armada incident didn’t seem as decisive to them as historians make it seem now; but I think the wheel seemed to be coming round again, because of the succession problem, so that we ought not to regard this vague desire to recover the mood of ten years earlier as merely stupid. I suspect indeed that the fashion for *child* actors, the main complaint of the Players in *Hamlet*, came up at this moment because children could use the old convention with an effect of charm, making it less absurd because more distanced.

Shakespeare himself had hardly written a tragedy before. To have had a hand in *Titus Andronicus*, ten years before, only brings him closer to his current audience; his own earlier tastes, as well as theirs, were now to be re-examined. *Romeo* does not suggest an Aristotelian “tragic flaw.” As a writer of comedies, his main improvement in technique had been to reduce the need for a villain so that the effect was wholly *un*-tragic, and meanwhile the series of History Plays had been on the practical or hopeful theme “How to Avoid Civil War”; even so he had manoeuvred himself into ending with the cheerful middle of the series, having written its gloomy end at the start. What Shakespeare was famous for, just before writing *Hamlet*, was Falstaff and patriotic stuff about Henry V. *Julius Caesar*, the play immediately previous to *Hamlet*, is the most plausible candidate for a previous tragedy or indeed Revenge Play, not surprisingly, but the style is dry and the interest mainly in the politics of the thing. One can easily imagine

that the external cause, the question of what the audience would like, was prominent when the theme was chosen. If Essex came into the background of the next assignment, Shakespeare's undoubted patron Southampton was also involved. I am not trying to make him subservient to his public, only sensitive to changes of taste in which he had an important part; nor would I forget that the misfortunes of genius often have a wild luck in their timing. But he must have seemed an unlikely person just then to start on a great Tragic Period, and he never wrote a Revenge Play afterwards; we can reasonably suppose that he first thought of *Hamlet* as a pretty specialized assignment, a matter, indeed, of trying to satisfy audiences who demanded a Revenge Play and then laughed when it was provided. I think he did not see how to solve this problem at the committee meeting, when the agile Bard was voted to carry the weight, but already did see how when walking home. It was a bold decision, and probably decided his subsequent career, but it was a purely technical one. He thought: "The only way to shut this hole is to make it big. I shall make Hamlet walk up to the audience and tell them, again and again, 'I don't know why I'm delaying any more than you do; the motivation of this play is just as blank to me as it is to you; but I can't help it.' What is more, I shall make it impossible for them to blame him. And *then* they daren't laugh." It turned out, of course, that this method, instead of reducing the old play to farce, made it thrillingly life-like and profound. A great deal more was required; one had to get a character who could do it convincingly, and bring in large enough issues for the puzzle not to appear gratuitous. I do not want to commit the Fallacy of Reduction, only to remove the suspicion that the first audiences could not tell what was going on.

Looked at in this way, the plot at once gave questions of very wide interest, especially to actors and the regular patrons of a repertory company; the character says: "Why do you assume *I* am theatrical? I particularly hate such behavior. I cannot help my situation. What do you *mean* by theatrical?" Whole areas of the old play suddenly became so significant that one could wonder whether Kyd had meant that or not; whether Hamlet really wants to kill Claudius, whether he was ever really in love with Ophelia, whether he can continue to grasp his own motives while "acting a part" before the Court, whether he is not really more of an actor than the Players, whether he is not (properly speaking) the only sincere person in view. In spite of its great variety of incident, the play sticks very closely to discussing theatricality. Surely this is what critics have long found so interesting about Hamlet, while an occasional voice like Kingsmill's says it is nasty, or Professor Stoll tries to save the Master by arguing it was not intended or visible at the time. But, so far from being innocent here, what the first audiences came to see was whether the Globe could revamp the old favorite without being absurd. To be sure, we cannot suppose them really very "sophisticated," considering the plays by other authors they admired; to make *The Spanish Tragedy* up-to-date enough for the Admiral's Company (which was paid for in

September, 1601, and June, 1602, in attempts to catch up with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* presumably—indeed I think with two successive *Hamlets*) only required some interesting “life-like” mad speeches. But that they *imagined* that they were too sophisticated for the old *Hamlet* does seem to emerge from the surviving jokes about it, and that is all that was required. We need not suppose, therefore, that they missed the purpose of the changes; “he is cunning past man's thought” they are more likely to have muttered unwillingly into their beards, as they abandoned the intention to jeer.

As was necessary for this purpose, the play uses the device of throwing away dramatic illusion much more boldly than Shakespeare does anywhere else. (Mr. S. L. Bethell, in *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition*, has written what I take to be the classical discussion of this technique.) A particularly startling case is planted early in the play, when the Ghost pursues Hamlet and his fellows underground and says “Swear” (to be secret) wherever they go, and Hamlet says

Come on, you hear this fellow in the cellarage,  
Consent to swear.

It seems that the area under the stage was *technically* called the cellarage, but the point is clear enough without this extra sharpening; it is a recklessly comic throw-away of illusion, especially for a repertory audience, who know who is crawling about among the trestles at this point (Shakespeare himself, we are told), and have their own views on his style of acting. But the effect is still meant to be frightening; it is like Zoo in *Back to Methuselah*, who says “This kind of thing is got up to impress you, not to impress me”; and it is very outfacing for persons in the audience who come expecting to make that kind of joke themselves.

Following out this plan, there are of course satirical misquotations of the Revenge classics, as in “Pox! leave thy damnable faces and begin. Come ‘the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge’” (probably more of them than we realize, because we miss the contrast with the old *Hamlet*); but there had also to be a positive dramatization of the idea, which is given in Hamlet's scenes with the Players. Critics have wondered how it could be endurable for Shakespeare to make the actor of Hamlet upbraid for their cravings for theatricality not merely his fellow actors but part of his audience (the term “groundlings” must have appeared an insult and comes nowhere else); but surely this carries on the central joke, and wouldn't make the author prominent. I agree that the Player's Speech and so forth was a parody of the ranting style of the Admiral's Company (and when Hamlet praised it his actor had to slip in and out of real life, without turning the joke too much against the Prince); but even so the situation is that the Chamberlain's Company are shown discussing how to put on a modern-style Revenge Play, which the audience knows to be a problem for them. The “mirror” was being held close to the face. As to the talk about the War of the Theatres,

people were curious to know what the Globe would say, and heard its leading actor speak for the Company; they were violently prevented from keeping their minds on "buried Denmark." What is technically so clever is to turn this calculated collapse of dramatic illusion into an illustration of the central theme. The first problem was how to get the audience to attend to the story again, solved completely by "O what a rogue" and so forth, which moves from the shame of theatrical behavior and the paradoxes of sincerity into an immediate scheme to expose the King. Yet even here one might feel, as Mr. Dover Wilson said (with his odd power of making a deep remark without seeing its implications), that "the two speeches are for all the world like a theme given out by the First Violin and then repeated by the Soloist"—Hamlet has only proved he is a better actor, and indeed "rogue" might make him say this, by recalling that actors were legally rogues and vagabonds. We next see Hamlet in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, and he has completely forgotten his passionate and apparently decisive self-criticism—but this time the collapse of interest in the story comes from the Prince, not merely from the audience; then when Ophelia enters he swings away from being completely disinterested into being more disgracefully theatrical than anywhere else (enjoying working up a fuss about a very excessive suspicion, and thus betraying himself to listeners he knows are present); next he lectures the Players with grotesque hauteur about the art of acting, saying that they must always keep cool (this is where the word *groundlings* comes); then, quite unexpectedly, he fawns upon Horatio as a man who is not "passion's slave," unlike himself, and we advance upon the Play-within-the-Play. The metaphor of the pipe which Fortune can blow upon as she pleases, which he used to Horatio, is made a symbol by bringing a recorder into bodily prominence during his moment of triumph after the play scene, and he now boasts to the courtiers that he is a mystery, therefore they cannot play on him—we are meant to feel that there are real merits in the condition, but he has already told us he despises himself for it. Incidentally he has just told Horatio that he deserves a fellowship in a "cry" of players (another searching joke phrase not used elsewhere) but Horatio only thinks "half of one." The recovery from the point where the story seemed most completely thrown away has been turned into an exposition of the character of the hero and the central dramatic theme. No doubt this has been fully recognized, but I do not think it has been viewed as a frank treatment of the central task, that of making the old play seem real by making the hero life-like.

Mr. Dover Wilson rightly points out the obsessive excitability of Hamlet, as when in each of the scenes scolding one of the ladies he comes back twice onto the stage, each time more unreasonable, as if he can't make himself stop. "But it is no mere theatrical trick or device," he goes on, "it is meant to be part of the nature of the man"; and meanwhile psychologists have elaborated the view that he is a standard "manic-depressive" type, in whom long periods of sullen gloom, often with actual forgetfulness, are followed by short periods of exhausting

excitement, usually with violence of language. By all means, but the nature of the man grows out of the original *donnée*; his nature had (first of all) to be such that it would make the old story “life-like.” And the effect in the theatre, surely, is at least prior to any belief about his nature, though it may lead you on to one; what you start from is the *astonishment* of Hamlet’s incessant changes of mood, which also let the one actor combine in himself elements which the Elizabethan theatre usually separates (e.g. simply tragedy and comedy). Every one of the soliloquies, it has been pointed out, contains a shock for the audience, apart from what it says, in what it doesn’t say: the first in having no reference to usurpation; the second (“rogue and slave”) no reference to Ophelia, though his feelings about her have been made a prominent question; the third (“To be or not to be”) no reference to his plot or his self-criticism or even his own walk of life—he is considering entirely in general whether life is worth living, and it is startling for him to say no traveller returns from death, however complete the “explanation” that he is assuming the Ghost was a devil; the fourth (“now might I do it pat”) no reference to his obviously great personal danger now that the King knows the secret; the fifth (“How all occasions do inform”) no reference to the fact that he can’t kill the King now, or rather a baffling assumption that he still can; and one might add his complete forgetting of his previous self-criticisms when he comes to his last words. It is this power to astonish, I think, which keeps one in doubt whether he is particularly theatrical or particularly “life-like”; a basic part of the effect, which would be clear to the first audiences.

However, the theme of a major play by Shakespeare is usually repeated by several characters in different forms, and Hamlet is not the only theatrical one here. Everybody is “acting a part” except Horatio, as far as that goes; and Laertes is very theatrical, as Hamlet rightly insists over the body of Ophelia (“I’ll rant as well as thou”). One might reflect that both of them trample on her, both literally and figuratively, just because of their common trait. And yet Laertes is presented as opposite to Hamlet in not being subject to delay about avenging his father or to scruples about his methods; the tragic flaw in Hamlet must be something deeper or more specific. We need therefore to consider what his “theatricality” may be, and indeed the reader may feel I am making too much play with a term that Elizabethans did not use; but I think it makes us start in the right place. The Elizabethans, though both more formal and more boisterous than most people nowadays, were well able to see the need for sincerity; and it is agreed that Shakespeare had been reading Montaigne about how quickly one’s moods can change, so that to appear consistent requires “acting,” a line of thought which is still current. But to understand how it was applied here one needs to keep one’s mind on the immediate situation in the theatre. The *plot* of a Revenge play seemed theatrical because it kept the audience waiting without obvious reason in the characters; then a theatrical *character* (in such a play) appears as one who gets undeserved effects, “cheap” because not justified by the plot as a whole. However,

theatrical behavior is never only “mean” in the sense of losing the ultimate aim for a petty advantage, because it must also “give itself away”—the idea “greedy to impress an audience” is required. Now the basic legend about Hamlet was that he did exactly this and yet was somehow right for it; he successfully kept a secret by displaying he had got one. The idea is already prominent in Saxo Grammaticus, where it gives a triumphant story not a tragic one; and “the Saxon who could write” around 1200 is as genuine a source of primitive legend as one need ask for. I am not sure whether Shakespeare looked up Saxo; it would easily be got for him if he asked, when he was given the assignment, but Kyd would have done it already; we think of Kyd as crude, but he was a solidly educated character. If Shakespeare did look up Saxo he only got a firm reassurance that his natural bent was the right one; the brief pungent Latin sentences about Hamlet are almost a definition of Shakespeare’s clown, and Mr. Dover Wilson is right in saying that Shakespeare presented Hamlet as a kind of generalization of that idea (“they fool me to the top of my bent” he remarks with appalling truth). Here we reach the bed-rock of Hamlet, unchanged by the local dramas of reinterpretation; even Dr. Johnson remarks that his assumed madness, though entertaining, does not seem to help his plot.

Kyd would probably keep him sane and rather tedious in soliloquy but give him powerful single-line jokes when answering other characters; the extreme and sordid pretence of madness implied by Saxo would not fit Kyd’s idea of tragic decorum. I think that Shakespeare’s opening words for Hamlet, “A little more than kin and less than kind,” are simply repeated from Kyd; a dramatic moment for the first-night audience, because they wanted to know whether the new Hamlet would be different. His next words are a passionate assertion that he is *not* the theatrical Hamlet—“I know not seems.” Now this technique from Kyd, though trivial beside the final Hamlet, would present the inherent paradox of the legend very firmly: why are these jokes supposed to give a kind of magical success to a character who had obviously better keep his mouth shut? All Elizabethans, including Elizabeth, had met the need to keep one’s mouth shut at times; the paradox might well seem sharper to them than it does to us. Shakespeare took care to laugh at this as early as possible in his version of the play. The idea that it is silly to drop hints as Hamlet does is expressed by Hamlet himself, not only with force but with winning intimacy, when he tells the other observers of the Ghost that they must keep silence completely, and not say “I could an I would, there be an if they might” and so on, which is precisely what he does himself for the rest of the play. No doubt he needs a monopoly of this technique. But the first effect in the theatre was another case of “closing the hole by making it big”; if you can make the audience laugh *with* Hamlet about his method early, they aren’t going to laugh *at* him for it afterwards. Instead they can wonder why he is or pretends to be mad, just as the other characters wonder; and wonder why he delays, just as he himself wonders. No other device could raise so sharply the question of “what



is theatrical behavior?" because here we cannot even be sure what Hamlet is aiming at. We can never decide flatly that his method is wrong, because the more it appears unwise the more it appears courageous. There seem to be two main assumptions, that he is trying to frighten his enemies into exposing themselves, and that he is not so frightened himself as to hide his emotions though he hides their cause. I fancy Shakespeare could rely on some of his audience to add the apparently modern theory that the relief of self-expression saved Hamlet from going finally mad, because it fits well enough onto their beliefs about the disease "melancholy." But in any case the basic legend is a dream glorification of both having your cake and eating it, keeping your secret for years, till you kill, and yet perpetually enjoying boasts about it. Here we are among the roots of the race of man; rather a smelly bit perhaps, but a bit that appeals at once to any child. It is ridiculous for critics to *blame* Shakespeare for accentuating this traditional theme till it became enormous.

The view that Hamlet "is Shakespeare," or at least more like him than his other characters, I hope falls into shape now. It has a basic truth, because he was drawing on his experience as actor and playwright; these professions often do puzzle their practitioners about what is theatrical and what is not, as their friends and audiences can easily recognize; but he was only using what the theme required. To have to give posterity, let alone the immediate audiences, a picture of himself would have struck him as laying a farcical extra burden on an already difficult assignment. I think he did feel he was giving a good hand to actors in general, though with decent obscurity, when he worked up so much praise for Hamlet at the end, but you are meant to be dragged round to this final admiration for Hamlet, not to feel it all through. To suppose he "is Shakespeare" has excited in some critics a reasonable distaste for both parties, because a man who models himself on Hamlet in common life (as has been done) tends to appear a mean-minded neurotic; whereas if you take the *plot* seriously Hamlet is at least assumed to have special reasons for his behavior.

We should now be able to reconsider the view which Professor Stoll has done real service by following up: Hamlet's reasons are so good that he not only never delays at all but was never supposed to; the self-accusations of the Revenger are always prominent in Revenge Plays, even classical Greek ones, being merely a necessary part of the machine—to make the audience continue waiting with attention. Any problem we may invent about Shakespeare's Hamlet, on this view, we could also have invented about Kyd's, but it wouldn't have occurred to us to want to. In making the old play "life-like" Shakespeare merely altered the style, not the story; except that it was probably he who (by way of adding "body") gave Hamlet very much better reasons for delay than any previous Revenger, so that it is peculiarly absurd of us to pick him out and puzzle over *his* delay. I do not at all want to weaken this line of argument; I think Shakespeare did, intentionally, pile up all the excuses for delay he could imagine, while at the same time making

Hamlet bewail and denounce his delay far more strongly than ever Revenger had done before. It is the force and intimacy of the self-reproaches of Hamlet, of course, which ordinary opinion has rightly given first place; that is why these legal arguments that he didn't delay appear farcical. But the two lines of argument are only two halves of the same thing. Those members of the audience who simply wanted to see a Revenge Play again, without any hooting at it from smarter persons, deserved to be satisfied; and anyhow, for all parties, the suspicion that Hamlet was a coward or merely fatuous had to be avoided. The ambiguity was an essential part of the intention, because the more you tried to translate the balance of impulses in the old drama into a realistic story the more peculiar this story had to be made. The old structure was still kept firm, but its foundations had to be strengthened to carry so much extra weight. At the same time, a simpler view could be taken; whatever the stage characters may say, the real situation in the theatre is still that the audience knows the revenge won't come till the end. Their own foreknowledge is what they had laughed at, rather than any lack of motive in the puppets, and however much the motives of the Revenger for delay were increased he could still very properly blame himself for keeping the audience waiting. One could therefore sit through the new *Hamlet* (as for that matter the eighteenth century did) without feeling too startled by his self-reproaches. But of course the idea that "bringing the style up to date" did not involve any change of content seems to me absurd, whether held by Shakespeare's committee or by Professor Stoll; for one thing, it made the old theatrical convention appear bafflingly indistinguishable from a current political danger. The whole story was brought into a new air, so that one felt there was much more "in it."

This effect, I think, requires a sudden feeling of novelty rather than a gradual evolution, but it is still possible that Shakespeare wrote an earlier draft than our present text. To discuss two lost plays at once, by Kyd and Shakespeare, is perhaps rather tiresome, but one cannot imagine the first audiences without forming some picture of the development of the play, of what struck them as new. Mr. Dover Wilson, to whom so much gratitude is due for his series of books on *Hamlet*, takes a rather absurd position here. He never edits a straightforward Shakespeare text without finding evidence for two or three layers of revision, and considering them important for a full understanding of the play; only in *Hamlet*, where there is positive evidence for them, and a long-recognized ground for curiosity about them, does he assume they can be ignored. He rightly insists that an editor needs to see the problems of a text as a whole before even choosing between two variant readings, and he sometimes actually asserts in passing that Shakespeare wrote earlier drafts of *Hamlet*; and yet his basis for preferring Q2 to F is a picture of Shakespeare handing in *one* manuscript (recorded by Q2) from which the Company at once wrote out *one* acting version (recorded by F), making drastic cuts and also verbal changes which they refused to reconsider. He says he is not concerned with "sixteenth century versions of Hamlet," a device of

rhetoric that suggests a gradual evolution, too hard to trace. I am not clear which century 1600 is in (there was a surprising amount of quarrelling over the point in both 1900 and 1800), but even writing done in 1599 would not be remote from 1601. I postulate one main treatment of the play by Shakespeare, first acted in 1600, and then one quite minor revision of it by Shakespeare, first acted in 1601, written to feed and gratify the interest and discussion which his great surprise had excited the year before. To believe in this amount of revision does not make much difference, whereas a gradual evolution would, but it clears up some puzzling bits of evidence and I think makes the audiences more intelligible.

Mr. Dover Wilson's two volumes on *The Manuscript of Shakespeare's Hamlet* are magnificently detailed and obviously right most of the time. I am only questioning this part of his conclusions: "we may venture to suspect that (always assuming Shakespeare to have been in London) *Hamlet* was not merely a turning-point in his career dramatically, but also marks some kind of crisis in his relations with his company." The idea that Shakespeare wasn't in London, I take it, is inserted to allow for the theory that he was in Scotland drafting his first version of *Macbeth*, which need not delay us. The cuts for time in the Folio seem to be his main argument, because he ends his leading volume (*Manuscript*, p. 174) by saying that Shakespeare discovered his mistake if he imagined that the Company would act such a long play in full. "If" here is a delicacy only, because the purpose of the argument is to answer critics who had called our full-length *Hamlet* "a monstrosity, the creation of scholarly compromise" between rival shorter versions. I agree with Mr. Dover Wilson that Shakespeare did envisage a use for this whole text. But Mr. Dover Wilson had just been giving an impressive section (pp. 166–170) to prove that some of the Folio cuts are so skilful that Shakespeare must have done them himself—perhaps unwillingly, but at least he was not being ignored. Another part of the argument for a quarrel is that the producer "did not trouble to consult the author when he could not decipher a word or understand a passage," but this section argues that Shakespeare did make a few corrections in the Prompt Copy, when a mistake happened to lie near the bits he had looked up to make his cuts. Surely this makes the author look culpably careless over details rather than in a huff because he hadn't been consulted over details. Another argument uses errors which are unchanged in the quartos and folio to suggest that the Company repeated the same bits of petty nonsense blindly for twenty years. But Mr. Dover Wilson also argues that the Prompt Copy used for the Folio was "brought up to date" in later years, at least on such points as the weapons fashionable for duelling; the same might apply to some slang terms which were already out of date when the Folio was published, though he labors to restore them now from the Quarto. I think he presumes an excessive desire to save paper in this quite wealthy company; they are not likely to have kept the same manuscript Prompt Copy of their most popular play in constant use for twenty years. There would have to be a copying staff, in any

case, to give the actors their parts to learn from. The baffling question is how the Folio *Hamlet* with its mass of different kinds of error could ever occur; and the theory of Mr. Dover Wilson is that it was badly printed from a copy of the Company's (irremovable) Prompt Copy made by a Company employee who was careless chiefly because he knew what was currently acted, so that his mind echoed phrases in the wrong place. Surely I may put one more storey onto this card castle. Heming and Condell, I suggest, set this man to copy the *original* Prompt Copy, which so far from being in current use had become a kind of museum piece; they tried to get a basic text for the printer, and only failed to realize that it isn't enough in these matters to issue an order. The basic object to be copied had neither the later corrections nor the extra passages which had been reserved for special occasions, and the interest of the man who copied it is that he could scribble down both old and new errors or variants without feeling he was obviously wrong. It seems improbable that the Globe actors, though likely to introduce corrections, would patiently repeat bits of unrewarding nonsense for twenty years; my little invention saves us from believing that, without forcing me to deny that Mr. Dover Wilson's theory has produced some good emendations.

We cannot expect to recover a correct text merely from an excess of error in the printed versions of it; and in no other Shakespeare play are they so confused. But surely this fact itself must have some meaning. I suggest that, while Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was the rage, that is, roughly till James became king without civil war, it was varied a good deal on the night according to the reactions of the immediate audience. This would be likely to make the surviving texts pretty hard to print from; also it relieves us from thinking of Shakespeare as frustrated by the Company's cuts in his first great tragedy. Surely any man, after a quarrel of this sort, would take some interest in "at least" getting the printed version right. No doubt there was a snobbery about print, to which he would probably be sensitive, and also the text belonged to the Company; but neither question would impinge here. The Company must have wanted a large text for the Second Quarto, and even the most anxious snob can correct proofs without attracting attention. Indeed there was at least one reprint of it (1611), and probably two, during his lifetime; they can be observed trying to correct a few mistakes, but obviously without help from the author. You might think he fell into despair over the incompetence of the printers, but they could do other jobs well enough, and were visibly trying to do better here. The only plausible view is that he refused to help them because he wouldn't be bothered, and I do not see how he could have felt this if he had been annoyed by the way *Hamlet* had been mangled at the Globe. I think he must have felt tolerably glugged by the performances.

Critics have long felt that the First Quarto probably contains evidence for a previous draft by Shakespeare which is hard to disentangle. I am not trying to alter the points of revision usually suggested, and need not recall the

arguments in their lengthy detail; I am only trying to give fresh support for them against Mr. Dover Wilson's view that Q1 is a perversion of the standard Globe performance. One must admit, on his side, that a text published in 1603 cannot be trusted to be unaffected by changes in the performance supposedly made in 1601; the idea that this was a travelling version, suited to audiences less experienced than the Globe ones, seems a needed hypothesis as well as one suggested by the title-page. Also, though often weirdly bad in detail, it is a very workmanlike object in broad planning; somebody made a drastically short version of the play which kept in all the action, and the effect is so full of action that it is almost as jerky as an early film, which no doubt some audiences would appreciate. There seems no way to decide whether or not this was done independently of the pirating reporters who forgot a lot of the poetry. The main change is that the soliloquy "To be or not to be" and its attendant scolding of Ophelia is put before the Player scene, not after it; but a producer wanting a short plain version is wise to make that change, so it is not evidence for an earlier draft by Shakespeare. The variations in names might only recall Kyd's names, perhaps more familiar in the provinces. What does seem decisive evidence, and was regularly considered so till Mr. Dover Wilson ignored rather than rebutted it, is that this text gives a sheer scene between Horatio and the Queen alone, planning what to do about Hamlet's return to Denmark; surely this would be outside the terms of reference of both the potting adapter and the pirating hack. The text seems particularly "cooked up" and not remembered from Shakespeare; but then, what these people wanted was "action," and it is less like action to have Horatio report Hamlet's adventures than to let the hero boast in person; and it is not inherently any shorter. Also this change fits in with a consistently different picture of the Queen, who is not only made clearly innocent of the murder but made willing to help Hamlet. Mr. Dover Wilson does not seem to deal with this familiar position beyond saying "Shakespeare is subtler than his perverters or his predecessors," assuming that the Q1 compiler is his first perverter; and he argues that the Queen is meant to appear innocent even of vague complicity in the murder in our standard text of *Hamlet*. But surely it is fair to ask what this "subtlety" may be, and why it deserves such a fine name if it only muddles a point that was meant to be clear. Why, especially, must the Queen be given an unexplained half-confession, "To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is . . .," a fear of betraying guilt by too much effort to hide it? Mr. Richard Flatter, I think, did well to emphasize how completely this passage has been ignored by critics such as A. C. Bradley and Mr. Dover Wilson, whose arguments from other passages to prove that she was meant to seem innocent are very convincing. Surely the only reasonable view is that Shakespeare in his final version wanted to leave doubt in the minds of the audience about the Queen. You may say that the adapter behind Q1 simply got rid of this nuisance, but you are making him do an unlikely amount of intelligent work. It is simpler

to believe that he is drawing on an earlier version, which made the Queen definitely on Hamlet's side after the bedroom scene.

Mr. Dover Wilson used to believe in two versions by Shakespeare and apparently does so still, or if not he must be praised for giving the evidence against his later view with his usual firmness. Harvey's note praising a *Hamlet* by Shakespeare, he recalls, needs to predate the execution of Essex in February 1601, whereas the remarks about the War of the Theatres, and perhaps a hint at the siege of Dunkirk in the soliloquy "How all occasions do inform against me," belong to the summer of that year. If we are to believe in a revision for 1601, then, it should include these items, and probably the rest of the soliloquy, also the new position for "To be or not to be" and the scolding of Ophelia, and a number of changes about the Queen, not long in bulk. The idea that the main text was written before the death of Essex and the revision after it should perhaps have more meaning that I can find; perhaps anyway it corresponds to a certain darkening of the whole air. But there is no need to make this revision large or elaborate; the points just listed seem to be the only ones we have direct evidence for, and are easily understood as heightening the peculiar effect of *Hamlet* for a public which had already caught on to it. May I now put the matter the other way round: I do not believe that our present text of *Hamlet*, a weirdly baffling thing, could have been written at all except for a public which had already caught on to it.

The strongest argument is from the soliloquy "How all occasions."<sup>1</sup> Mr. Dover Wilson says that the Company omitted this "from the very first" from the Fortinbras scene, "which was patently written to give occasion to the soliloquy." But no producer would leave in the nuisance of an army marching across the stage after removing the only point of it. Fortinbras had anyway to march his army across the stage, as he does in Q1 as well as F, and presumably did in Kyd's version. The beginning of the play is a mobilization against this army and the end a triumph for it; the audience thought in more practical terms than we do about these dynastic quarrels. But that made it all the more dramatic, in the 1601 version, to throw in a speech for Hamlet hinting that the troops at Dunkirk were as fatuous for too much action as he himself was for too little. It is only a final example of the process of keeping the old scenes and packing into them extra meaning. What is reckless about the speech is that it makes Hamlet say, while (presumably) surrounded by guards leading him to death, "I have cause and will and strength and means To do it," destroying a sheer school of Hamlet Theories with each noun; the effect is so exasperating that many critics have simply demanded the right to throw it away. Nobody is as annoying as this except on purpose, and the only reasonable view of why the speech was added is that these Hamlet Theories had already been propounded, in long discussions among the spectators, during the previous year. But the bafflement thrown in here was not the tedious one of making a psychological problem or a detective story insoluble;

there was a more obvious effect in making Hamlet magnificent. He finds his immediate position not even worth reflecting on; and he does get out of this jam, so you can't blame him for his presumption at this point. His complete impotence at the moment, one might say, seems to him "only a theatrical appearance," just as his previous reasons for delay seem to have vanished like a dream. Here as elsewhere he gives a curious effect, also not unknown among his critics, of losing all interest for what has happened in the story; but it is more impressive in him than in them. By the way, I would like to have one other passage added by Shakespeare in revision, the remarks by Hamlet at the end of the bedroom scene (in Q2 but not F) to the effect that it will only cheer him up to have to outwit his old pals trying to kill him; this seems liable to sound merely boastful unless afterwards proved genuine by his private thoughts, but if the soliloquy is being added some such remark is needed first, to prepare the audience not to find it merely unnatural.

One might suppose that this dream-like though fierce quality in Hamlet, which became perhaps his chief appeal two centuries later, was only invented for the 1601 revision. I think one can prove that this was not so. The moral effect is much the same, and hardly less presumptuous, when he insists at the end of the play on treating Laertes as a gentleman and a sportsman, though he has already told the audience (in high mystical terms) that he is not such a fool as to be unsuspecting; and the moral is at once drawn for us—this treatment unnerves Laertes so much that he almost drops the plot. The fencing-match no less than the Play Scene is an imitation which turns out to be reality, but that is merely a thing which one should never be surprised by; Laertes ought still to be treated in the proper style. "Use them after your own honour and dignity; the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty"; this curious generosity of the intellect is always strong in Hamlet, and indeed his main source of charm. One reason, in fact, why he could be made so baffling without his character becoming confused was that it made him give a tremendous display of top-class behavior, even in his secret mind as expressed in soliloquy. Now the paradoxical chivalry towards Laertes (which commentators tend to regard as a "problem" about how much Hamlet understood) is well marked in Q1, which fairly certainly didn't bother about the 1601 revision. On the other hand it wouldn't be in Kyd's version, because Kyd wasn't interested in this kind of startlingly gentlemanly behavior, as well as not wanting to use it as an explanation of the delay. It really belongs, I think, to the situation of continuing to claim a peculiar status as an aristocrat after the practical status has been lost, like Dukes in Proust; the casual remark by Hamlet in the graveyard that all the classes are getting mixed seems to me to have a bearing on his behavior. By the way, the reason why Hamlet apologizes to Laertes merely by claiming to be mad, which many commentators have felt to be a shifty way to talk about his killing of Laertes' father (since we have seen that that was not done when mad), is that he is uneasy about the incident "I'll rant

as well as thou”; to have scuffled with Laertes while they both kicked the body of his sister in her grave was disgustingly theatrical, and he is ashamed of it. This seems to him much more real than having caused the deaths of both father and sister, a thing he couldn’t help, and even when dying beside Laertes he refuses to admit any guilt for it. To have allowed his situation to make him theatrical is serious guilt, and (according to Q2) he snatches the occasion to throw in a separate apology to his mother, for the way he behaved to *her* on the occasion when Polonius happened to get killed. This emphasis on style rather than on one’s incidental murders seems now madly egotistical, but it would then appear as consistently princely behavior. It seems clear that Shakespeare used this as a primary element in his revivification of Hamlet.

In this kind of way, he got a good deal of mystery into his first version of *Hamlet*, starting with the intention of making it life-like. Then, when the audiences became intrigued by this mystery, he made some quite small additions and changes which screwed up the mystery to the almost torturing point where we now have it—the sky was the limit now, not merely because the audiences wanted it, but because one need only act so much of this “shock troops” material as a particular audience seemed ripe for. No wonder it made the play much too long. The soliloquy “How All Occasions” is a sort of encore planned in case an audience refuses to let the star go, and in the big days of *Hamlet* they would decide back-stage how much, and which parts, of the full text to perform when they saw how a particular audience was shaping. This view gives no reason to doubt that the whole thing was sometimes acted, ending by torchlight probably, with the staff of the Globe extremely cross at not being allowed to go home earlier. I am not clear how much this picture alters the arguments of Mr. Dover Wilson from the surviving texts, but it clearly does to a considerable extent. Everyone says that the peculiar merit of the Elizabethan theatre was to satisfy a broad and varied clientele, with something of the variability of the Music Hall in its handling of the audience; but the experts do not seem to imagine a theatre which actually carried out this plan, instead of sticking to a text laid down rigidly beforehand. It is unlikely to have happened on any scale, to be sure, except in the very special case of *Hamlet*. But if you suppose it happened there you need no longer suppose a quarrel over some extras written in for occasional use. And there is the less reason to suppose a quarrel, on my argument, because the Company must have accepted Shakespeare’s 1601 revision as regards both Ophelia and the Queen, for example treating the new position for “To be or not to be” as part of the standard Prompt Copy, eventually recorded in the Folio. (One would never swap back the order of scenes “on the night.”) I imagine that this excitement about the play, which made it worth while keeping bits for special audiences, had already died down by 1605, when the Company sent plenty of Shakespeare’s manuscript to the printer (as Mr. Dover Wilson says) just to outface the pirate of Q1; one no longer needed to keep extras up one’s sleeve. But I should fancy that



the claim on the title-page, “enlarged to almost as much again as it was,” does not only refer to the extreme shortness of the pirate’s version; advertisements even when lying often have sources of plausibility, and it would be known that a few of the Globe performances had also been almost recklessly enlarged.

The criticism of *Hamlet* has got to such a scale that it feels merely pokey to say one thing more; a library on the topic would completely fill an ordinary house. But I feel that the line of thought I have been following here is one which many recent critics have taken, and yet without their taking it as far as it will go.

#### NOTE

1. I discuss the other changes in the second part of this essay.

### *Hamlet* When New (Part II)

The first part of this essay argued that the 1600 Globe audiences would have laughed at the Kyd version of *Hamlet* simply because they could shout “Hurry Up”; thus the first problem for Shakespeare in re-writing it was to find how to stop them, by making the delay itself a subject of interest. From this point of view, I maintained, it is reasonable to revive the idea that he wrote two versions of Hamlet, and that the mangled First Quarto gives indirect evidence about the first one; an idea common among Victorian critics, but blown upon since then by Sir Edmund Chambers and Professor Dover Wilson. The first version, for 1600, solved the technical problem so well that it established Hamlet as a “mystery” among the first audiences; then a minor revision for 1601 gratified this line of interest by making him a baffling one and spreading mystery all round. Thus the soliloquy “How all occasions,” which seems to defy the commentators deliberately, was written as an extra for audiences especially fascinated by Hamlet; our full text was meant to be used sometimes but not regularly. These assertions, I would claim, fit in with the textual evidence, which is very confusing, better than anything else; but the main reason for believing them is that they explain how such an extraordinary play could get written at all. We need some picture of the first audiences even to understand what was intended.

I assume, then, that the First Quarto gives evidence about the first draft, so that the main changes for the second concern Ophelia and the Queen; whom I will consider in turn. The scolding of Ophelia by Hamlet, and the soliloquy “To be or not to be” before it, were put later in the play. The main purpose in this, I think, was to screw up the paradoxes in the character of Hamlet rather than to affect Ophelia herself. I tried to describe in the first part of this essay a sort of Pirandello sequence in his behavior from meeting the Players to the Recorder scene, which raises problems about whether he is very theatrical or very sincere, and this is much heightened by putting his hysterical attack on Ophelia in the middle of it; especially beside the utter detachment of “To be or not to be,” which J. M. Robertson found so incredible in its new position as to demand grotesque

collaboration theories. The first version by Shakespeare must have carried the main point of this sequence, because even the First Quarto makes him take an actual "pipe" after the Play scene and use it to claim he is a mystery ("though you can fret me, yet you cannot play upon me"); but this was a crucial part to "heighten" if you wanted to heighten the mystery as a whole.

One might also feel that the change had another purpose; combined with the new doubts about the Queen it gives the play a concentrated anti-woman central area. In any case, the worst behavior of Hamlet is towards Ophelia, whether you call it theatrical or not; the critics who have turned against him usually seem to do so on her behalf, and his relations with the two women raise more obvious questions about whether he is neurotic than the delay. The first question here is how Shakespeare *expected* the audience to take the scolding of Ophelia, admitting that an audience has different parts. We can all see Hamlet has excuses for treating her badly, but if we are to think him a hero for yielding to them the thing becomes barbaric; he punishes her savagely for a plot against him when he has practically forced her to behave like a hospital nurse. I feel sure that Mr. Dover Wilson is getting at something important, though as so often from a wrong angle, when he makes a fuss about adding a stage direction at II, ii, 158, and insists that Hamlet must visibly overhear the King and Polonius plotting to use Ophelia against him. No doubt this is better for a modern audience, but we need to consider the sequence of changes in the traditional play. In our present text, even granting Mr. Dover Wilson his tiny stage direction, what Hamlet overhears is very harmless and indeed what he himself has planned for; it was he who started using Ophelia as a pawn, however much excused by passion or despair. Kyd, I submit, would give solid ground for Hamlet's view that Ophelia is working against him; the merits of Kyd, as I am assuming all along, have nothing to do with leaving motives obscure. She would do it highmindedly, in ringing lines, with distress, regarding it as her duty since her lover has become mad, and never realizing what deep enmity against him she is assisting; but still she would do something plain and worth making a fuss about. Hamlet's scolding of her for it would follow at once. The agile Bard, with gleaming eye, merely removed the adequate motivation for the scolding of Ophelia, a habit to which he was becoming attached. Then for his revision he took the scolding far away even from the trivial bit of plotting, no more than was essential to explain the sequence, that he had left in for his Hamlet to overhear; thus making Mr. Dover Wilson's view harder for a spectator to invent. One can respect the struggle of Mr. Dover Wilson to recover one rag of the drapery so much needed by Hamlet, but if this was the development the Globe Theatre is not likely to have given any.

We should recall here, I think, the rising fashion in the theatres for the villain-hero, who staggers one by being so *outré*, and the love-poems of Donne, already famous in private circulation, which were designed to outrage the conventions about chivalrous treatment of women. Also the random indecency

of lunatics, a thing the Elizabethans were more accustomed to than we are, since they seldom locked them up, is insisted on in the behavior of Hamlet to Ophelia whether he is pretending or not. The surprising instruction of the Ghost "Taint not thy mind"—was bound to get attention, so that one was prepared to think his mind tainted. I think the Shakespeare Hamlet was meant to be regarded by most of the audience as behaving shockingly towards Ophelia, almost too much so to remain a tragic hero; to swing round the whole audience into reverence for Hamlet before he died was something of a lion-taming act. This was part of the rule that all his behavior must be startling, and was only slightly heightened in revision. But to see it in its right proportion we must remember another factor; the theatre, as various critics have pointed out, clung to an apparently muddled but no doubt tactical position of both grumbling against Puritans and accepting their main claims. The Victorians still felt that Hamlet was simply high-minded here. D. H. Lawrence has a poem describing him with hatred as always blowing and snoring about other folks' whoring, rightly perhaps, but in Hamlet's time this would feel like the voice of lower-class complaint against upper-class luxury, as when he rebukes the Court for too much drink. All Malcontents rebuked luxury; this aspect of him would not need to be "brought out."

Here I think we have the right approach to another Victorian view of Hamlet, of which Bernard Shaw is perhaps the only representative still commonly read: that he was morally too advanced to accept feudal ideas about revenge, and felt, but could not say, that his father had given him an out-of-date duty; that was why he gave such an absurd excuse for not killing the King at prayer. (Dr. Johnson thought it not absurd but too horrible to read.) Without this obscure element of "discussion drama," Shaw maintained, the nineteenth century would never have found Hamlet interesting; and of course Shaw would also feel it high-minded of him to be a bit rough with the women in a Puritan manner. This Hamlet Theory has been swept away by ridicule too easily, and I was glad to see Mr. Harbage defend it recently with the true remark that no moral idea was "remote from the Elizabethan mind", indeed, the most available source for *Hamlet*, the version by Belleforest, itself objects in principle to revenge. The word "feudal" needs to be removed (as so often); it is royal persons who cannot escape the duty of revenge by an appeal to public justice; this is one of the reasons why they have long been felt to make interesting subjects for plays. But I think Shakespeare's audiences did regard his Hamlet as taking a "modern" attitude to his situation, just as Bernard Shaw did. This indeed was one of the major dramatic effects of the new treatment. He walks out to the audience and says "You think this an absurd old play, and so it is, *but I'm in it*, and what can I do?" The theatrical device in itself expresses no theory about the duty of revenge, but it does ask the crowd to share in the question. No wonder that one of the seventeenth-century references, dropped while describing someone else, says "He is like Prince Hamlet, he pleases all."

This trait of his character has rightly irritated many critics, most recently perhaps Senor Madariaga, whose lively book on Hamlet has at least the merit of needing some effort to refute it. He finds him a familiar Renaissance type of the extreme "egotist," as well as a cad who had been to bed with Ophelia already. The curious indifference of Hamlet to the facts does make him what we call egotistical, but this would be viewed as part of his lordliness; "egotism," I think, is only a modern bit of popular psychology, quite as remote from medical science as the Elizabethan bit about "melancholy" and much less likely to occur to the first audiences. The argument that Hamlet has been to bed with Ophelia gives an impression of clearing the air, and I think greatly needs refuting; I am glad to have a coarse enough argument to do it without being suspected of undue chivalry. We need a little background first. Senor Madariaga points out that the corresponding lady in the sources did enjoy Hamlet's person on a brief occasion, and argues that the audience would take the story for granted unless it was firmly changed; he then easily proves that the actress of Ophelia can make all references to her virginity seem comic, but this doesn't prove she was meant to. The only "source" which most of the audience would know about is the play by Kyd which we have lost, and there is a grand simplicity about the drama of Kyd which is unlikely to have allowed any questionable aspect to his hero. The legend itself, I agree, gives Hamlet a strong "Br'er Fox" smell, and Shakespeare had a nose for this, but the tradition of the theatre would let him assume that Ophelia represented pure pathos and was somehow betrayed. Kyd would be likely to introduce the idea that this lady, who is undignified in the sources, had a high position and was regarded as Hamlet's prospective Queen. Shakespeare gave this a further twist; he implies at her first appearance that her brother and father are angling to make her Queen; they don't say that to the girl, and still less to Hamlet's parents, but we need not believe their over-eager protestations about the matter; the situation is a well-known one for the audience. (The placid lament of the Queen over the grave of Ophelia, that she had expected her to marry Hamlet, sounds as if she had long known it was in the wind.) They both tell her that the urgent thing is not to go to bed with him too quickly, and the audience will assume that this important family plan is being carried through; unless, of course, she leers and winks as Senor Madariaga recommends, but that would only make her seem a fool. The impact of the poetry that introduces the character has a natural right to interpret her; it is hauntingly beautiful and obviously does not interpret the father and brother who speak it:

The chariest maid is prodigal enough  
If she unmask her beauty to the moon

and so forth; the whole suggestion is that she must hold off from Hamlet, as part of her bid for grandeur, and yet that tragedy may come of it. However, I agree

that these vast poetic gestures towards all human experience could easily suggest just the opposite, that she is sure to have done what she is advised against; a more definite argument is required. In the play scene, when Hamlet is offensively jeering at her for her supposed lust, and she is trying to laugh it off (pathetically and courageously; it is unfair of Senor Madariaga to say this proves she is used to such talk), she says “you are keen, my lord, you are keen,” meaning to praise his jokes as high-minded general satire against the world, though they are flat enough bits of nastiness, and he answers:

It would cost you a groaning to take off my edge.

Now the conviction that it is fun to make a virgin scream and bleed was far too obvious to the Elizabethans for this to mean anything else; I can imagine alternatives, but do not believe in them and will wait for them to be advanced by some opponent. The point is not that Hamlet’s remark has any importance on the stage, but that the first audiences took for granted one view of her or the other, from the production if not from the tradition (an ambiguity here, I think, would only confuse the production), whereas we have to learn what they took for granted by using details which at the time merely seemed to fit in. This detail, I submit, is enough to prove they assumed her to be a virgin.

I am not trying to whitewash Hamlet; he is jeering at the desires of the virgin which he is keen to excite and not satisfy, and this is part of what sends her mad. But to jeer at a prospective Queen for having yielded to him already would be outside the code; the more loose the actual Court habits were (a point Senor Madariaga uses) the more ungentlemanly it would seem, and Hamlet never loses class, however mad. He also keeps a curious appeal for the lower classes in the audience as a satirist on the upper class, as I have tried to describe; even here, some of the audience would probably enjoy having jeers against an aggressively pure young lady whose family are angling for a grand marriage; but for this purpose too he needs to be unworldly rather than to have been to bed with her already. What seems more important to us is his “psychology,” and that gives the same answer; the whole point of his bad temper against her, which he builds up into feverish suspicions, is that it arises because she has shut him out, not because she has yielded to him. In the Nunnery scene, when he runs back for the second time onto the stage because he has just thought of a still nastier thing which he can’t bear not to say, he says “I have heard of your paintings, too,” heard that women in general paint their faces. It is almost a Peter Arno drawing. He calls her obscene because all women are (like his mother) and a prostitute because she is plotting against him (like a nurse). To allow any truth to his accusations against her seems to me throwing away the whole dramatic effect.

But of course there is a grave solemn truth, never denied, which is simply that Ophelia did want to marry him and ought not to have been accused

of lust for it. Senor Madariaga regards her behavior when mad as proof of incontinence when sane, an idea which strikes me as about equally remote from an Elizabethan audience and a modern doctor. She sings a song in which the man says to the woman "I would have married you, as I promised, if you had not come to my bed," which seems to ask for application to her own case; but many of the parallels in her mad talk work by opposites; indeed the agony of it (as in the mad speeches added to *The Spanish Tragedy*, for instance) is that we see her approaching recognition of the truth and then wincing far away again. "They say a made a good end" is her comment on the father who died unshriven, and "Bonny sweet Robin is all my joy" deals with her appalling lover before she walks out to death. Well might she reflect that the girls in the ballads, who came to a simpler kind of disaster by giving too early, met a less absolute frustration than the girl who held off because she was being groomed for queenhood; and surely this idea is the point of her vast farewell: "Come, my coach; . . . Good night, good ladies". But we can argue more directly than from the poetry of the thing. When she brings out this ballad the wicked King, who never falls below a certain breadth of sentiment, says "Pretty Ophelia," a quaintly smoking-room comment which directly tells the audience what to feel. Soon after, her brother echoes the word in a rage, saying that even in the madness forced upon her by Hamlet she turns Hell itself to favour and to prettiness, but the King saw that "pretty" is right at once. Recently I was being asked by a student in Peking what to make of the

long purples

Which liberal shepherds give a grosser name

But our cold maids do Dead Men's Fingers call them.

Why are the obscene thoughts of these peasants necessary in the impossible but splendid description of her death? At the time, I could only say that the lines seemed to me very beautiful, and in the usual tone about Ophelia, so I felt sure they didn't carry any hint that would go outside it. Also, no doubt, the maids give the flower this unmentioned name "when they laugh alone," and here the Love of a maid did become Death and fumble at her, but there is a broader, and one might well say a prettier, suggestion behind all these hints at her desire; that nobody wants her to be frigid. A certain amount of teasing about the modesty required from her would be ordinary custom, but the social purpose behind both halves of this little contradiction is to make her a good wife. Indeed to struggle against these absurd theories about her is to feel as baffled as she did by the confusions of puritanism; it makes one angry with Hamlet, not only with his commentators, as I think we are meant to be. Being disagreeable in this way was part of his "mystery."

Turning now to the Queen: Mr. Dover Wilson argued that the First Quarto was merely a perversion of the single play by Shakespeare, with a less

“subtle” treatment of the Queen. I do not think we need at once call it subtle of Shakespeare to make her into an extra mystery by simply cutting out all her explanations of her behavior. The idea of a great lady who speaks nobly but is treacherous to an uncertain degree was familiar on the stage, as in Marlowe’s *Edward II*, not a new idea deserving praise. No doubt the treatment is subtle; several of her replies seem unconscious proofs of complete innocence, whereas when she says her guilt “spills itself in fearing to be spilt” she must imply a guilty secret. But we must ask why the subtlety is wanted. An important factor here is the instruction of the Ghost to Hamlet, in the first Act, that he must contrive nothing against his mother. I think this was supplied by Kyd; he would see its usefulness as an excuse for the necessary delay, and would want his characters to be high-minded. Also he had to give his Ghost a reason for returning later, because the audience would not want this interesting character to be dropped. In Kyd’s first act, therefore, the Ghost said Claudius must be killed and the Queen protected; then in the third Act, when Hamlet was questioning her suspiciously, the Ghost came back and said she hadn’t known about his murder, supporting her own statement to that effect; meanwhile he told Hamlet that it would be dangerous to wait any longer about killing Claudius, because the Play Scene has warned him. Hamlet had felt he still ought to wait till he knew how much his mother was involved. The Ghost had already forgiven her for what she had done—perhaps adultery, probably only the hasty re-marriage to his brother—but had not cared to discuss it much; the tragic effect in the third act is that he clears up too late an unfortunate bit of vagueness in his first instructions. This makes him a bit absurd, but the motives of Ghosts seldom do bear much scrutiny, and he is better than most of them. (On this account, Hamlet is still liable to have different motives in different scenes for sparing the King at prayer, but that seems a normal bit of Elizabethan confusion.) Thus there is no reason why Kyd’s Queen should not have satisfied the curiosity of the audience fully; she would admit to Hamlet that her second marriage was wrong, clear herself of anything else, offer to help him, and be shown doing it. Shakespeare, in his first treatment of the play, had no reason not to keep all this, as the First Quarto implies; his problem was to make the audience accept the delay as life-like, and once Hamlet is surrounded by guards that problem is solved. But if we next suppose him making a minor revision, for audiences who have become interested in the mystery of Hamlet, then it is clearly better to surround him with mystery and make him drive into a situation which the audience too feels to be unplumbable.

Mr. Richard Flatter, in an interesting recent book (*Hamlet’s Father*), has done useful work by taking this re-interpretation of the Ghost as far as it will go. He points out that the Ghost must be supposed to return in the bedroom scene to say something important, and yet all he does is to prevent Hamlet from learning whether the Queen helped in his murder; such then was his intention, though he had to deny it. After this Hamlet does up his buttons (stops pretending to

be mad) and has nothing left but a high-minded despair about his duties to his parents; that is why he talks about Fate and refuses to defend himself. In effect, he can now only kill Claudius after his mother is dead, and he has only an instant to do it in before he himself dies, but he is heroic in seizing this moment to carry out an apparently impossible duty with pedantic exactitude. To accuse him of delay, says Mr. Flatter with considerable point, is like accusing Prometheus of delay while chained to the Caucasus. This result, I think, is enough to prove that the Flatter view was never a very prominent element in a play which hides it so successfully. He produces interesting evidence from stage history that her complicity in the murder was assumed as part of the tradition; but I can't see that the German version has any claim to echo a pre-Shakespearean play, whereas the First Quarto gives evidence that it was Shakespeare who first started this hare, in his revision of 1601. He goes on to claim that the theme of a Ghost who, so far from wanting Revenge, wants to save his unfaithful wife from being punished for murdering himself, wants even to save her from the pain of confessing it to their son, is an extraordinary moral invention, especially for an Elizabethan; and so it is, for a playwright in any period, if he keeps it so very well hidden. Here, surely, we are among the vaguely farcical "Solutions of the Hamlet Problem" which have been cropping up for generations. But we need also to consider why they crop up, why the play was so constructed as to excite them. I think the Flatter theory did cross the keen minds of some of the 1601 audiences, and was intended to; but only as a background possibility in a situation which encouraged a variety of such ideas. I think the fundamental reason why the change was "subtle," to recall the term of Mr. Dover Wilson, was something very close to the Freudian one which he is so quick at jumping away from; to make both parents a mystery at least pushes the audience towards fundamental childhood situations. But it would have a sufficient immediate effect from thickening the atmosphere and broadening the field.

There is a question about the staging of the bedroom scene which opens out in interesting directions. By all the rules of an enthusiast for the balcony, Hamlet must scold his mother on the balcony; whereas a modern producer usually feels it absurd to put such a long and dramatic scene in such a remote cramped space. One side says: "Hamlet walks straight on through one private room (the inner stage, the King at prayer) to a still more private room (the Queen's 'Closet,' the balcony); anything else would break the dramatic tension;" the other side says "How are you going to get four actors and a double bed and all the rest of it onto this balcony? How can the audience see them properly, let alone feel close enough to them?" We must also recognize and salute the splendid invention of J.C. Adams, a Globe Theatre in which the balcony was the most prominent stage, so that Desdemona could die on it actually touching the back wall of the whole building. This machine ought to be constructed, but the actual Globe could hardly be such a thrillingly specialized instrument; the plays had to be ready for



use under rougher circumstances. I think there is evidence that, here and in other cases, Shakespeare wanted to use the balcony more than the Company would let him, but that, even so, he regarded it as a “distancing” stage, like the modern producer and unlike J. C. Adams.

The Folio, to begin the next scene, just says “Enter King,” whereas Q2 says “Enter King and Queen with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.” Mr. Dover Wilson finds the Quarto odd here, because “not only is an entry for the Queen superfluous when she is already ‘on’, but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are quite obviously in the way, so much so that the Queen has to get rid of them at once.” However, they are called back in a moment to search for Hamlet, and Q1 brings them on here without bothering to move them out and back. Mr. Dover Wilson suggests an intervening scene cut by Shakespeare while revising his manuscript, but this I think only follows from his curious lack of interest in the Globe Theatre. Surely the Q2 version means that the inner-stage curtain is opened, “discovering” the King plotting with R. and G., and that the Queen at once walks downstairs from the balcony; the purpose of the Folio version, where the King walks into the bedroom alone and calls for R. and G. thirty lines later, is to keep the whole bedroom scene on the inner stage, not the balcony. This is a clumsy plan, because it forces the incident of the King at prayer out onto the apron stage, whereas how a King can be caught in private is one of the traditional lines of interest of Revenge Plays—here it happens because the Queen wants to speak to Hamlet privately just when the King urgently needs solitude to recover from the shock of the Mouse-Trap, and her room is only reached through his. This must also be how Hamlet can assume that the King has crept behind the arras in her room to spy on him. To make these points clear on the stage urgently needs two private rooms, and if the Company opposed using the balcony for such a definite purpose they must have opposed using it for any major scene. Now, on the theory of Mr. Dover Wilson about Q2 and F, this means that Shakespeare wrote the scene for the balcony but was never allowed to put it there. Presumably he had just built the instrument he wanted; he must have been on the committee about the technical requirements of the new Globe, as a major shareholder, and the wishes of the leading author about the shape of the balcony would have to be heard. It is an intriguing idea that, perhaps for the first big use of the Globe, he was not allowed to play with his toy as much as he wanted. One may suspect that the mysterious quarrel, which Mr. Dover Wilson can somehow smell in his dealings with *Hamlet*, was not about cuts in the text but about where to put the double bed.

There is a parallel case over the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*, with the opposite relation between Folio and Quarto. Here the Quarto is supposed to be a reconstruction of what was acted, the Folio to be mainly a record of Shakespeare’s manuscript, and the Quarto but not the Folio gives a soliloquy of fourteen lines by Edgar before the blinding scene. The previous scene is a shed

for hiding from the storm, so has to be the inner stage, and the curtain needs to open on a “bench” and some “joint-stools,” one of them “warped.” The next gives the blinding of Gloucester in his own castle, and the irony of this requires grandeur—his own coat-of-arms on a hanging cloth, and at least one grand chair facing away from the audience on which he is blinded. Edgar is ignored by the supporters of the now unconscious Lear but presumably leaves the hut when they do; so the back curtain can be closed behind him, and his speech is just long enough for a simple change of furniture. Neither scene requires the balcony. But his words are so clumsy that many critics have suspected interpolation, also they break the rule that he never talks sanely at length while dressed as mad; yet they make quite good dramatic irony and are obviously by Shakespeare. I think this is a decisive bit of evidence as far as it goes, apart from any theory about the Folio and Quarto; Shakespeare wrote these extra lines in cold blood for convenience in staging a performance without a balcony; therefore in his first draft, written in hot blood, he must have presumed the use of one for the blinding of Gloucester. But I am not sure how much we can build on this fact. If we suppose he had a major quarrel with the producer over the balcony in *Hamlet*, surely it is odd to have him running bull-headed into the same trouble six years later in *Lear*, when he can have been in no mood for negotiations with producers. The obvious view, it seems to me, is simply that the Company always required a version, less important than the one for the Globe Theatre, which could be acted where there wasn't a big balcony, for instance at Court. They wouldn't much care which version eventually hit print.

I cannot be decisive here but feel the questions need to be raised. It is clear from Q2 that Shakespeare wanted the bedroom scene in *Hamlet* on the balcony, because otherwise the peculiar requirements of that text would not have got written down. But are we to suppose that Kyd already had it on the balcony, or contrariwise that Shakespeare himself only wanted it there in his 1601 revision, as a way of adding to the general mystery? It seems probable that Kyd already had the crucial sequence of scenes here; first sparing the King at prayer, then testing the Queen and being interrupted by the Ghost. This requires the balcony already. Kyd had a balcony, but a small one used only for short scenes or as part of a general effect; if he used it for this scene he would not also kill Polonius on it. There is a direct theatrical or symbolical reason for putting the scene on the balcony; Hamlet has drifted away from the obvious necessity of killing Claudius, so he is next shown bellowing in a remote place, and when the Ghost arrives the effect is like some animal in the near-by bear-pit being driven back from a hiding-place to its death in the ring. (It is thus a rehabilitation for Hamlet when he fights his own way back from England.) Besides, any stage Ghost is safer from ridicule when kept a bit remote. So I think it likely that Kyd already had the scene there, without Polonius and with less prolonged scolding by Hamlet. Anyhow Shakespeare would have it there in his first version, because it

is required by his dramatic sequence, not merely by his later desire to add extra mystery about the Queen. Probably he told the Company he was only following tradition by putting it on the balcony, whereas he had made the scene so much bigger, to fit the new balcony of the Globe, that the effect was quite different. I do not think the Folio is adequate evidence that they refused, but they may have done.

The more important question is what Shakespeare wanted from his balcony, and therefore how we should build theatres for acting him. There is a large practical difference between the “distancing” theory of the balcony which is commonly assumed and the theory of J. C. Adams that it was simply the most prominent stage. One must suppose a gradual development; no doubt, the Globe of 1599 might have made a startling break with previous theatrical construction, but if so it is odd that that didn’t get mentioned. The current view of experts seems to be that the balcony came to be used more and more in the seventeenth century, for the “public” theatres. The year before the theatres were closed for the Rule of the Saints a hopeful man published a play with a stage direction requiring *two* double beds and other French farce material saying he *hoped* it could all be done on the balcony, and this may encourage us to believe that the forward-looking vision of Shakespeare was eventually justified. Even the Folio text of *Lear* is generally supposed to be checking its version by the Quarto etc., not copying a fifteen-year-old manuscript blindly; one could argue that the copyist in many of his cuts was leaving out the parts he knew were never spoken “nowadays”—for instance, you didn’t want those tiresome extra lines for Edgar because nowadays the balcony was used. The whole subject is confusing, but my impression is that Shakespeare regarded his balcony as a “distancing” stage, even while arranging for a bigger one and trying to use it more. We tend to feel that the obscenity and jealousy of Hamlet towards his mother are in themselves unpleasant enough to be the better for “distancing,” but squeamishness is not the main point; as I have tried to argue, there would already be a dramatic reason for putting it there in the 1580’s, which Shakespeare might well want to carry further. In the same way, we would prefer to feel farther off from the blinding of Gloucester, but also the function of the scene is to “sum up the eye imagery” and what not, rather than to emphasize his pain, since he does not become a major character till after it. Of course, as so often happens in a quarrel about how to use a new object, both sides may have been wrong in making the same basic assumption; J. C. Adams may be right in saying that the balcony was in fact the most prominent stage of the 1600 Globe, and yet everyone concerned may have failed to recognize this at the time. I imagine there is a good deal yet to be discovered about the staging, which may help to clear up our views about the first audiences; this makes a contrast with what may be called the basic point of *Hamlet*, which does seem to have been pursued, in the last century and a half, about as far as it will go.

I ought finally to say something about the Freudian view of *Hamlet*, the most extraordinary of the claims that it means something very profound which the first audiences could not know about. I think that literary critics, when this theory appeared, were thrown into excessive anxiety. A. C. Bradley had made the essential points before; that Hamlet's first soliloquy drives home (rather as a surprise to the first audiences, who expected something about losing the throne) that some kind of sex nausea about his mother is what is really poisoning him; also that in the sequence around the Prayer scene his failure to kill Claudius is firmly and intentionally tied up with a preference for scolding his mother instead. I have been trying to argue that his relations with the two women were made increasingly oppressive as the play was altered, but in any case the Freudian atmosphere of the final version is obvious even if distasteful. Surely the first point here is that the original legend is a kind of gift for the Freudian approach (even if Freud is wrong); it need not be painful to suppose that Shakespeare expressed this legend with a unique power. There is a fairy-story or childish fascination because Hamlet can boast of his secret and yet keep it, and because this crazy magical behaviour kills plenty of grown-ups; to base it on a conflict about killing Mother's husband is more specifically Freudian but still not secret. The Freudian theory makes a literary problem when its conclusions oppose what the author thought he intended; but it seems clear that Shakespeare wouldn't have wanted to alter anything if he had been told about Freud, whether he laughed at the theory or not. Then again, what is tiresome for the reader about the Freudian approach is that it seems to tell us we are merely deluded in the reasons we give for our preferences, because the real grounds for them are deep in the Unconscious; but here the passage to the underground is fairly open. A feeling that this hero is allowed to act in a peculiar way which is yet somehow familiar, because one has been tempted to do it oneself, is surely part of the essence of the story. There is a clear contrast with Oedipus, who had no Oedipus Complex. He had not wanted to kill his father and marry his mother, even "unconsciously"; if he came to recognize that he had wanted it, that would weaken his bleak surprise at learning he has done it. The claim is that his audiences wanted to do it unconsciously—that is why they were so deeply stirred by the play, and why Aristotle could treat it as the supreme tragedy though in logic it doesn't fit his case at all, being only a bad luck story. This position is an uneasy one, I think; one feels there ought to be some mediation between the surface and the depths, and probably the play did mean more to its first audiences than we realize. But Hamlet is himself suffering from the Complex, in the grand treatment by Ernest Jones, though the reactions of the audience are also considered when he makes the other characters "fit in." And this is not unreasonable, because Hamlet is at least peculiar in Saxo, and Shakespeare overtly treats him as a "case" of Melancholy, a specific though baffling mental disease which medical textbooks were being written about.

What does seem doubtful is whether his mental disease was supposed to be what made him spare the King at prayer. We may take it that Kyd already had the scene, and gave the reason (that this might not send him to Hell), and meant it to be taken seriously; and also meant its effect to be seen as fatal, a tragic failure of state-craft. A moral to this, that a desire for excessive revenge may sometimes spoil a whole design, would seem quite in order. But, by the time Shakespeare had finished raising puzzles about the motives, even the motive for this part, though apparently taken over directly, might well come into doubt; for one thing, the failure of Hamlet even to consider his own danger, now that the King knows his secret, is so very glaring. Even the wildly opposite reason suggested by Mr. Dover Wilson, that he feels it wouldn't be sporting though he can't tell himself so, might crop up among contemporary audiences; in any case, the idea that there was some puzzle about it could easily occur to them. And the idea of a man grown-up in everything else who still acts like a child towards his elder relations is familiar; it could occur to a reflective mind, not only be sensed by the Unconscious, as soon as behavior like Hamlet's was presented as a puzzle. The trouble with it if made prominent would be from making the hero contemptible, but Hamlet has many escapes from that besides his claim to mental disease. That his mother's marriage was considered incest made his initial disturbance seem more rational than it does now; but his horror and jealousy are made to feel, as Mr. Eliot pointed out for purposes of complaint, a spreading miasma and in excess of this cause. I do not think Mr. Dover Wilson need have suspected that Mr. Eliot hadn't heard about incest, even for a rival effort at dodging Freud; there was admittedly an excess, because the old play was admittedly theatrical. Unconscious resistance to killing a *King* is what the audience would be likely to invent, if any; for Claudius to talk about the divinity that doth hedge a king is irony, because he has killed one, but we are still meant to feel its truth; there may be some echo of the current view of Hamlet, as a recent critic has suggested, in the grand scene of Chapman with the repeated line "Do anything but killing of a King." It would fit well onto the high-minded aspect of Hamlet, as having an unmentioned doubt about the value of his revenge. But none of this is a rebuttal of the Freudian view; the feeling about a King is derived very directly from childhood feelings about Father.

We have to consider, not merely how a play came to be written which allows of being searched so deeply so long after, but why it has steadily continued to hold audiences who on any view do not see all round it. The Freudian view is that it satisfies the universal Unconscious, but one feels more practical in saying, as Hugh Kingsmill did, that they enjoy the imaginative release of indulging in very "theatrical" behavior, which in this case is hard to distinguish from "neurotic" behavior. The business of the plot is to prevent them from feeling it as an indulgence, because the assumption that Hamlet has plenty of reasons for it somehow is always kept up. If we leave the matter there, I think, the play

appears a rather offensive trick and even likely to be harmful. Indeed common sense has decided that people who feel encouraged to imitate Hamlet, or to follow what appear to be the instructions of Freud, actually are liable to behave badly. But the first audiences were being asked to consider this hero of legend as admittedly theatrical (already laughed at for it) and yet unbreakably true about life; in one way because he illustrated a recognized neurosis, in another because he extracted from it virtues which could not but be called great however much the story proved them to be fatal. So far as the spectator was tempted forward to examine the “reasons” behind Hamlet he was no longer indulging a delusion but considering a frequent and important, even if delusory, mental state, and trying to handle it. If one conceives the play as finally rewritten with that kind of purpose and that kind of audience, there is no need to be astonished that it happened to illustrate the Freudian theory. Indeed it would seem rather trivial, I think, to go on now and examine whether the successive versions were getting more Freudian. The eventual question is whether you can put up with the final Hamlet, a person who frequently appears in the modern world under various disguises, whether by Shakespeare’s fault or no. I would always sympathize with anyone who says, like Hugh Kingsmill, that he can’t put up with Hamlet at all. But I am afraid it is within hail of the more painful question whether you can put up with yourself and the race of man.



**1951—Harold C. Goddard.**  
**From *The Meaning of Shakespeare***

Harold Goddard (1878–1950) was a professor of English at Swarthmore College and the University of Chicago. *The Meaning of Shakespeare* has been frequently reprinted since its publication in 1951. He was also the author of *Blake’s Fourfold Vision* (1956) and *Alphabet of the Imagination* (1974), both collections of Goddard’s literary essays that were published after his death.

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When such a spacious mirror’s set before him,  
 He needs must see himself.

**I**

There is no mystery in a looking glass until someone looks into it. Then, though it remains the same glass, it presents a different face to each man who holds it in front of him. The same is true of a work of art. It has no proper existence as art until someone is reflected in it—and no two will ever be reflected in the

same way. However much we all see in common in such a work, at the center we behold a fragment of our own soul, and the greater the art the greater the fragment. *Hamlet* is possibly the most convincing example in existence of this truth. In a less "spacious mirror" it is often concealed or obscured. But "Hamlet wavered for all of us," as Emily Dickinson said, and everyone admits finding something of himself in the Prince of Denmark. *Hamlet* criticism seems destined, then, to go on being what it has always been: a sustained difference of opinion. It is quite as if *Hamlet* were itself a play within a play. *The Murder of Gonzago* was one thing to the Prince, another to the King, and others still to the Queen, Polonius, Ophelia, and the rest. So *Hamlet* is to us. The heart of its hero's mystery will never be plucked out. No theory of his character will ever satisfy all men, and even if one should convince one age, it would not the next. But that does not mean that a deep man will not come closer to that mystery than a shallow man, or a poetic age than a prosaic one—just as Hamlet saw more in "The Mouse-trap" than Rosencrantz or Guildenstern could conceivably have seen. No one but a dead man can escape projecting himself on the Prince of Denmark. But some will project themselves on many, others on only a few, of the innumerable facets of his personality. The former, compared with the latter, will obtain a relatively objective view of the man. And this process will continue to create what might be called the world's slowly growing portrait of Hamlet. Over the years the cairn of *Hamlet* criticism is more than any stone that has been thrown upon it.

## II

To nearly everyone both Hamlet himself and the play give the impression of having some peculiarly intimate relation to their creator. What that relation may originally have been we shall probably never know. But it is hard to refrain from speculating. When we learn that Dostoevsky had a son, Alyosha (Alexey), whom he loved dearly and who died before he was three, and that the father began writing *The Brothers Karamazov* that same year, the temptation is irresistible to believe that its hero, Alexey Karamazov, is an imaginative reincarnation of the child, a portrayal of what the author would have liked the boy to become. In this instance the father bestowed an immortality that there is only a negligible chance the son would have achieved if he had lived. Shakespeare's son Hamnet died at the age of eleven, possibly not long before his father began to be attracted by the Hamlet story. Was there any connection? We do not know. But the name, in its interchangeable forms, must have had strong emotional associations for Shakespeare. Hamnet and Judith Sadler, neighbors and friends of the Shakespeares, were godparents to their twins, to whom they gave their names. When Shakespeare was sixteen, a girl, Katherine Hamlett, was drowned near Stratford under circumstances the poet may have remembered when he told of Ophelia's death. Resemblances between Hamlet and the Earl of Essex, who, in turn, figured significantly in Shakespeare's life, have frequently been pointed out.

However all this may be, there is no doubt that Shakespeare endowed Hamlet with the best he had acquired up to the time he conceived him. He inherits the virtues of a score of his predecessors—and some of their weaknesses. Yet he is no mere recapitulation of them. In him, rather, they recombine to make a man as individual as he is universal. He has the passion of Romeo (“Romeo is Hamlet in love,” says Hazlitt), the dash and audacity of Hotspur, the tenderness and genius for friendship of Antonio, the wit, wisdom, resourcefulness, and histrionic gift of Falstaff, the bravery of Faulconbridge, the boyish charm of the earlier Hal at his best, the poetic fancy of Richard II, the analogic power and meditative melancholy of Jaques, the idealism of Brutus, the simplicity and human sympathy of Henry VI, and, after the assumption of his antic disposition, the wiliness and talent for disguise of Henry IV and the cynicism and irony of Richard III—not to mention gifts and graces that stem more from certain of Shakespeare’s heroines than from his heroes—for, like Rosalind, that inimitable boy-girl, Hamlet is an early draft of a new creature on the Platonic order, conceived in the *Upanishads*, who begins to synthesize the sexes. “He who understands the masculine and keeps to the feminine shall become the whole world’s channel. Eternal virtue shall not depart from him and he shall return to the state of an infant.” If Hamlet does not attain the consummation that Laotse thus describes, he at least gives promise of it. What wonder that actresses have played his role, or that among the theories about him one of the most inevitable, if most insane, is that he is a woman in disguise! Mad literally, the idea embodies a symbolic truth and helps explain why Hamlet has been pronounced both a hero and a dreamer, hard and soft, cruel and gentle, brutal and angelic, like a lion and like a dove. One by one these judgments are all wrong. Together they are all right—

These contraries such unity do hold,

a line which those who object to such paradoxes as “modernizing” should note is Shakespeare’s, as is also the phrase “mighty opposites.”

For what was such a man made? Plainly for the ultimate things: for wonder, for curiosity and the pursuit of truth, for love, for creation—but first of all for freedom, the condition of the other four. He was made, that is, for religion and philosophy,<sup>1</sup> for love and art, for liberty to “grow unto himself”—five forces that are the elemental enemies of Force.

And this man is called upon to kill. It is almost as if Jesus had been asked to play the role of Napoleon (as the temptation in the wilderness suggests that in some sense he was). If Jesus had been, ought he to have accepted it? The absurdity of the question prompts the recording of the strangest of all the strange facts in the history of *Hamlet*: the fact, namely, that nearly all readers, commentators, and critics are agreed in thinking that it was Hamlet’s duty to kill, that he ought indeed to have killed much sooner than he did. His delay, they



say, was a weakness and disaster, entailing, as it did, many unintended deaths, including his own. He should have obeyed much earlier the Ghost's injunction to avenge his father's murder. "Surely it is clear," says Bradley, giving expression to this idea for a multitude of others, "that, whatever we in the twentieth century may think about Hamlet's duty, we are meant in the play to assume that he *ought* to have obeyed the Ghost." "As for the morality of personal vengeance," says Hazelton Spencer, "however abhorrent the concept we must accept it in the play as Hamlet's sacred duty, just as we must accept the Ghost who urges it." "John-a-dreams tarried long," says Dover Wilson at the end of *What Happens in Hamlet*, "but this Hercules 'sweeps' to his revenge." And with plain approval he pronounces Hamlet's "task accomplished," his "duty now performed."

Now whatever we are "meant" to assume, there is no doubt that nearly every spectator and reader the first time he encounters the play does assume that Hamlet ought to kill the King—and nearly all continue in that opinion on further acquaintance in the face of the paradox just stated.

How can that be?

It can be for the same reason that we exult when Gratiano cries, "Now, infidel, I have thee on the hip," and we see Shylock get what he was about to give, for the same reason that we applaud when Romeo sends Tybalt to death, and are enthralled by Henry V's rant before Harfleur or his injunction to his soldiers to imitate the action of the tiger. It can be because we all have stored up within ourselves so many unrequited wrongs and injuries, forgotten and unforgotten, and beneath these such an inheritance of racial revenge, that we like nothing better than to rid ourselves of a little of the accumulation by projecting it, in a crowd of persons similarly disposed, on the defenseless puppets of the dramatic imagination. There is no mystery about it. Anyone can follow the effect along his own backbone.

But if we are all repositories of racial revenge, we are also repositories of the rarer tendencies that over the centuries have resisted revenge. Against the contagion of a theater audience these ethereal forces have practically no chance, for in the crowd we are bound to take the play as drama rather than as poetry. But in solitude and in silence these forces are sure to lead a certain number of sensitive readers to shudder at the thought of Hamlet shedding blood. Let them express their revulsion, however, and instantly there will be someone to remind them that, whatever may be true now, "in those days" blood revenge was an accepted part of the moral code. As if Shakespeare were a historian and not a poet!

"Those days" never existed. They never existed poetically, I mean. No doubt the code of the vendetta has prevailed in many ages in many lands and revenge has been a favorite theme of the poets from Homer down. History itself, as William James remarked, has been a bath of blood. Yet there is a sense in which the dictum "Thou shalt not kill" has remained just as absolute in the kingdom of the imagination as in the Mosaic law. Moralize bloodshed by custom,

legalize it by the state, camouflage it by romance, and still to the finer side of human nature it is just bloodshed; and always where poetry has become purest and risen highest there has been some parting of Hector and Andromache, some lament of the Trojan women, to show that those very deeds of vengeance and martial glory that the poet himself is ostensibly glorifying have somehow failed to utter the last word. To utter that last word—or try to—is poetry's ultimate function, to defend man against his own brutality, against

That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat,  
Of habits devil,

a much emended line-and-a-half of Hamlet that makes excellent sense exactly as it stands.

If Shakespeare was bent in this play on presenting the morality of a primitive time, why did he make the mistake of centering it around a man who in endowment is as far ahead of either the Elizabethan age or our own as the code of blood revenge is behind both? "The ultimate fact is," says J. M. Robertson, "that Shakespeare *could not* make a psychologically or otherwise consistent play out of a plot which retained a strictly barbaric action while the hero was transformed into a supersubtle Elizabethan." *Hamlet*, the conclusion is, is a failure because the materials Shakespeare inherited were too tough and intractable. Too tough and intractable for what? That they were too tough and intractable for a credible historical picture may be readily granted. But what of it? And since when was poetry supposed to defer to history? Two world wars in three decades ought to have taught us that our history has not gone deep enough. But poetry has. The greatest poetry has always depicted the world as a little citadel of nobility threatened by an immense barbarism, a flickering candle surrounded by infinite night. The "historical" impossibility of *Hamlet* is its poetical truth, and the paradox of its central figure is the universal psychology of man.

Yet, in the face of the correspondingly universal fascination that both the play and its hero have exercised, T. S. Eliot can write: "*Hamlet*, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art. We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble enigma." In which case, why all this fuss over a play that failed? To reason as Eliot does is to indict the taste and intelligence of three centuries. If Hamlet is just a puzzle, why has the world not long since transferred its adulation to Fortinbras and Laertes?

They, at any rate, are clear. If action and revenge were what was wanted, they understood them. The trouble is that by no stretch of the imagination can we think of Shakespeare preferring their morality to that of his hero. They are living answers to the contention that Hamlet ought to have done what either of them,

in his situation, would have done instantly. For what other purpose indeed did Shakespeare put them in than to make that plain?

But Hamlet himself, it will be said, accepts the code of blood revenge. Why should we question what one we so admire embraces with such unquestioning eagerness? With such *suspicious* eagerness might be closer to the mark. But waiving that for the moment, let us see what is involved in the assumption that Shakespeare thought it was Hamlet's duty to kill the King.

It involves nothing less than the retraction of all the Histories, of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar*. Private injury, domestic feud, civil revolution, imperialistic conquest: one by one in these plays Shakespeare had demonstrated how bloodshed invoked in their name brings on the very thing it was intended to avert, how, like seeds that propagate their own kind, force begets force and vengeance vengeance. And now in *Hamlet* Shakespeare is supposed to say: "I was wrong. I take it all back. Blood should be shed to avenge blood." And more incredible yet, we must picture him a year or two later taking his new opinion back and being reconverted in turn to his original conviction in *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and the rest. If you find a term in a mathematical series fitting perfectly between what has gone before and what follows, you naturally assume it is in its right place, as you do a piece that fits into the surrounding pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. Only on the assumption that Hamlet ought not to have killed the King can the play be fitted into what then becomes the unbroken progression of Shakespeare's spiritual development. The only other way out of the difficulty for those who do not themselves believe in blood revenge is to hold that Shakespeare in *Hamlet* is an archeologist or anthropologist interested in the customs of primitive society rather than a poet concerned with the eternal problems of man.

### III

"But in that case why didn't Shakespeare make his intention clear?" A question that implies a profound misapprehension of the nature of poetic, if not of dramatic, art.

Of course Shakespeare expected his audience to assume that Hamlet should kill the King, exactly as he expected them to assume that Katharine was a shrew, and that Henry V was a glorious hero for attempting to steal the kingdom of France. He was not so ignorant of human nature as not to know how it reacts under the stimulus of primitive emotion. He understood too that what ought to be can be seen only against a background of what is. Carlyle spoke of the Paolo and Francesca incident in *The Inferno* as a thing woven of rainbows on a background of eternal black. And Hamlet himself declared:

I'll be your foil, Laertes; in mine ignorance  
Your skill shall, like a star i' the darkest night,  
Stick fiery off indeed.

The contrast need not always be so extreme. The setting is more ordinarily terrestrial and diurnal than infernal, or even nocturnal. If, enthralled by its familiarity, we do not alter the focus of our eyes to see what may be unfamiliar and perhaps nearly invisible in the foreground, how is that the poet's fault? That is not his lookout. His business is to create a work of art. How it is taken is not his responsibility. "Here it is," he seems to say, as perhaps God did when he made the world, "take it, and see what you can make of it." And different men make very different things. To all of us in life appearances are deceitful. To all save the wisest characters in a work of dramatic art, if it be true to life, they should be even more so. The spectator or reader of that work takes delight in their delusions. But meanwhile from a higher level the poet may be deluding him. Living would lose all its challenge if everything were made so plain that anybody could understand it all the first time. And so would reading. You plunge into a poem as you plunge into battle—at your peril. "What can be made explicit to an idiot," said Blake, "is not worth my care."

This procedure is not trickery. Even the alertest reader must be partly taken in the first time or he will miss more than he gains. A book that can be comprehended at a first reading is not imaginative literature. Dostoevsky's novels, for instance, contain many dreams and hallucinations which the reader is intended to mistake for occurrences in the objective world until, later, he realizes that the person having the experience was asleep or in a trance. That is as it should be. For dreams are true while they last, and Dostoevsky's technique leads us to identify ourselves with the dreamer. A too critical reader who sees through the device deprives himself of the very experience he would understand. Intellectuals cannot read. A child lost in a story is the model of right first reading. The more ingenuous we are, the first time the better. But not the second and third times. Then the critical intellect should begin to check the imagination—or check on it rather. Shakespeare, I am convinced, wanted us at first to believe that Hamlet ought to kill the King in order that we might undergo his agony with him. But he did not want us, I am equally convinced, to persist in that belief. We must view Hamlet first under the aspect of time so that later we may view him under the aspect of eternity. We must be him before we can understand him.

And here, oddly, we have an advantage over Shakespeare. The author of *Hamlet*, when he wrote it, had not had the privilege of reading *King Lear* and other post-Hamletian masterpieces. But we have had it, and can read *Hamlet* in their light. This does not mean that we import into *Hamlet* from later plays anything that is not already there. A work of art must stand or fall by itself. It merely means that, with vision sharpened by later plays, we are enabled to see in *Hamlet* what was already there but hidden from us—as a later dream does not alter an earlier one but may render it intelligible because of a mutual relation. In some sense or other, as we have seen, Hamlet's problem must have been

Shakespeare's. He doubtless wrote the play in part to make that problem clear, just as Tolstoy, to make his problem clear, wrote *Anna Karenina*. *Hamlet* being only a step in its solution, its author could not conceivably have caught its full import at once. But we can see, as later he could see, whither it was tending, as a prophecy is remembered and illuminated when it is fulfilled. However much above us Shakespeare may be in genius, at any particular moment in his development we are beyond him in time. To that extent we are on the mountain while he is on the road.

And even if we do not look beyond *Hamlet*, our vantage point enables us to see from the past the direction that road was taking. Roads, to be sure, may make unexpected turns, and even a long-maintained general course is no guarantee against its interruption. But highways of Shakespearean breadth seldom go off abruptly at right angles. And so it is permissible to ask as we come to *Hamlet*: What, judging from what he had been doing, might Shakespeare be expected to do next?

The answer is plain. Having given us in Hal-Henry (not to mention Romeo and Richard II) a divided man easily won by circumstances to the side of violence, and in Brutus a man so won only after a brief but terrible inner struggle, what then? Why, naturally, the next step in the progression: a divided man won to the side of violence only after a protracted struggle. And this is precisely what we have in Hamlet. Moreover, there is a passage in the play that confirms just this development. Indeed, as the word "development" suggests, a better metaphor than the road is the figure of an unfolding organism.

#### IV

In the notes Dostoevsky made when composing *The Brothers Karamazov* there is one especially remarkable revelation: the fact that in its earliest stages the hero, who was to become Alyosha, is identified with the hero of a previous novel, *The Idiot*, being even called the Idiot by name. It shows how akin to the dream the creative faculty is—one character splitting off from another. What was at first a vague differentiation ends as a distinct individual, but an individual always bearing traces of his origin, as traces of the parent can be found in the child and in the man.

Shakespeare is not Dostoevsky, and it is not likely that an early draft of *Hamlet* will ever be found in which the Prince's name is first set down as Brutus. Yet there is a bit of dialogue in the play as we have it that links the two almost as intimately as Alyosha is linked with Prince Myshkin. The passage is brief and apparently parenthetical. Shortly before the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, Hamlet suddenly addresses Polonius:

HAM.: My lord, you played once i' the university, you say?

POL.: That did I, my lord, and was accounted a good actor.

HAM.: What did you enact?

POL.: I did enact Julius Caesar: I was killed i' the Capitol; Brutus killed me.

HAM.: It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there.

It is interesting, to begin with, that Polonius was accounted a good actor in his youth. He has been playing a part ever since, until his mask has become a part of his face. The roles that men cast themselves for often reveal what they are and may prophesy what they will become. That Polonius acted Julius Caesar characterizes both men: Caesar, the synonym of imperialism, Polonius, the petty domestic despot—the very disparity of their kingdoms makes the comparison all the more illuminating.

But it is not just Caesar and Polonius. Brutus is mentioned too. And Brutus killed Caesar. In an hour or so Hamlet is to kill Polonius. If Polonius is Caesar, Hamlet is Brutus. This is the rehearsal of the deed. For to hate or scorn is to kill a little. “It was a brute part . . . to kill so capital a calf there.” The unconscious is an inveterate punster and in that “brute part” Hamlet passes judgment in advance on his own deed in his mother’s chamber. Prophecy, rehearsal, judgment: was ever more packed into fewer words?<sup>2</sup> *Et tu*, Hamlet?

And it is not Brutus only who stands behind Hamlet. There is another behind him. And another behind *him*.

A third is like the former. . . .

. . . A fourth! start, eyes!

What! will the line stretch out to the crack of doom?

Another yet!

We need not follow it as far as did Macbeth to perceive that, as Hamlet listens to the spirit of his father, behind him are the ghosts of Brutus, Hal, and Romeo. “Beware, Hamlet,” says Romeo, “my soul told me to embrace Juliet and with her all the Capulets. But my ‘father’ bade me kill Tybalt and carry on the hereditary quarrel. And I obeyed him.” “Beware, Hamlet,” says Hal, “my soul told me to hold fast to Falstaff’s love of life. But, instead, I did what is expected of a king, rejected Falstaff, and following my dying father’s advice, made war on France.” “Beware, Hamlet,” says Brutus, “Portia and my soul gave ample warning. But Cassius reminded me that there was once a Brutus who expelled a tyrant from Rome, and, in the name of ‘our fathers,’ tempted me to exceed him in virtue by killing one. And I did. Beware, Hamlet.” Each of these men wanted to dedicate himself to life. Romeo wanted to love. Hal wanted to play. Brutus wanted to read philosophy. But in each case a commanding hand was placed on the man’s shoulder that disputed the claim of life in the name of death. Romeo defied that command for a few hours, and then circumstances proved too strong for

him. Hal evaded it for a while, and then capitulated utterly. Brutus tried to face the issue, with the result of civil war within himself. But death won. Brutus' suppressed compunctions, however, ejected themselves in the form of a ghost that, Delphically, was both Caesar and Brutus' own evil spirit, his reliance on force.

Hamlet is the next step. He is a man as much more spiritually gifted than Brutus as Brutus is than Hal. The story of Hamlet is the story of Hal over again, subtilized, amplified, with a different ending. The men themselves seem so unlike that the similarities of their situations and acts are obscured. Like Hal, Hamlet is a prince of charming quality who cares nothing at the outset for his royal prospects but is absorbed in playing and savoring life. Only with him it is playing in a higher sense: dramatic art, acting, and playwriting rather than roistering in taverns and perpetrating practical jokes. And, like all men genuinely devoted to art, he is deeply interested in philosophy and religion, drawing no sharp lines indeed between or among the three. Because he is himself an imaginative genius, he needs no Falstaff to spur him on. Hamlet is his own Falstaff.

Hamlet's father, like Hal's, was primarily concerned with war, and after death calls his son to a deed of violence, not to imperial conquest, as the elder Henry did, but to revenge. Like Hal, Hamlet accepts the injunction. But instead of initiating a change that gradually alters him into his father's likeness, the decision immediately shakes his being to its foundations. The "antic disposition" under which he hides his real design is an exaggerated counterpart of the "wildness" under which Hal had previously concealed his own political ambition—however much less selfish and better grounded Hamlet's deception was.

The far more shattering effect on Hamlet than on Hal or even on Brutus of the task he assumes shows how much more nearly balanced are the opposing forces in his case. Loyalty to his father and the desire to grow unto himself—thirst for revenge and thirst for creation—are in Hamlet almost in equilibrium, though of course he does not know it. Henry V was vaguely troubled by nocturnal stirrings of the spirit. He saw no ghost. Brutus became the victim of insomnia. He stifled his conscience by action and saw no ghost until after the deed. Hamlet saw his before the deed—as Brutus would have if his soul had been stronger—and it made night hideous for him. No spirit but one from below would have produced that effect, and the fact that "this fellow in the cellarage" speaks from under the platform when he echoes Hamlet's "swear" is in keeping with Shakespeare's frequent use of the symbolism that associates what is physically low with what is morally wrong. Hamlet's delay, then, instead of giving ground for condemnation, does him credit. It shows his soul is still alive and will not submit to the demands of the father without a struggle. If two forces pulling a body in opposite directions are unequal, the body will move in response to the preponderant force. If the two are nearly

equal, but alternately gain slight ascendancy, it will remain unmoved except for corresponding vibrations. In a tug of war between evenly matched teams the rope at first is almost motionless, but ultimately the strength of one side ebbs and then the rope moves suddenly and violently. So mysterious, and no more, is Hamlet's hesitation, followed, as it finally was, by lightning-like action. "Shakespeare, as everyone knows," says Dover Wilson, "never furnishes an explanation for Hamlet's inaction." "No one knows," says Professor Alden, "why Hamlet delays." And many others have said the same. Yet Shakespeare puts in the mouth of Claudius words that seem expressly inserted to explain the riddle. The King, caught in the same way between opposing forces—desire to keep the fruits of his sin and desire to pray—declares:

And, like a man to double business bound,  
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,  
And both neglect.

That seems plain enough. But what is true of Claudius in this one scene is true of Hamlet during all the earlier part of the play. It is as if his soul were a body in space so delicately poised between the gravitation of the earth and the gravitation, or we might say the levitation, of the sun that it "hesitates" whether to drop into the one or fly up to the other. It sometimes seems as if *Homo sapiens* were in just that situation.

People who think Shakespeare was just a playwright say Hamlet delayed that there might be a five-act play! Others, who calmly neglect much of the text, say he delayed because of external obstacles. Coleridge thinks it was because he thought too much. Bradley, because he was so melancholy.<sup>3</sup> It would be nearer the truth to say he thought too much and was melancholy because he delayed. The more powerful an unconscious urge, the stronger and the more numerous the compensations and rationalizations with which consciousness attempts to fight it. Hence the excess of thought and feeling. Goethe, I would say, is far closer to the mark than Coleridge and Bradley in attributing Hamlet's hesitation to a feminine element in the man. But then he proceeds to spoil it all by implying that Hamlet is weak and effeminate: "a lovely, pure and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve that makes a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away." The implication is that Hamlet ought to have killed the King at once; also that loveliness, purity, and moral insight are not sources of strength and heroism!

On the contrary, they are the very higher heroism that challenges a more primitive one in this play. Hamlet is the battlefield where the two meet. It is war in that psychological realm where all war begins. Hamlet is like Thermopylae, the battle that stands first among all battles in the human imagination because of its



symbolic quality—a contest between the Persian hordes of the lower appetites and the little Greek band of heroic instincts.

They have the numbers, we, the heights.

At Thermopylae the Persians won. Yet we think of it as a Greek victory because it was the promise of Salamis and Plataea. So with Hamlet. Hamlet lost. But *Hamlet* is the promise of *Othello* and *King Lear*.

### NOTES

1. Hamlet himself condemns this word as inadequate to the idea of the pursuit of truth in his

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy,”

“your philosophy” meaning, of course, not Horatio’s, but philosophy in general.

2. A person interested in psychological symbols might find in “calf” an unconscious allusion to Ophelia, at whose feet Hamlet is to lie down a moment later and whom he really kills in killing Polonius—just as Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* kills the childlike Lizaveta in killing the Old Money Lender. Unlikely as this will sound to those who have never paid attention to the associative and prophetic ways of the unconscious mind, Shakespeare proves again and again that he is capable, exactly as dreams are, of just such psychological supersubtleties. Ophelia is life sacrificed before it has reached maturity.

3. I yield to no one in admiration of Bradley’s *Shakespearean Tragedy* and indebtedness to it, but how little Bradley believes in his own theory of Hamlet is shown by the net of illogicality in which he entangles himself, a net that reminds one of the similar toils in which Henry V and Brutus get caught. On page 122 he says: “The action required of Hamlet is very exceptional. It is violent, dangerous, difficult to accomplish perfectly, on one side repulsive to a man of honour and sensitive feeling. . . . These obstacles would not suffice to prevent Hamlet from acting, if his state were normal; and against them there operate, even in his morbid state, healthy and positive feelings, love of his father, loathing of his uncle, desire of revenge, desire to do his duty.” Revenge, then, and loathing, are healthy and positive feelings; also, they are on one side repulsive to a man of honor and sensitive feeling! Nothing can be made of such an argument (A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* [2d ed.; Macmillan, 1929]).



### 1957—Carolyn Heilbrun. “The Character of Hamlet’s Mother,” from *Shakespeare Quarterly*

A scholar of Virginia Woolf and an influential feminist thinker, Carolyn Heilbrun (1926–2003) was a professor of English at Columbia University.

The author of many books, her early essay on Gertrude was collected in *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women* (1990). She also wrote mysteries set in the halls of academe under the pen name Amanda Cross.

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The character of Hamlet's mother has not received the specific critical attention it deserves. Moreover, the traditional account of her personality as rendered by the critics will not stand up under close scrutiny of Shakespeare's play.

None of the critics of course has failed to see Gertrude as vital to the action of the play; not only is she the mother of the hero, the widow of the Ghost, and the wife of the current King of Denmark, but the fact of her hasty and, to the Elizabethans, incestuous marriage, the whole question of her "falling off," occupies a position of barely secondary importance in the mind of her son, and of the Ghost. Indeed, Freud and Jones see her, the object of Hamlet's Oedipus complex, as central to the motivation of the play.<sup>1</sup> 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.35-36).

The critics are agreed that Gertrude was not a party to the late King's murder and indeed knew nothing of it, a point which on the clear evidence of the play, is indisputable. They have also discussed whether or not Gertrude, guilty of more than an "o'er-hasty marriage," had committed adultery with Claudius before her husband's death. I will return to this point later on. Beyond discussing these two points, those critics who have dealt specifically with the Queen have traditionally seen her as well-meaning but shallow and feminine, in the pejorative sense of the word: incapable of any sustained rational process, superficial and flighty. It is this tradition which a closer reading of the play will show to be erroneous.

Professor Bradley describes the traditional Gertrude thus:

The Queen was not a bad-hearted woman, not at all the woman to think little of murder. But she had a soft animal nature and was very dull and very shallow. She loved to be happy, like a sheep in the sun, and to do her justice, it pleased her to see others happy, like more sheep in the sun. . . . It was pleasant to sit upon her throne and see smiling faces around her, and foolish and unkind in Hamlet to persist in grieving for his father instead of marrying Ophelia and making everything comfortable. . . . The belief at the bottom of her heart was that the world is a place constructed simply that people may be happy in it in a good-humored sensual fashion.<sup>2</sup>

Later on, Bradley says of her that when affliction comes to her “the good in her nature struggles to the surface through the heavy mass of sloth.”

Granville-Barker is not quite so extreme. Shakespeare, he says,

gives us in Gertrude the woman who does not mature, who clings to her youth and all that belongs to it, whose charm will not change but at last fade and wither; a pretty creature, as we see her, desperately refusing to grow old. . . . She is drawn for us with unemphatic strokes, and she has but a passive part in the play’s action. She moves throughout in Claudius’ shadow; he holds her as he won her, by the witchcraft of his wit.<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere Granville-Baker says “Gertrude who will certainly never see forty-five again, might better be ‘old.’ [That is, portrayed by an older, mature actress.] But that would make her relations with Claudius—and *their* likelihood is vital to the play—quite incredible” (p. 226). Granville-Barker is saying here that a woman about forty-five years of age cannot feel any sexual passion nor arouse it. This is one of the mistakes which lie at the heart of the misunderstanding about Gertrude.

Professor Dover Wilson sees Gertrude as more forceful than either of these two critics will admit, but even he finds the Ghost’s unwillingness to shock her with knowledge of his murder to be one of the basic motivations of the play, and he says of her “Gertrude is always hoping for the best.”<sup>4</sup>

Now whether Claudius won Gertrude before or after her husband’s death, it was certainly not, as Granville-Barker implies, with “the witchcraft of his wit” alone. Granville-Barker would have us believe that Claudius won her simply by the force of his persuasive tongue. “It is plain”, he writes, that the Queen “does little except echo his [Claudius’] wishes; sometimes—as in the welcome to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—she repeats his very words” (p. 227), though Wilson must admit later that Gertrude does not tell Claudius everything. Without dwelling here on the psychology of the Ghost, or the greater burden borne by the Elizabethan words “witchcraft” and “wit,” we can plainly see, for the Ghost tells us, how Claudius won the Queen: the Ghost considers his brother to be garbage, and “lust,” the Ghost says, “will sate itself in a celestial bed and prey on garbage” (I.v.54–55). “Lust”—in a woman of forty-five or more—is the key word here. Bradley, Granville-Barker, and to a lesser extent Professor Dover Wilson, misunderstand Gertrude largely because they are unable to see lust, the desire for sexual relations, as the passion, in the Elizabethan sense of the word, the flaw, the weakness which drives Gertrude to an incestuous marriage, appalls her son, and keeps him from the throne. Unable to explain her marriage to Claudius as the act of any but a weak-minded vacillating woman, they fail to see Gertrude for the

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 are aware, as Miss Campbell has shown.<sup>5</sup> Claudius echoes her with a well-reasoned argument against grief which was, in its philosophy if not in its language, a piece of commonplace Elizabethan lore. After Claudius' speech, Gertrude asks Hamlet to remain in Denmark, where he is rightly loved. Her speeches have been short, however warm and loving, and conciseness of statement is not the mark of a dull and shallow woman.

We next hear her, as Queen and gracious hostess, welcoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the court, hoping, with the King, that they may cheer Hamlet and discover what is depressing him. Claudius then tells Gertrude, when they are alone, that Polonius believes he knows what is upsetting Hamlet. The Queen answers:

I doubt it is no other than the main,  
His father's death and our o'er-hasty marriage. (II.ii.56-57)

This statement is concise, remarkably to the point, and not a little courageous. It is not the statement of a dull, slothful woman who can only echo her husband's words. Next, Polonius enters with his most unbrief 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.38–42)

It is difficult to see in this speech, as Bradley apparently does, the gushing shallow wish of a sentimental woman that class distinctions shall not stand in the way of true love.

At the play, the Queen asks Hamlet to sit near her. She is clearly trying to make him feel he has a place in the court of Denmark. She does not speak again until Hamlet asks her how she likes the play. “The lady doth protest too much, methinks” (III.ii.240) is her immortal comment on the player queen. The scene gives her four more words: when Claudius leaps to his feet, she asks “How fares my Lord?” (III.ii.278).

I will for the moment pass over the scene in the Queen’s closet, to follow her quickly through the remainder of the play. After the closet scene, the Queen comes to speak to Claudius. She tells him, as Hamlet has asked her to, that he, Hamlet, is mad, and has killed Polonius. She adds, however, that he now weeps for what he has done. She does not wish Claudius to know what she now knows, how wild and fearsome Hamlet has become. Later, she does not wish to see Ophelia, but hearing how distracted she is, consents. When Laertes bursts in ready to attack Claudius, she immediately steps between Claudius and Laertes to protect the King, and tells Laertes it is not Claudius who has killed his father. Laertes will of course soon learn this, but it is Gertrude who manages to tell him before he can do any meaningless damage. She leaves Laertes and the King together, and then returns to tell Laertes that his sister is drowned. She gives her news directly, realizing that suspense will increase the pain of it, but this is the one time in the play when her usual pointed conciseness would be the mark neither of intelligence nor kindness, and so, gently, and at some length, she tells Laertes of his sister’s death, giving him time to recover from the shock of grief, and to absorb the meaning of her words. At Ophelia’s funeral the Queen scatters flowers over the grave:

Sweets to the sweet; farewell!  
I hop’d thou shouldst have been my Hamlet’s wife.  
I thought thy bride-bed to have deck’d, sweet maid,  
And not t’ have strew’d thy grave. (V.i.266–269)

She is the only one present decently mourning the death of someone young, and not heated in the fire of some personal passion.

At the match between Hamlet and Laertes, the Queen believes that Hamlet is out of training, but glad to see him at some sport, she gives him her handkerchief to wipe his brow, and drinks to his success. The drink is poisoned and she dies. But before she dies she does not waste time on vituperation; she

warns Hamlet that the drink is poisoned to prevent his drinking it. They are her last words. Those critics who have thought her stupid admire her death; they call it uncharacteristic.

In Act III, when Hamlet goes to his mother in her closet his nerves are pitched at the very height of tension; he is on the edge of hysteria. The possibility of murdering his mother has in fact entered his mind, and he has just met and refused an opportunity to kill Claudius. His mother, meanwhile, waiting for him, has told Polonius not to fear for her, but she knows when she sees Hamlet that he may be violently mad. Hamlet quips with her, insults her, tells her he wishes she were not his mother, and when she, still retaining dignity, attempts to end the interview, Hamlet seizes her and she cries for help. The important thing to note is that the Queen's cry "Thou wilt not murder me" (III.iv.21) is not foolish. She has seen from Hamlet's demeanor that he is capable of murder, as indeed in the next instant he proves himself to be.

We next learn from the Queen's startled "As kill a king" (III.iv.30) that she has no knowledge of the murder, though of course this is only confirmation here of what we already know. Then the Queen asks Hamlet why he is so hysterical:

What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue  
In noise so rude against me? (III.iv.39–40)

Hamlet tells her: it is her lust, the need of sexual passion, which has driven her from the arms and memory of her husband to the incomparably cruder charms of his brother. He cries out that she has not even the excuse of youth for her lust:

O Shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,  
If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,  
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax  
And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame  
When the compulsive ardor gives the charge,  
Since frost itself as actively doth burn,  
And reason panders will. (III.iv.82–87)

This is not only a lust, but a lust which throws out of joint all the structure of human morality and relationships. And the Queen admits it. If there is one quality that has characterized, and will characterize, every speech of Gertrude's in the play, it is the ability to see reality clearly, and to express it. This talent is not lost when turned upon herself:

O Hamlet, speak no more!  
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,

And there I see such black and grained spots  
As will not leave their tinct. (III.iv.88–91)

She knows that lust has driven her, that this is her sin, and she admits it. Not that she wishes to linger in the contemplation of her sin. No more, she cries, no more. And then the Ghost appears to Hamlet. The Queen thinks him mad again—as well she might—but she promises Hamlet that she will not betray him—and she does not.

Where, in all that we have seen of Gertrude, is there the picture of “a soft animal nature, very dull and very shallow”? She may indeed be “animal” in the sense of “lustful.” But it does not follow that because she wishes to continue a life of sexual experience, her brain is soft or her wit unperceptive.

Some critics, having accepted Gertrude as a weak and vacillating woman, see no reason to suppose that she did not fall victim to Claudius’ charms before the death of her husband and commit adultery with him. These critics, Professor Bradley among them (p. 166), claim that the elder Hamlet clearly tells his son that Gertrude has committed adultery with Claudius in the speech beginning “Ay that incestuous, that adulterate beast” (I.v.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. (p. 293)

Professor Dover Wilson and other critics have accepted the Ghost’s word “adulterate” in its modern meaning. The Elizabethan word “adultery,” however, was not restricted to its modern meaning, but was used to define any sexual relationship which could be called unchaste, including of course an incestuous one.<sup>6</sup> Certainly the elder Hamlet considered the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude to be unchaste and unseemly, and while his use of the word “adulterate” indicates his very strong feelings about the marriage, it would not to an Elizabethan audience necessarily mean that he believed Gertrude to have been false to him before his death. It is important to notice, too, that the Ghost does

not apply the term “adulterate” to Gertrude, and he may well have considered the term a just description of Claudius’ entire sexual life.

But even if the Ghost used the word “adulterate” in full awareness of its modern restricted meaning, it is not necessary to assume on the basis of this single speech (and it is the only shadow of evidence we have for such a conclusion) that Gertrude was unfaithful to him while he lived. It is quite probable that the elder Hamlet still considered himself married to Gertrude, and he is moreover revolted that her lust for him (“why she would hang on him as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on”) should have so easily transferred itself to another. This is why he uses the expressions “seduce,” “shameful lust,” and others. Professor Dover Wilson has himself said “Hamlet knew of the marriage, and his whole soul was filled with nausea at the thought of the speedy 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.<sup>7</sup> 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. “Good night sweet prince,” Horatio says at the end. They are neither of them dull, or shallow, or slothful, though one of them is passion’s slave.

#### NOTES

1. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, with a psychoanalytical study by Ernest Jones, M.D. (London: Vision Press, 1947), pp. 7–42.
2. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), p. 167.
3. Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 1:227.



4. J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), p. 125.

5. Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1952), pp. 112–113.

6. See Bertram Joseph, *Conscience and the King* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1953), pp. 16–19.

7. Charlton M. Lewis, *The Genesis of Hamlet* (New York: Henry Holt, 1907), p. 36.



### 1958—Boris Pasternak. “Hamlet,” from *Doctor Zhivago*

The Russian writer Boris Pasternak (1890–1960) was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958. Though among Russian readers his reputation is primarily as one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, he is best known internationally for his novel *Doctor Zhivago*. The following poem is attributed to a character in this novel.

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The stir is over. I step forth on the boards.  
Leaning against an upright at the entrance,  
I strain to make the far-off echo yield  
A cue to the events that may come in my day.

Night and its murk transfix and pin me,  
Staring through thousands of binoculars.  
If Thou be willing, Abba, Father,  
Remove this cup from me.

I cherish this, Thy rigorous conception,  
And I consent to play this part therein;  
But another play is running at this moment,  
So, for the present, release me from the cast.

And yet, the order of the acts has been schemed and plotted,  
And nothing can avert the final curtain's fall.  
I stand alone. All else is swamped by Pharisaism.  
To live life to the end is not a childish task.



### 1969—Stephen Booth. “On the Value of *Hamlet*”

Stephen Booth is a professor of English at University of California—Berkeley. His books include *The Book Called Holinshed’s Chronicles* (1968) and *An Essay on Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (1969). His edition of Shakespeare’s sonnets is widely acclaimed and was reprinted in 2000.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that *Hamlet* as we have it—usually in a conservative conflation of the second quarto and first folio texts—is not really *Hamlet*. The very fact that the *Hamlet* we know is an editor-made text has furnished an illusion of firm ground for leaping conclusions that discrepancies between the probable and actual actions, statements, tone, and diction of *Hamlet* are accidents of its transmission. Thus, in much the spirit of editors correcting printer’s errors, critics have proposed stage directions by which, for example, Hamlet can overhear the plot to test Polonius’ diagnosis of Hamlet’s affliction, or by which Hamlet can glimpse Polonius and Claudius actually spying on his interview with Ophelia. Either of these will make sense of Hamlet’s improbable raging at Ophelia in III.i. The difficulty with such presumably corrective emendation is not only in knowing where to stop, but also in knowing whether to start. I hope to demonstrate that almost everything else in the play has, in its particular kind and scale, an improbability comparable to the improbability of the discrepancy between Hamlet’s real and expected behavior to Ophelia; for the moment, I mean only to suggest that those of the elements of the text of *Hamlet* that are incontrovertibly accidental may by their presence have led critics to overestimate the distance between the *Hamlet* we have and the prelapsarian *Hamlet* to which they long to return.

I think also that the history of criticism shows us too ready to indulge a not wholly explicable fancy that in *Hamlet* we behold the frustrated and inarticulate Shakespeare furiously wagging his tail in an effort to tell us something, but, as I said before, the accidents of our texts of *Hamlet* and the alluring analogies they father render *Hamlet* more liable to interpretive assistance than even the other plays of Shakespeare. Moreover, *Hamlet* was of course born into the culture of Western Europe, our culture, whose every thought—literary or nonliterary—is shaped by the Platonic presumption that the reality of anything is other than its apparent self. In such a culture it is no wonder that critics prefer the word *meaning* (which implies effort rather than success) to *saying*, and that in turn they would rather talk about what a work *says* or *shows* (both of which suggest the hidden essence bared of the dross of physicality) than talk about what it *does*. Even stylistic critics are most comfortable and acceptable when they reveal that rhythm, syntax, diction, or (and above all) imagery are vehicles for meaning. Among people to whom “It means a lot to me” says “I value it,” in a language

where *significant* and *valuable* are synonyms, it was all but inevitable that a work with the peculiarities of *Hamlet* should have been treated as a distinguished and yearning failure.

Perhaps the value of *Hamlet* is where it is most measurable, in the degree to which it fulfills one or another of the fixable identities it suggests for itself or that are suggested for it, but I think that before we choose and argue for one of the ideal forms toward which *Hamlet* seems to be moving, and before we attribute its value to an exaggeration of the degree to which it gets there, it is reasonable to talk about what the play *does* do, and to test the suggestion that in a valued play what it does do is what we value. I propose to look at *Hamlet* for what it undeniably is: a succession of actions upon the understanding of an audience. I set my hypothetical audience to watch *Hamlet* in the text edited by Willard Farnham in *The Pelican Shakespeare* (Baltimore, 1957), a text presumably too long to have fitted into the daylight available to a two o'clock performance, but still an approximation of what Shakespeare's company played.

## I

The action that the first scene of *Hamlet* takes upon the understanding of its audience is like the action of the whole, and most of the individual actions that make up the whole. The first scene is insistently incoherent and just as insistently coherent. It frustrates and fulfills expectations simultaneously. The challenge and response in the first lines are perfectly predictable sentry-talk, but—as has been well and often observed—the challenger is the wrong man, the relieving sentry and not the one on duty. A similarly faint intellectual uneasiness is provoked when the first personal note in the play sets up expectations that the play then ignores. Francisco says, “For this relief much thanks. ’Tis bitter cold, / And I am sick at heart” (I.i.8–9). We want to know why he is sick at heart. Several lines later Francisco leaves the stage and is forgotten. The scene continues smoothly as if the audience had never focused on Francisco's heartsickness. Twice in the space of less than a minute the audience has an opportunity to concern itself with a trouble that vanishes from consciousness almost before it is there. The wrong sentry challenges, and the other corrects the oddity instantly. Francisco is sick at heart, but neither he nor Bernardo gives any sign that further comment might be in order. The routine of sentry-go, its special diction, and its commonplaces continue across the audience's momentary tangential journey; the audience returns as if *it* and not the play had wandered. The audience's sensation of being unexpectedly and very slightly out of step is repeated regularly in *Hamlet*.

The first thing an audience in a theater wants to know is why it is in the theater. Even one that, like Shakespeare's audiences for *Richard II* or *Julius Caesar* or *Hamlet*, knows the story being dramatized wants to hear out the familiar terms of the situation and the terms of the particular new dramatization. Audiences want their bearings and expect them to be given. The first thing we see in *Hamlet*

is a pair of sentries. The sight of sentries in real life is insignificant, but, when a work of art focuses on sentries, it is usually a sign that what they are guarding is going to be attacked. Thus, the first answer we have to the question “what is this play about?” is “military threat to a castle and a king,” and that leads to our first specific question: “what is that threat?” Horatio’s first question (“What, has this thing appeared again to-night?” I.i.21) is to some extent an answer to the audience’s question; its terms are not military, but their implications are appropriately threatening. Bernardo then begins elaborate preparations to tell Horatio what the audience must hear if it is ever to be intellectually comfortable in the play. The audience has slightly adjusted its expectations to accord with a threat that is vaguely supernatural rather than military, but the metaphor of assault in which Bernardo prepares to carry the audience further along its new path of inquiry is pertinent to the one from which it has just deviated:

Sit down awhile,  
And let us once again assail your ears,  
That are so fortified against our story,  
What we two nights have seen. (I.i.30–33)

We are led toward increased knowledge of the new object—the ghost—in terms appropriate to the one we assumed and have just abandoned—military assault. Bernardo’s metaphor is obviously pertinent to his occupation as sentinel, but in the metaphor he is not the defender but the assailant of ears fortified against his story. As the audience listens, its understanding shifts from one system of pertinence to another; but each perceptible change in the direction of our concern or the terms of our thinking is balanced by the repetition of some continuing factor in the scene; the mind of the audience is in constant but gentle flux, always shifting but never completely leaving familiar ground.

Everyone onstage sits down to hear Bernardo speak of the events of the past two nights. The audience is invited to settle its mind for a long and desired explanation. The construction of Bernardo’s speech suggests that it will go on for a long time; he takes three lines (I.i.35–38) to arrive at the grammatical subject of his sentence, and then, as he begins another parenthetical delay in his long journey toward a verb, “the bell then beating one,” *Enter Ghost*. The interrupting action is not a simple interruption. The description is interrupted by a repetition of the action described. The entrance of the ghost duplicates on a larger scale the kind of mental experience we have had before. It both fulfills and frustrates our expectations: it is what we expect and desire, an action to account for our attention to sentinels; it is unexpected and unwanted, an interruption in the syntactical routine of the exposition that was on its way to fulfilling the same function. While the ghost is on the stage and during the speculation that immediately follows its departure, the futile efforts of Horatio and the sentries

(who, as watchers and waiters, have resembled the audience from the start) are like those of the audience in its quest for information. Marcellus' statement about the ghost is a fair comment on the whole scene: "Tis gone and will not answer" (I.i.52), and Horatio's "In what particular thought to work I know not" (I.i.67) describes the mental condition evoked in an audience by this particular dramatic presentation of events as well as it does that evoked in the character by the events of the fiction.

Horatio continues from there into the first statement in the play that is responsive to an audience's requirement of an opening scene, an indication of the nature and direction of the play to follow: "But, in the gross and scope of my opinion, / This bodes some strange eruption to our state" (I.i.68–69). That vague summary of the significance of the ghost is political, but only incidentally so because the audience, which was earlier attuned to political/military considerations, has now given its attention to the ghost. Then, with only the casual preamble of the word *state*, Marcellus asks a question irrelevant to the audience's newly primary concerns, precisely the question that no one asked when the audience first wanted to know why it was watching the sentries, the question about the fictional situation whose answer would have satisfied the audience's earlier question about its own situation: Marcellus asks "Why this same strict and most observant watch / So nightly toils the subject of the land" (I.i.71–72). Again what we are given is and is not pertinent to our concerns and expectations. This particular variety among the manifestations of simultaneous and equal propriety and impropriety in *Hamlet* occurs over and over again. Throughout the play, the audience gets information or sees action it once wanted only after a new interest has superseded the old. For one example, when Horatio, Bernardo, and Marcellus arrive in the second scene (I.ii.159), they come to do what they promise to do at the end of scene one, where they tell the audience that the way to information about the ghost is through young Hamlet. By the time they arrive "where we shall find him most conveniently," the audience has a new concern—the relation of Claudius to Gertrude and of Hamlet to both. Of course interruptions of one train of thought by the introduction of another are not only common in *Hamlet* but a commonplace of literature in general. However, although the audience's frustrations and the celerity with which it transfers its concern are similar to those of audiences of, say, Dickens, there is the important difference in *Hamlet* that there are no sharp lines of demarcation. In *Hamlet* the audience does not so much shift its focus as come to find its focus shifted.

Again the first scene provides a type of the whole. When Marcellus asks why the guard is so strict, his question is rather more violent than not in its divergence from our concern for the boding of the ghost. The answer to Marcellus' question, however, quickly pertains to the subject of ours: Horatio's explanation of the political situation depends from actions of "Our last king, / Whose image even

but now appeared to us" (I.i.80–81), and his description of the activities of young Fortinbras as "The source of this our watch" is harnessed to our concern about the ghost by Bernardo, who says directly, if vaguely, that the political situation is pertinent to the walking of the ghost:

I think it be no other but e'en so.  
 Well may it sort that this portentous figure  
 Comes armèd through our watch so like the king  
 That was and is the question of these wars. (I.i.108–11)

Horatio reinforces the relevance of politics to ghosts in a long speech about supernatural events on the eve of Julius Caesar's murder. Both these speeches establishing pertinence are good examples of the sort of thing I mean: both seem impertinent digressions, sufficiently so to have been omitted from the folios.

Now for the second time, *Enter Ghost*. The reentrance after a long and wandering digression is in itself an assertion of the continuity, constancy, and unity of the scene. Moreover, the situation into which the ghost reenters is a careful echo of the one into which it first entered, with the difference that the promised length of the earlier exposition is fulfilled in the second. These are the lines surrounding the first entrance; the italics are mine and indicate words, sounds, and substance echoed later:

*Horatio. Well, sit we down,*  
 And let us hear Bernardo speak of this.  
*Bernardo. Last night of all,*  
*When yond same star that's westward from the pole*  
 Had made his course t' illumine that part of heaven  
 Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,  
 The bell then beating one—  
*Enter Ghost.*  
*Marcellus. Peace, break thee off. Look where it comes again.* (I.i.33–40)

Two or three minutes later a similar situation takes shape in words that echo, and in some cases repeat, those at the earlier entrance:

*Marcellus. Good now, sit down,* and tell me he that knows,  
*Why this same strict and most observant watch,*  
 So nightly toils the subject of the land . . .  
 . . . . .  
*Enter Ghost*  
*But soft, behold, lo where it comes again!* (I.i.70–72, 126)

After the ghost departs on the crowing of the cock, the conversation, already extravagant and erring before the second apparition when it ranged from Danish history into Roman, meanders into a seemingly gratuitous preoccupation with the demonology of cocks (I.i.148–65). Then—into a scene that has from the irregularly regular entrance of the two sentinels been a succession of simultaneously expected and unexpected entrances—enters “the morn in russet mantle clad,” bringing a great change from darkness to light, from the unknown and unnatural to the known and natural, but also presenting itself personified as another walker, one obviously relevant to the situation and to the discussion of crowing cocks, and one described in subdued but manifold echoes of the two entrances of the ghost. Notice particularly the multitude of different kinds of relationship in which “yon high eastward hill” echoes “yond same star that’s westward from the pole”:

*But look, the morn in russet mantle clad  
Walks o’er the dew of yon high eastward hill.  
Break we our watch up. . . .* (I.i.166–68)

The three speeches (I.i.148–73—Horatio’s on the behavior of ghosts at cockcrow, Marcellus’ on cocks at Christmas time, and Horatio’s on the dawn) have four major elements running through them: cocks, spirits, sunrise, and the presence or absence of speech. All four are not present all the time, but the speeches have a sound of interconnection and relevance to one another. This at the same time that the substance of Marcellus’ speech on Christmas is just as urgently irrelevant to the concerns of the scene. As a gratuitous discussion of Christianity, apparently linked to its context only by an accident of poulterer’s lore, it is particularly irrelevant to the moral limits usual to revenge tragedy. The sequence of these last speeches is like the whole scene and the play in being both coherent and incoherent. Watching and comprehending the scene is an intellectual triumph for its audience. From sentence to sentence, from event to event, as the scene goes on it makes the mind of its audience capable of containing materials that seem always about to fly apart. The scene gives its audience a temporary and modest but real experience of being a superhumanly capable mental athlete. The whole play is like that.

During the first scene of *Hamlet* two things are threatened, one in the play, and one by the play. Throughout the scene the characters look at all threats as threats to the state, and specifically to the reigning king. As the king is threatened *in* scene one, so is the audience’s understanding threatened *by* scene one. The audience wants some solid information about what is going on in this play. Scene one is set in the dark, and it leaves the audience in the dark. The first things the play teaches us to value are the order embodied in the king and the rational sureness, purpose, and order that the play as a play lacks in its first scene. Scene two presents both the desired orders at once and in one—the king, whose name even in scene

one was not only synonymous with order but was the regular sign by which order was reasserted: the first confusion—who should challenge whom—was resolved in line three by “Long live the king”; and at the entrance of Horatio and Marcellus, rightness and regularity were vouched for by “Friends to this ground. And liegemen to the Dane.” As scene two begins it is everything the audience wanted most in scene one. Here it is daylight, everything is clear, everything is systematic. Unlike scene one, this scene is physically orderly; it begins with a royal procession, businesslike and unmistakable in its identity. Unlike the first scene, the second gives the audience all the information it could desire, and gives it neatly. The direct source of both information and orderliness is Claudius, who addresses himself one by one to the groups on the stage and to the problems of the realm, punctuating the units both with little statements of conclusion like “For all, our thanks” and “So much for him” (I.ii.16, 25), and with the word “now” (I.ii.17, 26, 42, 64), by which he signals each remove to a new listener and topic. Denmark and the play are both now orderly, and are so because of the king. In its specifics, scene two is the opposite of scene one. Moreover, where scene one presented an incoherent surface whose underlying coherence is only faintly felt, this scene is the opposite. In scene one the action taken *by* the scene—it makes its audience perceive diffusion and fusion, division and unification, difference and likeness at once—is only an incidental element in the action taken or discussed *in* the scene—the guards have trouble recognizing each other; the defense preparation “does not divide the Sunday from the week,” and makes “the night joint-laborer with the day” (I.i.76, 78). In scene two the first subject taken up by Claudius, and the subject of first importance to Hamlet, is itself an instance of improbable unification—the unnatural natural union of Claudius and Gertrude. Where scene one brought its audience to feel coherence in incoherence by response to systems of organization other than those of logical or narrative sequence, scene two brings its audience to think of actions and characters alternately and sometimes nearly simultaneously in systems of value whose contradictory judgments rarely collide in the mind of an audience. From an uneasiness prompted by a sense of lack of order, unity, coherence, and continuity, we have progressed to an uneasiness prompted by a sense of their excess.

Claudius is everything the audience most valued in scene one, but he is also and at once contemptible. His first sentences are unifications in which his discretion overwhelms things whose natures are oppugnant. The simple but contorted statement, “therefore our . . . sister . . . have we . . . taken to wife,” takes Claudius more than six lines to say; it is plastered together with a succession of subordinate unnatural unions made smooth by rhythm, alliteration, assonance, and syntactical balance:

Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,  
 Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state,  
 Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,



With an auspicious and a dropping eye,  
 With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,  
 In equal scale weighing delight and dole,  
 Taken to wife. (I.ii.8–14)

What he says is overly orderly. The rhythms and rhetoric by which he connects any contraries, moral or otherwise, are too smooth. Look at the complex phonetic equation that gives a sound of decorousness to the moral indecorum of “With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage.” Claudius uses syntactical and rhetorical devices for equation by balance—as one would a particularly heavy and greasy cosmetic—to smooth over any inconsistencies whatsoever. Even his incidental diction is of joining: “jointress,” “disjoint,” “Colleaguèd” (I.ii.9, 20, 21). The excessively lubricated rhetoric by which Claudius makes unnatural connections between moral contraries is as gross and sweaty as the incestuous marriage itself. The audience has double and contrary responses to Claudius, the unifier of contraries.

Scene two presents still another kind of double understanding in double frames of reference. Claudius is the primary figure in the hierarchy depicted—he is the king; he is also the character upon whom all the other characters focus their attention; he does most of the talking. An audience focuses its attention on him. On the other hand, one of the members of the royal procession was dressed all in black—a revenger to go with the presumably vengeful ghost in scene one. Moreover, the man in black is probably also the most famous actor in England (or at least of the company). The particulars of the scene make Claudius the focal figure, the genre and the particulars of a given performance focus the audience’s attention on Hamlet.

When the two focuses come together (“But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son—”) Hamlet’s reply (I.ii.65) is spoken not to the king but to the audience. “A little more than kin, and less than kind” is the first thing spoken by Hamlet and the first thing spoken aside to the audience. With that line Hamlet takes the audience for his own, and gives himself to the audience as its agent on the stage. Hamlet and the audience are from this point in the play more firmly united than any other such pair in Shakespeare, and perhaps in dramatic literature.

Claudius’ “my cousin Hamlet, and my son” is typical of his stylistic unifications of mutually exclusive contrary ideas (cousin, son). Hamlet’s reply does not unify ideas, but disunifies them (more than kin, less than kind). However, the style in which Hamlet distinguishes is a caricature of Claudius’ equations by rhetorical balance; here again, what interrupts the order, threatens coherence, and is strikingly at odds with its preamble is also a continuation by echo of what went before. Hamlet’s parody of Claudius and his refusal to be folded into Claudius’ rhetorical blanket is satisfying to an audience in need of assurance that it is not alone in its uneasiness at Claudius’ rhetoric. On the other hand, the orderliness

that the audience valued in scene two is abruptly destroyed by Hamlet's reply. At the moment Hamlet speaks his first line, the audience finds itself the champion of order in Denmark and in the play, and at the same time irrevocably allied to Hamlet—the one present threat to the order of both.

## II

The play persists in taking its audience to the brink of intellectual terror. The mind of the audience is rarely far from the intellectual desperation of Claudius in the prayer scene when the systems in which he values his crown and queen collide with those in which he values his soul and peace of mind. For the duration of *Hamlet* the mind of the audience is as it might be if it could take on, or dared to try to take on, its experience whole, if it dared drop the humanly necessary intellectual crutches of compartmentalization, point of view, definition, and the idea of relevance, if it dared admit any subject for evaluation into any and all the systems of value to which at different times one human mind subscribes. The constant occupation of a sane mind is to choose, establish, and maintain frames of reference for the things of its experience; as the high value placed on artistic unity attests, one of the attractions of art is that it offers a degree of holiday from that occupation. As the creation of a human mind, art comes to its audience ready-fitted to the human mind; it has physical limits or limits of duration; its details are subordinated to one another in a hierarchy of importance. A play guarantees us that we will not have to select a direction for our attention; it offers us isolation from matter and considerations irrelevant to a particular focus or a particular subject. *Hamlet* is more nearly an exception to those rules than other satisfying and bearable works of art. That, perhaps, is the reason so much effort has gone into interpretations that presume that *Hamlet*, as it is, is not and was not satisfying and bearable. The subject of literature is often conflict, often conflict of values; but, though the agonies of decision, knowing, and valuing are often the objects of an audience's concern, an audience rarely undergoes or even approaches such agonies itself. That it should enjoy doing so seems unlikely, but in *Hamlet* the problems the audience thinks about and the intellectual action of thinking about them are very similar. *Hamlet* is the tragedy of an audience that cannot make up its mind.

One of the most efficient, reliable, and usual guarantees of isolation is genre. The appearance of a ghost in scene one suggests that the play will be a revenge tragedy. *Hamlet* does indeed turn out to be a revenge tragedy, but here genre does not provide the limited frame of reference that the revenge genre and genres in general usually establish. The archetypal revenge play is *The Spanish Tragedy*. In the first scene of that, a ghost and a personification, Revenge, walk out on the stage and spend a whole scene saying who they are, where they are, why they are there, what has happened, and what will happen. The ghost in *The Spanish Tragedy* gives more information in the first five lines of the play than

there is in the whole first scene of *Hamlet*. In *The Spanish Tragedy* the ghost and Revenge act as a chorus for the play. They keep the doubt and turmoil of the characters from ever transferring themselves to the audience. They keep the audience safe from doubt, safely outside the action, looking on. In *The Spanish Tragedy* the act of revenge is presented as a moral necessity, just as, say, shooting the villain may be in a Western. Revenge plays were written by Christians and played to Christian audiences. Similarly, traditional American Westerns were written by and for believers faithful to the principles of the Constitution of the United States. The possibility that an audience's Christian belief that vengeance belongs only to God will color its understanding of revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy* is as unlikely as a modern film audience's consideration of a villain's civil rights when somebody shouts, "Head him off at the pass." The tension between revenge morality and the audience's own Christian morality was a source of vitality always *available* to Kyd and his followers, but one that they did not avail themselves of. Where they did not ignore moralities foreign to the vaguely Senecan ethic of the genre, they took steps to take the life out of conflicts between contrary systems of value.

When Christian morality invades a revenge play, as it does in III.xiii of *The Spanish Tragedy* when Hieronimo says *Vindicta Mibi* and then further echoes St. Paul's "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord," the quickly watered-down Christian position and the contrary position for which Hieronimo rejects it are presented as isolated categories between which the *character* must and does choose. The conflict is restricted to the stage and removed from the mind of the audience. The effect is not to make the contrariety of values a part of the audience's experience but to dispel the value system foreign to the genre, to file it away as, for the duration of the play, a dead issue. In its operations upon an audience of *The Spanish Tragedy*, the introduction and rejection of the Christian view of vengeance is roughly comparable to the hundreds of exchanges in hundreds of Westerns where the new schoolmarm says that the hero should go to the sheriff rather than try to outdraw the villain. The hero rarely gives an intellectually satisfying reason for taking the law into his own hands, but the mere fact that the pertinent moral alternative has been mentioned and rejected is ordinarily sufficient to allow the audience to join the hero in his morality without fear of further interruption from its own.

The audience of *Hamlet* is not allowed the intellectual comfort of isolation in the one system of values appropriate to the genre. In *Hamlet* the Christian context for valuing is persistently present. In I.v the ghost makes a standard revenge-tragedy statement of Hamlet's moral obligation to kill Claudius. The audience is quite ready to think in that frame of reference and does so. The ghost then—in the same breath—opens the audience's mind to the frame of reference least compatible with the genre. When he forbids vengeance upon Gertrude, he does so in specifically Christian terms: "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy

soul contrive / Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven . . ." (I.v.85–86). Moreover, this ghost is at least as concerned that he lost the chance to confess before he died as he is that he lost his life at all.

Most of the time contradictory values do not collide in the audience's consciousness, but the topic of revenge is far from the only instance in which they live anxiously close to one another, so close to one another that, although the audience is not shaken in its faith in either of a pair of conflicting values, its mind remains in the uneasy state common in nonartistic experience but unusual for audiences of plays. The best example is the audience's thinking about suicide during *Hamlet*. The first mention of suicide comes already set into a Christian frame of reference by the clause in which self-slaughter is mentioned: "Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (I.ii.131–32). In the course of the play, however, an audience evaluates suicide in all the different systems available to minds outside the comfortable limitations of art; from time to time in the play the audience thinks of suicide variously as (1) cause for damnation, (2) a heroic and generous action, (3) a cowardly action, and (4) a last sure way to peace. The audience moves from one to another system of values with a rapidity that human faith in the rational constancy of the human mind makes seem impossible. Look, for example, at the travels of the mind that listens to and understands what goes on between the specifically Christian death of Laertes (*Laertes*: ". . . Mine and my father's death come not upon thee, / Nor thine on me."—*Hamlet*: "Heaven make thee free of it" V.ii.319–21) and the specifically Christian death of Hamlet (*Horatio*: ". . . Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest . . ." V.ii.348–49). During the intervening thirty lines the audience and the characters move from the Christian context in which Laertes' soul departs, into the familiar literary context where they can take Horatio's attempted suicide as the generous and heroic act it is (V.ii.324–31). Audience and characters have likewise no difficulty at all in understanding and accepting the label "felicity" for the destination of the suicide—even though Hamlet, the speaker of "Absent thee from felicity awhile" (V.ii.336), prefaces the statement with an incidental "By heaven" (V.ii.332), and even though Hamlet and the audience have spent a lot of time during the preceding three hours actively considering the extent to which a suicide's journey to "the undiscovered country" can be called "felicity" or predicted at all. When "Good night, sweet prince" is spoken by the antique Roman of twenty lines before, both he and the audience return to thinking in a Christian frame of reference, as if they had never been away.

The audience is undisturbed by a nearly endless supply of similar inconstancies in itself and the play; these are a few instances:

The same audience that scorned pretense when Hamlet knew not "seems" in I.ii admires his skill at pretense and detection in the next two acts.

The audience joins Hamlet both in admiration for the self-control by which the player "could force his soul so to his own conceit" that he could cry

for Hecuba (II.ii.537), and in admiration for the very different self-control of Horatio (III.ii.51–71).

The audience, which presumably could not bear to see a literary hero stab an unarmed man at prayer, sees the justice of Hamlet's self-accusations of delay. The audience also agrees with the ghost when both have a full view of the corpse of Polonius, and when the ghost's diction is an active reminder of the weapon by which Hamlet has just attempted the acting of the dread command: "Do not forget. This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose" (III. iv.111–12).

The audience that sees the ghost and hears about its prison house in I.v also accepts the just as obvious truth of "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns. . . ."

What have come to be recognized as the problems of *Hamlet* arise at points where an audience's contrary responses come to consciousness. They are made bearable in performance (though not in recollection) by means similar to those by which the audience is carried across the quieter crises of scene one. In performance, at least, the play gives its audience strength and courage not only to flirt with the frailty of its own understanding but actually to survive conscious experiences of the Polonian foolishness of faith that things will follow only the rules of the particular logic in which we expect to see them. The best example of the audience's endurance of self-knowledge is its experiences of Hamlet's madness. In the last moments of Act I Hamlet makes Horatio, Marcellus, and the audience privy to his intention to pretend madness: ". . . How strange or odd some'er I bear myself / (As I perchance hereafter shall think meet / To put an antic disposition on) . . ." (I.v.170–73). The audience sets out into Act II knowing what Hamlet knows, knowing Hamlet's plans, and secure in its superiority to the characters who do not. (Usually an audience is superior to the central characters: it knows that Desdemona is innocent, Othello does not; it knows what it would do when Lear foolishly divides his kingdom; it knows how Birnam Wood came to come to Dunsinane. In *Hamlet*, however, the audience never knows what it would have done in Hamlet's situation; in fact, since the King's successful plot in the duel with Laertes changes Hamlet's situation so that he becomes as much the avenger of his own death as of his father's, the audience never knows what Hamlet would have done. Except for brief periods near the end of the play, the audience never has insight or knowledge superior to Hamlet's or, indeed, different from Hamlet's. Instead of having superiority *to* Hamlet, the audience goes into the second act to share the superiority *of* Hamlet.) The audience knows that Hamlet will play mad, and its expectations are quickly confirmed. Just seventy-five lines into Act II, Ophelia comes in and describes a kind of behavior in Hamlet that sounds like the behavior of a young man of limited theatrical ability who is pretending to be mad (II.i.77–84). Our confidence that this behavior so puzzling to others is well within our grasp is

strengthened by the reminder of the ghost, the immediate cause of the promised pretense, in Ophelia's comparison of Hamlet to a creature "loosèd out of hell / To speak of horrors."

Before Ophelia's entrance, II.i has presented an example of the baseness and foolishness of Polonius, the character upon whom both the audience and Hamlet exercise their superiority throughout Act II. Polonius seems base because he is arranging to spy on Laertes. He instructs his spy in ways to use the "bait of falsehood"—to find out directions by indirections (II.i.1–74). He is so sure that he knows everything, and so sure that his petty scheme is not only foolproof but brilliant, that he is as contemptible mentally as he is morally. The audience laughs at him because he loses his train of thought in pompous byways, so that, eventually, he forgets what he set out to say: "What was I about to say? . . . I was about to say something! Where did I leave?" (II.i.50–51). When Ophelia reports Hamlet's behavior, Polonius takes what is apparently Hamlet's bait: "Mad for thy love?" (II.i.85). He also thinks of (and then spends the rest of the act finding evidence for) a specific cause for Hamlet's madness: he is mad for love of Ophelia. The audience knows (1) Hamlet will pretend madness, (2) Polonius is a fool, and (3) what is actually bothering Hamlet. Through the rest of the act, the audience laughs at Polonius for being fooled by Hamlet. It continues to laugh at Polonius' inability to keep his mind on a track (II.ii.85–130); it also laughs at him for the opposite fault—he has a one-track mind and sees anything and everything as evidence that Hamlet is mad for love (II.ii.173–212; 394–402). Hamlet, whom the audience knows and understands, spends a good part of the rest of the scene making Polonius demonstrate his foolishness.

Then, in Act III, scene one, the wise audience and the foolish Polonius both become lawful espials of Hamlet's meeting with Ophelia. Ophelia says that Hamlet made her believe he loved her. Hamlet's reply might just as well be delivered by the play to the audience: "You should not have believed me . . ." (III.i.117). In his next speech Hamlet appears suddenly, inexplicably, violently, and really mad—this before an audience whose chief identity for the last hour has consisted in its knowledge that Hamlet is only pretending. The audience finds itself guilty of Polonius' foolish confidence in predictable trains of events. It is presented with evidence for thinking just what it has considered other minds foolish for thinking—that Hamlet is mad, mad for love of an inconstant girl who has betrayed him. Polonius and the audience are the self-conscious and prideful knowers and understanders in the play. They both overestimate the degree of safety they have as innocent onlookers.

When Hamlet seems suddenly mad, the audience is likely for a minute to think that it is mad or that the play is mad. That happens several times in the course of the play; and the play helps audiences toward the decision that the trouble is in themselves. Each time the play seems insane, it also is obviously

ordered, orderly, all of a piece. For example, in the case of Hamlet's truly odd behavior with Ophelia in III.i some of the stuff of his speeches to her has been otherwise applied but nonetheless present in the play before (fickleness, cosmetics). Furthermore, after the fact, the play often tells us how we should have reacted; here the King sums up the results of the Ophelia experiment as if they were exactly what the audience expected they would be (which is exactly what they were not): "Love? his affections do not that way tend, / . . . what he spoke . . . / Was not like madness" (III.i. 162–64). In the next scene, Hamlet enters perfectly sane, and lecturing, oddly enough, on what a play should be (III.ii.1–42). Whenever the play seems mad it drifts back into focus as if nothing odd had happened. The audience is encouraged to agree with the play that nothing did, to assume (as perhaps for other reasons it should) that its own intellect is inadequate. The audience pulls itself together, and goes on to another crisis of its understanding. Indeed, it had to do so in order to arrive at the crisis of the nunnery speech. At exactly the point where the audience receives the information that makes it so vulnerable to Hamlet's inexplicable behavior in the nunnery scene, the lines about the antic disposition (I.v.170–73) act as a much needed explanation—*after the fact of the audience's discomfort*—of jocular behavior by Hamlet ("Art thou there, truepenny?" "You hear this fellow in the cellarage," "Well said, old mole!" I.v.150–51, 162) that is foreign to his tone and attitude earlier in the scene, and that jars with the expectations aroused by the manner in which he and the play have been treating the ghost. For a moment, the play seems to be the work of a madman. Then Hamlet explains what he *will* do, and the audience is invited to feel lonely in foolishly failing to understand that that was what he was doing before.

### III

The kind of experience an audience has of *Hamlet* in its large movements is duplicated—and more easily demonstrated—in the microcosm of its responses to brief passages. For example, the act of following the exchange initiated by Polonius' "What do you read, my Lord?" in II.ii is similar to the larger experience of coping with the whole career of Hamlet's madness:

*Polonius.* . . . What do you read, my Lord?

*Hamlet.* Words, words, words.

*Polonius.* What is the matter, my lord?

*Hamlet.* Between who?

*Polonius.* I mean the matter that you read, my lord.

*Hamlet.* Slanders, sir, for the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams. All which, sir, though I most powerfully

and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down, for you yourself, sir, should be old as I am if, like a crab, you could go backward.

*Polonius.* [aside] Though this be madness, yet there is method in't. . . .  
(II.ii.190–204)

The audience is full partner in the first two of Hamlet's comically absolute answers. The first answer is not what the questioner expects, and we laugh at the mental inflexibility that makes Polonius prey to frustration in an answer that takes the question literally rather than as it is customarily meant in similar contexts. In his first question Polonius assumes that what he says will have meaning only within the range appropriate to the context in which he speaks. In his second he acts to limit the frame of reference of the first question, but, because "What is the matter?" is a standard idiom in another context, it further widens the range of reasonable but unexpected understanding. On his third try Polonius achieves a question whose range is as limited as his meaning. The audience—composed of smug initiates in Hamlet's masquerade and companions in his cleverness—expects to revel further in the comic revelation of Polonius' limitations. Hamlet's answer begins by letting us laugh at the discomfiture inherent for Polonius in a list of "slanders" of old men. Because of its usual applications, the word "slander" suggests that what is so labeled is not only painful but untrue. Part of the joke here is that these slanders are true. When Hamlet finishes his list, he seems about to continue in the same vein and to demonstrate his madness by saying something like "All which, sir, though . . . , yet are lies." Instead, a syntactical machine ("though . . . yet"), rhetorical emphasis ("powerfully and potently"), and diction ("believe") suitable for the expected denial are used to admit the truth of the slanders: "All which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down, for you yourself, sir. . . ." The speech seems to have given up comic play on objection to slanders on grounds of untruth, and to be about to play from an understanding of "slander" as injurious whether true or not. The syntax of "I hold it not honesty . . . , for" signals that a reason for Hamlet's objections will follow, and—in a context where the relevance of the slanders to Polonius gives pain enough to justify suppression of geriatric commonplaces—"for you yourself, sir" signals the probable general direction of the explanation. So far the audience has followed Hamlet's wit without difficulty from one focus to another, but now the bottom falls out from under the audience's own Polonian assumption, in this case the assumption that Hamlet will pretend madness according to pattern: "for you yourself, sir, should be old as I am if, like a crab, you could go backward." This last is exactly the opposite of what Polonius calls it, this is madness without method.

The audience finds itself trying to hear sense in madness; it suddenly undergoes experience of the fact that Polonius' assumptions about cause and



effect in life and language are no more arbitrary and vulnerable than its own. The audience has been where it has known that the idea of sanity is insane, but it is there very briefly; it feels momentarily lonely and lost—as it feels when it has failed to get a joke or when a joke has failed to be funny. The play continues blandly across the gulf. Polonius' comment reflects comically on the effects on him of the general subject of old age; the banter between Hamlet and Polonius picks up again; and Polonius continues his self-confident diagnostic asides to the audience. Moreover, the discussion of Hamlet's reading is enclosed by two passages that have strong nonlogical, nonsignificant likeness to one another in the incidental materials they share—breeding, childbearing, death, and walking:

*Hamlet.* For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion—Have you a daughter?

*Polonius.* I have, my lord.

*Hamlet.* Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to't.

*Polonius.* [aside] How say you by that? Still harping on my daughter. Yet he knew me not at first. 'A said I was a fishmonger. 'A is far gone, far gone. And truly in my youth I suffered much extremity for love, very near this. I'll speak to him again.—What do you read, my lord?  
(II.ii.181–90)

*Polonius.* [aside] Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.—Will you walk out of the air, my lord?

*Hamlet.* Into my grave?

*Polonius.* Indeed, that's out of the air. [aside] How pregnant sometimes his replies are! a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of. . . . (II.ii.203–9)

From beginning to end, in all sizes and kinds of materials, the play offers its audience an actual and continuing experience of perceiving a multitude of intense relationships in an equal multitude of different systems of coherence, systems not subordinated to one another in a hierarchy of relative power. The way to an answer to “What is so good about *Hamlet*?” may be in an answer to the same question about its most famous part, the “To be or not to be” soliloquy.

The soliloquy sets out with ostentatious deliberation, rationality, and precision. Hamlet fixes and limits his subject with authority and—considering that his carefully defined subject takes in everything humanly conceivable—with remarkable confidence: “To be, or not to be—that is the question.” He then restates and further defines the question in four lines that echo the physical proportions of “To be or not to be” (two lines on the positive, two on the

negative) and also echo the previous grammatical construction (“to suffer . . . or to take arms”):

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune  
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
 And by opposing end them. (III.i.57–60)

The speech is determinedly methodical about defining a pair of alternatives that should be as easily distinguishable as any pair imaginable; surely being and not being are distinct from one another. The next sentence continues the pattern of infinitives, but it develops the idea of “not to be” instead of continuing the positive–negative alternation followed before:

To die, to sleep—  
 No more—and by a sleep to say we end  
 The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks  
 That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation  
 Devoutly to be wished. (III.i.60–64)

As an audience listens to and comprehends the three units “To die,” “to sleep,” and “No more,” some intellectual uneasiness should impinge upon it. “To sleep” is in apposition to “to die,” and their equation is usual and perfectly reasonable. However, death and sleep are also a traditional type of unlikeness; they could as well restate “to be or not to be” (to sleep or to die) as “not to be” alone. Moreover, since to die is to sleep, and is also to sleep no more, no vocal emphasis or no amount of editorial punctuation will limit the relationship between “to sleep” and “no more.” Thus, when “and by a sleep to say we end . . .” reasserts the metaphoric equation of death and sleep, the listener feels a sudden and belated need to have heard “no more” as the isolated summary statement attempted by the punctuation of modern texts. What is happening here is that the apparently sure distinction between “to be” and “not to be” is becoming less and less easy to maintain. The process began even in the methodically precise first sentence where passivity to death-dealing slings and arrows described “to be,” and the positive aggressive action of taking arms described the negative state, “not to be.” Even earlier, the listener experienced a substantially irrelevant instability of relationship when “in the mind” attached first to “nobler,” indicating the sphere of the nobility, and then to “suffer,” indicating the sphere of the suffering: “nobler in the mind to suffer.”

“The thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to” further denies the simplicity of the initial alternatives by opening the mind of the listener to considerations excluded by the isolated question whether it is more pleasant to

live or to die; the substance of the phrase is a summary of the pains of life, but its particulars introduce the idea of duty. "Heir" is particularly relevant to the relationship and duty of Hamlet to his father; it also implies a continuation of conditions from generation to generation that is generally antithetical to any assumption of finality in death. The diction of the phrase also carries with it a suggestion of the Christian context in which flesh is heir to the punishment of Adam; the specifically religious word "devoutly" in the next sentence opens the idea of suicide to the Christian ethic from which the narrowed limits of the first sentences had briefly freed it.

While the logical limits and controls of the speech are falling away, its illogical patterns are giving it their own coherence. For example, the constancy of the infinitive construction maintains an impression that the speech is proceeding as methodically as it began; the word "to," in its infinitive use and otherwise, appears thirteen times among the eighty-five words in the first ten lines of the soliloquy. At the same time that the listener is having trouble comprehending the successive contradictions of "To die, to sleep— / No more—and by a sleep to say we end . . .," he also hears at the moment of crisis a confirming echo of the first three syllables and the word "end" from "*and by opposing end them*" in the first three syllables and word "end" in "*and by a sleep to say we end.*" As the speech goes on, as it loses more and more of its rational precision, and as "to be" and "not to be" become less and less distinguishable, rhetorical coherence continues in force. The next movement of the speech begins with a direct repetition, in the same metrical position in the line, of the words with which the previous movement began: "To die, to sleep." The new movement seems, as each new movement has seemed, to introduce a restatement of what has gone before; the rhetorical construction of the speech insists that all the speech does is make the distinct natures of "to be" and "not to be" clearer and clearer:

To die, to sleep—  
 To sleep—perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub,  
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
 Must give us pause. There's the respect  
 That makes calamity of so long life. (III.i.64–69)

As Hamlet describes his increasing difficulty in seeing death as the simple opposite of life, the manner of his description gives his listener an actual experience of that difficulty; "shuffled off this mortal coil" says "cast off the turmoil of this life," but "shuffled off" and "coil" both suggest the rejuvenation of a snake which, having once thrown her enamell'd skin, reveals another just like it underneath. The listener also continues to have difficulty with the simple action of understanding; like the nature of the things discussed, the natures of the

sentences change as they are perceived: “what dreams may come” is a common construction for a question, and the line that follows sounds like a subordinate continuation of the question; it is not until we hear “must give us pause” that we discover that “what dreams may come” is a noun phrase, the subject of a declarative sentence that only comes into being with the late appearance of an unexpected verb. In the next sentence (“There’s the respect / That makes calamity of so long life”), logic requires that we understand “makes calamity so long-lived,” but our habitual understanding of *makes . . . of* constructions and our recent indoctrination in the pains of life make us likely to hear the contradictory, illogical, and yet appropriate “makes a long life a calamity.”

Again, however, the lines sound ordered and reasonable. The rejected first impressions I have just described are immediately followed by a real question, and one that is largely an insistently long list of things that make life a monotonously painful series of calamities. Moreover, nonlogical coherence is provided by the quiet and intricate harmony of “to dream,” “of death,” and “shuffled off” in the metrical centers of three successive lines; by the echo of the solidly metaphoric “there’s the rub” in the vague “there’s the respect”; and by the repetition of “for” from “For in that sleep” to begin the next section of the speech.

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
 Th’ oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely,  
 The pangs of despised love, the law’s delay,  
 The insolence of office, and the spurns  
 That patient merit of th’ unworthy takes,  
 When he himself might his quietus make  
 With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,  
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
 But that the dread of something after death,  
 The undiscovered country, from whose bourn  
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will,  
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
 Than fly to others that we know not of? (III.i.70–82)

Although the list in the first question is disjointed and rhythmically frantic, the impression of disorder is countered by the regularity of the definite article, and by the inherently conjunctive action of six possessives. The possessives in *’s*, the possessives in *of* and the several nonpossessive *of* constructions are themselves an underlying pattern of simultaneous likeness and difference. So is the illogical pattern present in the idea of burdens, the word “bear,” and the word “bare.” The line in which the first of these questions ends and the second begins is an epitome of the construction and action of the speech: “With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear, . . .” The two precisely equal halves of a single rhythmic unit

hold together two separate syntactical units. The beginning of the new sentence, “Who would fardels bear,” echoes both the beginning, “For who would bear,” and the sound of one word, “bare,” from the end of the old. Moreover, “bare” and “bear,” two words that are both the same and different, participate here in statements of the two undistinguishable alternatives: “to be, or not to be”—to bear fardels, or to kill oneself with a bare bodkin.

The end of the speech sounds like the rationally achieved conclusion of just such a rational investigation as Hamlet began. It begins with *thus*, the sign of logical conclusion, and it gains a sound of inevitable truth and triumphant clarity from the incremental repetition of *and* at the beginning of every other line. The last lines are relevant to Hamlet’s behavior in the play at large and therefore have an additional sound of rightness here. Not only are the lines broadly appropriate to the play, the audience’s understanding of them is typical of its understanding throughout the play and of its understanding of the previous particulars of this speech: Hamlet has hesitated to kill Claudius. Consideration of suicide has seemed a symptom of that hesitancy. Here the particular from which Hamlet’s conclusions about his inability to act derive is his hesitancy to commit suicide. The audience hears those conclusions in the context of his failure to take the action that suicide would avoid.

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,  
 And thus the native hue of resolution  
 Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,  
 And enterprises of great pitch and moment  
 With this regard their currents turn awry  
 And lose the name of action. (III.i.83–88)

These last lines are accidentally a compendium of phrases descriptive of the action of the speech and the process of hearing it. The speech puzzles the will, but it makes us capable of facing and bearing puzzlement. The “To be or not to be” soliloquy is a type of the over-all action of *Hamlet*. In addition, a soliloquy in which being and its opposite are indistinguishable is peculiarly appropriate to a play otherwise full of easily distinguishable pairs that are not easily distinguished from one another by characters or audience or both: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; the pictures of Gertrude’s two husbands (III.iv.54–68); the hawk and the handsaw (II.ii.370); and father and mother who are one flesh and so undistinguished in Hamlet’s farewell to Claudius (IV.iii.48–51). The soliloquy is above all typical of a play whose last moments enable its audience to look unblinking upon a situation in which Hamlet, the finally successful revenger, is the object of Laertes’ revenge; a situation in which Laertes, Hamlet’s victim, victimizes Hamlet; a situation in which Fortinbras, the threat to Denmark’s future in scene one, is its hope for political salvation; in short, a situation in which any

identity can be indistinguishable from its opposite. The soliloquy, the last scene, the first scene, the play—each and together—make an impossible coherence of truths that are both undeniably incompatible and undeniably coexistent.

#### IV

The kind of criticism I am doing here may be offensive to readers conditioned to think of revelation as the value of literature and the purpose of criticism. The things I have said about *Hamlet* may be made more easily palatable by the memory that illogical coherence—coherent madness—is a regular topic of various characters who listen to Hamlet and Ophelia. In the Reynaldo scene (II.i) and Hamlet's first talk with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the power of rhetoric and context to make a particular either good or bad at will is also a topic in the play. So too is the perception of clouds which may in a moment look "like a camel indeed," and "like a weasel" and be "very like a whale" (III.ii.361–67).

What I am doing may seem antipoetical; it should not. On the contrary, the effects I have described in *Hamlet* are of the same general kind as the nonsignificant coherences made by rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, and others of the standard devices of prosody. For example, the physics of the relationship among Hamlet, Laertes, Fortinbras, and Pyrrhus, the four avenging sons in *Hamlet*, are in their own scale and substance the same as those of the relationship among *cat*, *rat*, *bat*, and *chat*. The theme of suicide, for all the inconstancy of its fluid moral and emotional value, is a constant and unifying factor in the play. So too is the theme of appearance and reality, deceit, pretense, disguise, acting, seeming, and cosmetics which gives the play coherence even though its values are as many as its guises and labels. The analogy of rhyme or of a pair of like-metered lines applies profitably to the nonsignifying relationship between Hamlet's two interviews with women. Both the nunnery scene with Ophelia and the closet scene with Gertrude are stage-managed and overlooked by Polonius; neither lady understands Hamlet; both are amazed by his intensity; in both scenes Hamlet makes a series of abortive departures before his final exit. There is a similar kind of insignificant likeness in numerous repeated patterns of scenes and situations like that of Hamlet's entrance reading in II.ii and its echo in Ophelia's show of devotional reading in III.i. Indeed, the same sort of thing can be said about any of the themes and images whose value critics have tried to convert to significance.

The tools of prosody and the phenomena I have talked about show their similarity well when they cooperate in Hamlet's little poem on perception and truth, a poem that is a model of the experience of the whole play. Polonius reads it to the king and queen:

Doubt thou the stars are fire;  
Doubt that the sun doth move;

Doubt truth to be a liar;  
 But never doubt I love. (II.ii.116–19)

I suggest that the pleasure of intellectual possession evoked by perception of the likeness and difference of “fire” and “liar” and of “move” and “love,” or among the four metrically like and unlike lines, or between the three positive clauses and the one negative one, or between “stars” and “sun” or “truth” and “liar” is of the same kind as the greater achievement of intellectual mastery of the greater challenge presented by “doubt” in the first three lines. The first two *doubts* demand disbelief of two things that common sense cannot but believe. The third, whose likeness to the first two is insisted upon by anaphora, is made unlike them by the words that follow it: disbelief that truth is a liar is a logical necessity; therefore, “doubt” here must mean “believe” or “incline to believe” as it does earlier in this scene (l. 56) and several other times in the play. To be consistent with the pair of hyperbolic impossibilities to which it is coupled, and to fit the standard rhetorical formula (Doubt what cannot be doubted, but do not doubt . . .) in which it appears, “Doubt truth to be a liar” must be understood in a way inconsistent with another pattern of the poem, the previously established meaning of “doubt.” Even the first two lines, which seem to fit the hyperbolic formula so well, may make the poem additionally dizzying because their subject matter could remind a Renaissance listener (once disturbed by the reversal of the meaning of the third “doubt”) of doubts cast upon common-sense impressions by still recent astronomical discoveries, notably that the diurnal motion of the sun is an illusion.

The urgent rhetorical coherence of the poem is like that of the play. As the multitude of insistent and overlapping systems of coherence in the poem allows its listener to hold the two contradictory meanings of “doubt” in colloid-like suspension and to experience both the actions “doubt” describes, so in the play at large an alliteration of subjects—a sort of rhythm of ideas whose substance may or may not inform the situation dramatized—gives shape and identity, nonphysical substance, to the play that *contains* the situation. Such a container allows Shakespeare to replace *conclusion* with *inclusion*; it provides a particular and temporary context that overcomes the intellectual terror ordinarily inherent in looking at an action in all the value systems it invades. Such a container provides a sense of order and limitation sufficient to replace the comforting boundaries of carefully isolated frames of reference; it makes its audience capable of contemplating more truth than the mind should be able to bear.

In summary I would say that the thing about *Hamlet* that has put Western man into a panic to explain it is not that the play is incoherent, but that it is coherent. There are plenty of incoherent plays; nobody ever looks at them twice. This one, because it obviously makes sense and because it just as obviously cannot be made sense of, threatens our inevitable working assumption that there are no “more things in earth” than can be understood in one philosophy.

People see *Hamlet* and tolerate inconsistencies that it does not seem they could bear. Students of the play have explained that such people do not, in fact, find the play bearable at all. They therefore whittle the play down for us to the size of one of its terms, and deny the others. Truth is bigger than any one system for knowing it, and *Hamlet* is bigger than any of the frames of reference it inhabits. *Hamlet* allows us to comprehend—hold on to—all the contradictions it contains. *Hamlet* refuses to cradle its audience's mind in a closed generic framework, or otherwise limit the ideological context of its actions. In *Hamlet* the mind is cradled in nothing more than the fabric of the play. The superior strength and value of that fabric is in the sense it gives that it is unlimited in its range, and that its audience is not only sufficient to comprehend but is in the act of achieving total comprehension of all the perceptions to which its mind can open. The source of the strength is in a rhetorical economy that allows the audience to perform both of the basic actions of the mind upon almost every conjunction of elements in the course of the play: it perceives strong likeness, and it perceives strong difference. Every intellectual conjunction is also a disjunction, and any two things that pull apart contain qualities that are simultaneously the means of uniting them.



### 1985—Margaret Ferguson. “*Hamlet: Letters and Spirits*,” from *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*

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“The letter killeth,” said Saint Paul (2 Cor. 3:6). His words can serve as an epigraph—or epitaph—to my essay, which approaches some broad questions about the genre of Shakespearean tragedy by exploring the connections between certain techniques of wordplay in *Hamlet* and a process of dramatic literalization that is associated, in this play, with the impulse to kill. In the early part of the play, Hamlet frequently uses language to effect a divorce between words and their conventional meanings. His rhetorical tactics, which include punning and deliberately undoing the rhetorical figures of other speakers, expose the arbitrariness, as well as the fragility, of the bonds that tie words to agreed-upon significations. His language in dialogues with others, though not in his soliloquies, produces a curious effect of *materializing* the word, materializing it



in a way that forces us to question the distinction between literal and figurative meanings, and that also leads us to look in new ways at the word as a spoken or written phenomenon. Hamlet's verbal tactics in the early part of the play—roughly through the closet scene in Act III—constitute a rehearsal for a more disturbing kind of materializing that occurs, with increasing frequency, in the later part of the drama. This second kind of materializing pertains to the realm of deeds as well as to that of words; in fact it highlights the thin but significant line that separates those realms, while at the same time it reminds us that all acts performed in a theater share with words the problematic status of representation. This second type of materializing might be called performative,<sup>1</sup> and since in *Hamlet*, in contrast to the comedies, it almost always results in a literal death, it might also be described as a process of “increasing”—to borrow a term that is used once in *Hamlet* and nowhere else in Shakespeare's corpus.

Hamlet begins his verbal activity of materializing words with the first line he speaks: “A little more than kin, and less than kind” (I.ii.65).<sup>2</sup> With this riddling sentence, spoken aside to the audience, Hamlet rejects the social and linguistic bond that Claudius asserted when he addressed Hamlet in terms of their kinship: “But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son” (I.ii.64). Hamlet not only refuses to be defined or possessed by Claudius's epithets, the second of which confuses the legal relation of stepson with the “natural” one of son; he also refuses to accept the principle of similarity that governs Claudius's syntax, which here, as elsewhere, employs the rhetorical figure of *isocolon*: balanced clauses joined by “and.”<sup>3</sup> Claudius's isocolonic style is also characteristically oxymoronic: opposites are smoothly joined by syntax and sound, as for instance in these lines from his opening speech:

Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,  
 Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state,  
 Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,  
 With an auspicious and a dropping eye,  
 With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,  
 In equal scale weighing delight and dole,  
 Taken to wife. (I.ii.8–14)

Hamlet's remark “A little more than kin, and less than kind” unbalances the scale Claudius has created through his rhetoric—a scale in which opposites like “delight” and “dole” are blandly equated. Hamlet's sentence disjoins what Claudius has linked; it does so through its comparative “more” and “less,” and also through the play on “kin” and “kind” which points, by the difference of a single letter, to a radical difference between what Claudius seems or claims to be, and what he is. The pun on the word “kind” itself, moreover, works, as Hamlet's puns so often do, to disrupt the smooth surface of another person's discourse. Hamlet's pun,

suggesting that Claudius is neither natural nor kindly, is like a pebble thrown into the oily pool of the king's rhetoric. As Lawrence Danson observes in *Tragic Alphabet*, Hamlet's puns challenge Claudius's "wordy attempts at compromise" by demanding "that words receive their full freight of meaning."<sup>4</sup> If the puns work to increase semantic richness, however—the Elizabethan rhetorician George Puttenham characterized the pun or *syllipsis* as "the figure of double supply"<sup>5</sup>—they do so by driving a wedge between words and their ordinary meanings. The pun, Sigurd Burckhardt argues, characteristically performs "an act of verbal violence. . . . It asserts that mere phonetic—i.e., material, corporeal—likeness establishes likeness of meaning. The pun gives the word as entity primacy over the word as sign."<sup>6</sup>

If Hamlet's punning wit makes an oblique attack on Claudius's rhetorical penchant for "yoking heterogeneous ideas by violence together"—to borrow the phrase Dr Johnson used in a similar attack on what he felt to be indecorous conceits—Hamlet is, of course, attacking much more than Claudius's rhetorical style. For Claudius has yoked not only words but bodies together, and it therefore seems likely that Hamlet's style reflects his (at this point) obscure and certainly overdetermined desire to separate his uncle from his mother. His dialogue with Polonius in II.ii offers further support for my hypothesis that Hamlet's disjunctive verbal techniques constitute not only a defense against being entrapped by others' tropes but also an aggressive, albeit displaced, attack on the marriage union of Gertrude and Claudius. By the time Hamlet speaks with Polonius, of course, he has not only had his worst suspicions about the king confirmed by the Ghost, but has also met with a rebuff from Ophelia, a rebuff dictated by Polonius's and Laertes' suspicions. It is no wonder, then, that his rhetoric is now directly deployed against the very idea of fleshly union. "Have you a daughter?" he asks Polonius (II.ii.182), and goes on to draw Ophelia into his morbid train of thought, which has been about the sun's power to breed maggots in the dead flesh of a dog. "Let her not walk i'th' sun," he says, echoing his earlier statement, in the opening scene with Claudius, "I am too much in the sun" (I.ii.67). The echo hints that Ophelia is already in some sense Hamlet's double here: both are endangered by the sun which is an emblem of kingly power, and both are also endangered—though in significantly different ways—by Hamlet's terrible burden of being a biological son to a dead king and a legal son to Claudius. As if dimly aware that his own way of thinking about Ophelia is tainting her with maggoty conceptions about sonship, Hamlet says to her father, "Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive—friend, look to't" (II.ii.184–6). It is at this point that Hamlet strikes yet another rhetorical blow against union in the realm of discourse: "What do you read, my lord?" asks Polonius. "Words, words, words," Hamlet replies. "What is the matter, my lord?" Polonius persists. "Between who?" is the perverse, ungrammatical, and fascinating reply, not an answer but, characteristically, another question. In this

peculiar dialogue Hamlet disjoins words from their conventional meanings both rhetorically and thematically; in so doing, he breaks the social contract necessary to ordinary human discourse, the contract which mandates that there be, in Roman Jakobson's words, "a certain equivalence between the symbols used by the addressor and those known and interpreted by the addressee."<sup>7</sup>

In his first answer, "Words, words, words," Hamlet deliberately interprets Polonius's question literally; in his second reply, however, he does something more complicated than substituting a literal sense for a figurative one: he points, rather, to the problem that has always plagued classical theories of metaphor, which is that a word or phrase may not *have* a single, "literal" sense.<sup>8</sup> And it seems strangely appropriate that Hamlet should expose the problem of distinguishing between multiple—and perhaps equally figurative—meanings through the example of the word *matter*—a word that appears 26 times in the play, more than in any other by Shakespeare, in locutions ranging from Gertrude's acerbic remark to Polonius, "More matter with less art" (II.ii.95), to Hamlet's poignant comment to Horatio in the last act: "Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart; but it is no matter" (V.ii.208–9).

As is apparent from even a cursory examination of the play's manifold uses of this word, the relation between matter and spirit, matter and art, matter and anything that is "no matter," is altogether questionable for Hamlet; he is therefore quite accurate in presenting matter as an obstacle to unity of opinion: "Between who?" suggests only that any definition of matter will be a matter for dispute. Hamlet has indeed effectively disjoined this word from any single conventional meaning we or Polonius might want to give it; and it is no accident, I think, that Hamlet's rapier attack on the word "matter" foreshadows the closet scene in which he both *speaks* daggers to his mother and literally stabs Polonius, mistaking him, as he says to the corpse, "for thy better." In this scene, the concept of matter is linked to that of the mother by a pun that marries Shakespeare's mother tongue to the language known, in the Renaissance, as the *sermo patrius*: the language of the Church fathers and also of the ancient Romans.<sup>9</sup> "Now, mother, what's the matter?" asks Hamlet at the very outset of the closet scene (III.iv.7), and this query makes explicit an association of ideas already implied by a remark Hamlet made to Rosencrantz: "Therefore no more, but to the matter. My mother, you say—" (III.ii.315–16).

As we hear or see in the word "matter" the Latin term for mother, we may surmise that the common Renaissance association between female nature in general and the "lower" realm of matter is here being deployed in the service of Hamlet's complex oedipal struggle.<sup>10</sup> The mother is the matter that comes between the father and the son—and it is no accident that in this closet scene Hamlet's sexual hysteria rises to its highest pitch. Dwelling with obsessive, disgusted fascination on his mother's unseemly passion for her second husband, Hamlet appears to be struggling with his own feelings about her body even

as he argues for his dead father's continuing rights to her bed. Hamlet's act of stabbing Polonius through the curtain, which occurs almost casually in the middle of the tirade against Gertrude's lust, seems only to increase his passionate desire to make her *see* her error in preferring Claudius to her first husband. For Hamlet, however, the problem of seeing a genuine *difference* between his original father and the man Gertrude has called his father assumes enormous significance at precisely this juncture in the drama; immediately before Hamlet refers to Claudius as a "king of shreds and patches," the Ghost appears, or rather reappears, with a dramatic entrance that allows the phrase "king of shreds and patches" to refer to the Ghost as well as to Claudius. As if to underscore the fact that Hamlet's dilemma here is a hermeneutic as well as an ethical one, Shakespeare has him address the Ghost with the pregnant question, "What would your gracious figure?" (III.iv.105). If Claudius is a figure of the father, so is the Ghost; according to what standard of truth, then, is Hamlet to distinguish between them?

Shakespeare gives this problem a further turn of the screw, as it were, by making the Ghost invisible and inaudible to Gertrude. Like the governess in Henry James's tale, who sees the ghostly figure of Miss Jessell when the "gross" housekeeper does not, Hamlet is forced to confront and deny the possibility that the Ghost may be a figment of his own imagination. He, and the audience, must at least fleetingly experience a conflict between the evidence provided by their eyes and ears and Gertrude's statement that she perceives "nothing." And even if this scene's stage directions confirm the Ghost's existence and support Hamlet's argument that what he has seen is not, as Gertrude insists, a "bodiless creation" of "ecstasy," we may well not feel entirely easy about giving credence to Hamlet here; after the Ghost exits, Hamlet declares to Gertrude that his "pulse" keeps time just as "temperately" as hers does (III.iv.142). Then, having claimed to be no less (but also no more) sane than is the woman whose perceptions we have just been forced to discount, Hamlet proceeds to promise that "I the matter will re-word, which madness / Would gambol from." The relation between the "matter" of the Ghost and the matter Hamlet will "re-word" in the ensuing passionate dialogue with Gertrude remains deeply mysterious.

By stressing the epistemologically doubtful status of the Ghost, we can usefully supplement the classic psychoanalytic explanation for why Hamlet defers performing the deed of revenge. That explanation, outlined by Freud in a famous footnote to the *Interpretation of Dreams* and elaborated by Ernest Jones, suggests that Hamlet obscurely knows that in killing Claudius he would be satisfying his repressed oedipal desire to be *like* Claudius, who has become a king and husband by killing the elder Hamlet.<sup>11</sup> Jacques Lacan, in his brilliant, albeit elliptical, essay on "Desire and the interpretation of desire in *Hamlet*," speculates that Hamlet's invectives against Claudius in the closet scene are an example of *dénégation*, that is, the words of dispraise and contempt are indications of repressed admiration.<sup>12</sup>

Building on both Freud and Lacan, we might read Hamlet's frantic efforts to draw a clear epistemological distinction between his father and Claudius as a defense against his perception of an excessive degree of *likeness* between himself and Claudius, or, more precisely, between his desires and Claudius's. In fact, the distinctions Hamlet draws between Claudius and Old Hamlet seem no less questionable, in their hyperbole, than the distinction he draws between himself and his mother when, alluding to the simple moral system of medieval religious drama, he calls her a vice and himself a virtue. A parallel dualistic oversimplification informs his sermon-like speech on the pictures of the two kings, "The counterfeit presentment of two brothers," as he calls them:

See what a grace was seated on this brow,  
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,  
An eye like Mars to threaten and command,  
A station like the herald Mercury  
New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill (III.iv.55–9)

He doth protest too much, methinks, in this plethora of similitudes designed, as he says, to make his mother relinquish that passion which is blind to difference. Hamlet's own passion, we might say, is making him blind to similarity. His description of his father's incomparable virtue hardly accords with what the Ghost himself said to his son when he lamented having been "Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin" and "sent to my account / With all my imperfections on my head" (I.v.76–9). Nor does it accord with what Hamlet himself said in III.iii, where he described his father dying with "all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May" (81).

Hamlet's doubts about his father's character, about the Ghost's status as a figure, and about his own relation to both his father and Claudius, constitute one reason why he cannot resolve the matter of his mother or his revenge. Another and related reason is that he is too filled with disgust at female flesh to follow the path Freud describes for those who eventually emerge, however scarred, from the oedipal complex. That path leads to marriage with a woman who is not the mother. In Hamlet's case, the obvious candidate is Ophelia, whom Hamlet actually seems to prefer to his mother in the play within the play scene. "Come hither, my dear Hamlet, sit by me," says Gertrude, and Hamlet replies, "No, good mother, here's metal more attractive" (III.ii.108). The metaphor is misogynistically reductive—and ominously allied to Hamlet's pervasive concern with debased currency; nonetheless, for a moment it seems that he may find in Ophelia a matter to replace his mother. "Lady, shall I lie in your lap?" he asks, and when she says no, taking him literally, he specifies his meaning, offering to lay in her lap only that part of him which houses the higher faculties: "I mean, my head upon your lap?" "Ay, my lord," she answers; but he twists her affirmation

by indicating that his head is filled with thoughts of her—and his—lower parts: “Do you think I meant country matters?” he asks, punning on the slang term for the female genitals. “I think nothing, my lord,” Ophelia replies; and Hamlet once again bawdily literalizes her words: “That’s a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs” (III.ii.110–17). While his speeches in this dialogue seem like an invitation to sexual union (in one sense he is enticing her to realize that the matter between *his* legs is not nothing but something), the final effect of this exchange, as of all the encounters between Ophelia and Hamlet we see in this play, is to separate her from him, to push her naive love away and reduce her to incomprehension of what he later calls his “mystery.” Hamlet’s relation to Ophelia seems aptly epitomized a little later in this scene, when he leaves off interpreting the tropical ambiguities of the *Mousetrap* play being presented before them to say to her, “I could interpret between you and your love if I could see the puppets dallying” (III.ii.241–2). The role of the interpreter who stands *between* others and their loves is the role he has at once had thrust upon him by fate and which he chooses to continue to play. It is dangerous to suggest that he had any alternative, for the play notoriously foils critics who think themselves ethically or intellectually superior to this tragic hero.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, I would like to argue that the play does provide a critical perspective on Hamlet, a perspective that implies a questioning of the genre of tragedy itself more than a moral critique of the hero as an individual subject.

The critical perspective I hope to trace does not result in our feeling that Hamlet *should* have done something else at any point in the play; rather, it heightens our awareness that the drama itself is the product of certain choices which *might have been different*. Like many students of Shakespeare, I have often felt that certain of his plays strongly invite the audience to imagine how the play would go if it were written according to a different set of generic rules. Certain turns of plot are made to seem somehow *arbitrary*, and the effect of such moments is to shift our attention from the story-line to the invisible hand manipulating it; we are reminded that the dramatist’s decisions about his material are *not* wholly preordained. A strange sense of potentiality arises at such moments; we enter a metadramatic realm where movements of plot and characterization no longer seem simply given or “necessary.” The death of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* is an example of the kind of moment I have in mind; it seems so accidental, so unmotivated, that we may well wonder how the play would have turned out had he been allowed to live. The play *could* have been a comedy—as Shakespeare later explicitly indicated by including a parody of it in Act V of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Shakespeare’s tendency to blur generic boundaries throughout his career has often been remarked; but critics have not, to my knowledge, related this phenomenon to the peculiar way in which Shakespearean tragedy, in contrast to Greek or classical French examples of the genre, seems so often to imply a questioning of the necessity of casting a given story as tragedy.

The critical perspective on Hamlet—or on *Hamlet* as a “piece of work”—begins to emerge, I think, with the first death in the play, the stabbing of Polonius in the pivotal closet scene of III.iv. Here we see a darker, literalized version of Hamlet’s verbal technique of separating others’ words from their conventional meanings. That technique was dissociative but also semantically fecund; now, however, a spirit is definitively separated from its body, which becomes mere matter. “It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf,” Hamlet had punningly remarked apropos of Polonius’s fate when he played Julius Caesar in a university theatrical (III.ii.104); now, by killing Polonius, Hamlet makes the earlier insult seem prophetic; he “realizes” it, transforming the old man into a sacrificial calf on another stage. This performative mode of materializing a figure, with its grim effects of tragic irony, is what I want to call “incorpsing.”

Although the play raises all sorts of questions about the boundary between speaking and doing, in the closet scene there is no doubt that Hamlet passes from speaking daggers to using them. But he has stabbed Polonius only through a curtain—yet another figure for that position of “in betweenness” Hamlet himself is structurally bound to occupy. That curtain may also be seen, I think, as a material emblem not only for Hamlet’s ignorance of Polonius’s identity, but also for his inability to pursue a certain ethical line of interpreting the meaning of his deed. Hamlet does not inquire very deeply either here or later, when he kills Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, into the meaning of his action. This seems odd, since he has shown himself so remarkably capable of interrogating the meaning of his *inaction*. There is a thinness, even an uncharacteristic patness, to his response to his killing of Polonius: “For this same lord / I do repent,” he says, adding, “but heaven hath pleas’d it so, / To punish me with this and this with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister” (III.iv.174–7). It seems to me that the play questions this kind of self-justification, supplementing if not altogether invalidating Hamlet’s view of himself as a divinely appointed “scourge.” The questioning occurs most generally through the play’s scrutiny of kingship; kings, like divinely appointed “scourges,” may easily abuse their power by seeing themselves as heavenly instruments, beyond the authority of human laws. Shakespeare, I would argue, invites us to see that one meaning of Hamlet’s “incorpsing” activity is that through it he becomes more and more like a king—or, perhaps, like a playwright. Indeed, with the killing of Polonius—the “rat” Hamlet mistakenly takes for the king he had already symbolically caught in the *Mousetrap* play—Hamlet takes a crucial step towards occupying the place of the king as the play defines it: not in terms of an individual, but in terms of a *role* associated both with the power to kill and with the tendency to justify killing with lines of argument unavailable to lesser men. Horatio darkly suggests this in V.ii.

Hamlet has just described how he disposed of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. "They are not near my conscience," he says:

'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes  
Between the pass and fell incensed points  
Of mighty opposites. (V.ii.60–2)

"Why, what a king is this!" Horatio ambiguously exclaims or queries. Does he refer to Hamlet or to Claudius? It doesn't much matter, Shakespeare seems to say: a king is one who thinks himself capable of literally disposing of whatever comes between him and his desires.

It is no accident that Hamlet kills Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by means of a forged letter. For Claudius's letter ordering the king of England to kill Hamlet, Hamlet substitutes a letter ordering the king to kill Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He seals that letter with his father's ring, the signet or sign of royal power; Claudius of course possesses a copy of this ring, and it is worth noting that there is no difference between the *effect* of Claudius's copy and that of the original seal. Both have the power to order instant death. Communication among kings in this play would, indeed, appear to be a grim illustration of Saint Paul's dictum that the letter killeth. The play suggests, however, that it is not only the letter, but the desire to *interpret* literally, to find one single sense, that leads to murder. The Ghost that appeared "In the same figure like the King that's dead" commands Hamlet to take action by means of several equivocal and mutually contradictory phrases, including "beat it not," "Taint not thy mind," and "Remember me" (I.v.81, 85, 91); even when he reappears to whet Hamlet's almost blunted purpose, all the Ghost commands is "Do not forget" (III.iv.110). So long as Hamlet remains perplexed by the multiple potential meanings of these commands, he remains in a realm where destruction of meanings goes hand in hand with the creation of new ones: the verbal and hermeneutic realm of his puns. Unyoking words from their conventional meanings is not the same thing as unyoking bodies from spirits. In coming to resemble Claudius, Hamlet is driven to forget this distinction, and Shakespeare, I think, asks us to see the cost of this forgetting. He does so by giving the audience a letter (of sorts) that invites a radically different interpretation from those which Claudius and Hamlet take from the messages they receive from mysterious places.

Shakespeare's "letter to the audience," as I want to characterize it, appears in a passage immediately following Claudius's receipt of Hamlet's letter announcing his return—naked and alone—to the shores of Denmark (IV.vii.41–5): let me try to show why the juxtaposition of passages is significant. Claudius says that he cannot understand Hamlet's letter ("What should this mean?" he asks Laertes (IV.vii.47)); but he recognizes Hamlet's "character" in the handwriting and



proceeds quickly enough to give it a kingly interpretation. For he immediately tells Laertes of his “device” to work Hamlet’s death in a way that will appear an accident. His response to the letter—which comes, after all, from someone he believed he had sent to the country from which no traveler returns—is eerily similar to Hamlet’s response to the Ghost’s message from the land of the dead. Like Hamlet, Claudius wonders about the ambiguity of the message: “is (the letter) some abuse?” he asks Laertes (IV.vii.48), echoing Hamlet’s earlier question to himself about whether “The spirit that I have seen” is or is not a devil that “perhaps . . . / Abuses me to damn me” (II.ii.596, 599). Also like Hamlet, although much more quickly, Claudius chooses a single interpretation of the message, finding in it an incentive to kill. It hardly seems to matter whether the message comes from a spirit or a letter: the interpreter’s *decision* about its meaning creates the deadliness. But in the passage that follows, Shakespeare offers an oblique criticism of the kind of interpretive decision that the kings or would-be kings make in this play. He does so by using Claudius as the unwitting spokesman for a greater king, the one who will really win the duel in the final scene. This is the king whom Richard II describes in Act III of his play:

within the hollow crown  
That rounds the mortal temples of a king,  
Keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits  
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,  
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,  
To monarchize, be fear’d, and kill with looks;  
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,  
As if this flesh which walls about our life  
Were brass impregnable. (*Richard II*, III.ii.160–8)

With wonderful irony, Shakespeare has Claudius metaphorically describe this king of kings while *thinking* he is pursuing his own aims—devising his own plot—by manipulating Laertes’ competitive spirit to transform his rage against Claudius for Polonius’s death into anger against Hamlet. “Two months since,” Claudius says,

Here was a gentleman of Normandy—  
I have seen myself, and serv’d against, the French,  
And they can well on horseback, but this gallant  
Had witchcraft in’t. He grew unto his seat,  
And to such wondrous doing brought his horse  
As had he been incorps’d and demi-natur’d  
With the brave beast. So far he topp’d my thought  
That I in forgery of shapes and tricks  
Come short of what he did. (IV.vii.81–9)

A Norman was't?" Laertes asks, and then, in one of the subtlest nonrecognition scenes in all of Shakespeare, Laertes tells us the Norman's name: "Upon my life, Lamord" (91).<sup>14</sup> The spirit behind these letters from the text of the Second Quarto is invisible to Laertes and Claudius; it was also invisible to the compilers of the First Folio, who spelled the Frenchman's name "Lamound," and to eighteenth-century editors like Pope and Malone; the former gave the name as "Lamord," the latter, citing the phrase which describes the character as "the brooch and gem of all the nation," suggested "Lamode," fashion.<sup>15</sup> But I contend that Shakespeare meant us to hear or see the word "death" in and through the letters of this name; "Upon my life, Death," is the translation we are invited to make<sup>16</sup>—and for those who are uncertain of their French but willing to suspect that puns which depend on mere changes of letters have metaphorical significance, Shakespeare provides an English pun in the word "Norman," which is all too close for comfort to the phrase used by the gravedigger in the next scene: "What man dost thou dig it for?" Hamlet asks. "For no man, sir," is the equivocal reply (V.i.126–7).

The play offers other intratextual clues to the identity of "Lamord." Laertes' phrase "Upon my life, Lamord," echoes a phrase Horatio used in his discussion of the Ghost in I.i:

Let us impart what we have seen tonight  
 Unto young Hamlet; for *upon my life*  
*This spirit*, dumb to us, will speak to him. (I.i.174–6; my italics)

Horatio here unwittingly exposes the same eerie truth that Laertes does in Act IV: the "spirit" of Death, whether in the figure of the Ghost or in the figure of Lamord, sits upon the lives of all the characters in the play. And the scene which introduces Lamord seems deliberately designed not only to make Death's past and future presence manifest, but to link it, ominously and obscurely, to the playwright's own activities of "forging shapes," of persuading, and of creating elegiac song: immediately after Claudius successfully persuades Laertes to envenom his sword so that if he "galls" Hamlet in the duel "It may be death" (146–7), the queen enters with news of Ophelia's fate of being pulled, by her garments, from her "melodious lay / To muddy death" (181–2).

In the description of the mysterious Norman, Shakespeare paradoxically insists on the presence of Death by animating the dead metaphor in the common phrase "upon my life"; he also creates a new adjective, "incorpsed," which editors (and the *OED*, citing this line as the first use of the term) gloss as "made into one body," but which may also evoke the image of a dead body if we hear the Norman's name as "Death." The lines make us "see" Death, as it were, in a strangely materialized and emblematic figure: that of the rider sitting on—and controlling—the horse that traditionally represents human passion and ambition: "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse," Richard III famously

cries, when he is about to lose the powerful vitality that animal symbolizes.<sup>17</sup> The figure of Lamord sitting on his horse as if he were “incorps’d and deminatur’d / With the brave beast” is richly evocative, reminding us, as Harry Levin suggests, both of the apocalyptic image of Death as a rider on a “pale horse” (Revelation 6:8), and of Hamlet’s broodings on the inherently double or centaur-like nature of man, the angel and beast, the “beauty of the world” and the “quintessence of dust” combined into one “piece of work” (II.ii.307ff.).<sup>18</sup>

The description of Lamord, which I would like to see as Shakespeare’s figurative letter to the reader, is somber and mysterious, a *memento mori* admonition. But it contrasts in a curious way with the other messages and admonitions in this play; for there is all the difference in the world between a message that asks us, with the paradoxical temporality of literature and dream, to *remember* our own future death, and messages that ambiguously incite characters to kill and thereby to forget, as it were, the potential future of another. It seems to me significant, therefore, that Shakespeare uses the trope of personification—the animation of inanimate things—to describe Lamord. A premonitory and admonitory figure he certainly is—but how interestingly different from the literalized *memento mori* that appears in the next scene, in Yorick’s skull. I do not think Hamlet grasps the meaning of Yorick’s skull very completely because he so quickly forgets its implications for the fate of kings. Although seeing the skull leads him to brood on the idea that great men such as Alexander and Caesar finally become, like commoners, no more than dust to stop a bung hole, in the very next scene (V.ii.58–62) we find Hamlet still thinking of *himself* as a “mighty opposite” in a kingly war that makes humble men like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern irrelevant to conscience. Paradoxically, the death drive in Hamlet seems too strong to allow him to understand either a graphic *memento mori* such as Yorick’s skull or the more unusual, figurative one offered to the audience (but not to Hamlet) in the Lamord passage. For truly to understand a *memento mori*, one must have at least some love of life—on earth or beyond. And Hamlet lacks this love; he was speaking truly when he told Polonius that there was nothing he would prefer to lose more than Polonius’s company “except my life, except my life, except my life” (II.ii.216–17).<sup>19</sup> It is therefore appropriate that, in the description of Lamord that Hamlet can neither read nor hear, Shakespeare asks us to remember not only death, but also love and life—particularly the life of Hamlet as Ophelia remembers it from a time before the play began. Lamord, Laertes admiringly says, is “the brooch indeed / And gem of all the nation” (IV.vii.92–3); the phrasing and rhythm recall Ophelia’s description of Hamlet as “Th’expectancy and rose of the fair state, / The glass of fashion and the mould of form” (III.i.154–5).

The implied parallel between Lamord and Hamlet—not the gloomy and disheveled prince we see throughout most of the play, a man obsessed with a sense of sexual impotence, but rather a prince made present to us only through the mediation of Ophelia’s memorializing description—this parallel suggests

that there is yet another way of interpreting Lamord's name and symbolic significance. If one listens closely to his name, one may hear in it a pun not only on Death but also on Love—there is, after all, only the slightest difference in pronunciation between the French “la mort” and “l'amour”; and the Latin *amor* is contained within the Norman's name. French Renaissance poets often punned on “l'amour” and “la mort” in ways that suggest the two forces are no less “demi-natured” than Lamord and his horse.<sup>20</sup>

In a play as concerned as this one is with problems of translation, it seems quite plausible that Shakespeare would pun bilingually here no less richly than he does in the bawdy “French lesson” scene of *Henry V*. It also seems plausible that he would be particularly interested in puns that strike the reader's eye even more than the listener's ear; *Hamlet* is after all a play that broods on the relation between elite and “general” audiences, and also on the relation between written texts and dramatic performances of them.<sup>21</sup> The play on Lamord's name suggested by the Second Quarto in any case invites those of us who read *Hamlet* now, knowing all the problems presented by the existence of its different textual versions, to imagine the playwright asking of himself a question similar to the one Horatio voices in Act V, apropos of Osric's inability to understand Hamlet's parody of the inflated courtly style Osric himself uses: “Is't not possible to understand in another tongue?” (V.ii.125). Horatio's question, like so many questions in this play, is left unanswered. But even if most of Shakespeare's later readers and editors have not understand the other tongue, or tongues, spoken by the text in the Lamord passage, that passage is nonetheless significant as a kind of window that allows us briefly to look out from the dark and claustrophobic world of Hamlet to another verbal universe, one whose metaphysical economy is less depressed than the one we see in *Hamlet*. The description of Lamord, often cut in production and apparently so irrelevant to the play's plot that it is sometimes described as a “personal allusion” on Shakespeare's part,<sup>22</sup> seems to me a significant digression from the world of tragedy itself. The language of this passage is strangely foreign to *Hamlet* because here letter and spirit are joined in a message that insists on the union of life and death but does not present that union as a horror. For Hamlet, questioner of tropes and incorpser of bodies, all unions are tainted with poison, like the literal “union” (the pearl) in the cup Claudius prepares for Hamlet in the final scene. After Gertrude has mistakenly drunk from that cup and Claudius has been wounded with the envenomed sword, Hamlet ironically offers the poisoned vessel to Claudius, asking bitterly, “is thy union here? / Follow my mother” (V.ii.331–2).

There is a different perspective on unions in the personification of Lamord. Shakespeare explores that perspective more fully in some of his later plays, notably the romances; one might indeed see the passage on Lamord as a kind of prophecy of Shakespeare's later career, when he experimented with a genre characterized by “wondrous” escapes from potentially tragic plots. In the

romances, and in a play like *Antony and Cleopatra* which blurs the boundary between tragedy and romance, we find a vision of the relation between death and life that sharply contrasts with the tragic vision represented in *Hamlet*. Characters like Antony, Florizel (*The Winter's Tale*) and Ferdinand (*The Tempest*) inhabit verbal universes in which the verb "to die" often has a double meaning; and the playwright himself exploits the theatrical analogue to this pun by reminding us, as he does conspicuously in *Antony*, that actors, like lovers, may die many times and come again to life.<sup>23</sup> Antony's marvelous dialogue with Eros envisions death as a dissolving of boundaries that is more erotic than terrible, and that may well be compared to the image of Lamord "incorps'd and demi-natur'd" with his horse. "Thou hast seen these signs, / They are black vesper's pageants," Antony tells Eros after describing to him the various forms clouds take; he goes on to conjure an image that anticipates Prospero's famous "cloud-capp'd towers" speech in *The Tempest* (IV.i.148ff.). Antony says:

That which is now a horse, even with a thought  
The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct  
As water is in water. (IV.xiv.9–11)

Such a way of conceiving death allows for the possibility of new shapes rising from the dissolution of old ones; death is acknowledged but also, one might say, embraced, in a romance vision similar to the one incarnated in a dialogue in Act IV of *The Winter's Tale*. Speaking of the spring flowers she lacks (for the pastoral world of Shakespearean romance is never an Eden of timeless spring), Perdita says that if she had such flowers she would use them on her lover, "To strew him o'er and o'er." "What, like a corpse?" he asks, and she replies:

No, like a bank, for love to lie and play on:  
Not like a corpse; or if—not to be buried,  
But quick, and in mine arms. (IV.iv.130–2)

Here again is language like that in the Lamord passage, which speaks of something "incorps'd" and lively at once, the quick and the dead "demi-natur'd." In such visions there is a kind of sublime punning, an equivocation that holds life and death in solution or delicate balance. "We must speak by the card or equivocation will undo us," Hamlet says in the graveyard scene (V.i.133–4). Shakespeare, I think, infuses this statement with an irony Hamlet cannot see; for Hamlet is undone, and undoes others, not because he equivocates, but because he inhabits a world where equivocation tends, as if by a fatal entropy, to become "absolute for death." The play, however, renders its own generic drive toward death just equivocal enough to make us question the rules of tragedy.

## NOTES

I am grateful to Mac Pigman for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay. I am also grateful to the many friends and strangers who listened to this paper and criticized it constructively when it was presented in various forms at Wellesley, Smith, Vassar, Bennington, Williams and Mount Holyoke colleges, and at Brown and The Johns Hopkins universities.

1. I borrow the term “performative” from J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (1962), 2nd edn (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 5 and *passim*. Austin, however, notoriously seeks to exclude from his discussion the type of performative utterance that interests me here, namely that which occurs on a stage or in a literary text. Such performatives, he writes, “will be in a *peculiar way* hollow or void” (22, Austin’s italics).

2. All quotations from *Hamlet* and other Shakespeare plays are from the New Arden editions, general editors Harold F. Brooks, Harold Jenkins and Brian Morris (London and New York). The Arden *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, was published in 1982.

3. See Stephen Booth’s excellent discussion of the syntactic and rhetorical devices Claudius uses to achieve “equation by balance”; “On the value of *Hamlet*,” in *Reinterpretations of Elizabethan Drama*, ed. Norman Rabkin (New York, 1969), esp. 148–9.

4. Lawrence Danson, *Tragic Alphabet: Shakespeare’s Drama of Language* (New Haven and London, 1974), 27.

5. See George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge, 1936), 136. “Syllepsis” is the classical trope that corresponds most closely to the modern notion of the pun—a term that did not appear to English until the eighteenth century, according to the *OED*. Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov define syllepsis as “the use of a single word that has more than one meaning and participates in more than one syntactic construction”; they cite as an example Falstaff’s remark, from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, “At a word, hang no more about me; I am no gibbet for you” (*Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language*, tr. Catherine Porter (Baltimore, 1979), 278). I am indebted for this citation and for my general understanding of punning tropes to Jane Hedley’s unpublished essay on “Syllepsis and the problem of the Shakespeare sonnet order.”

6. Sigurd Burckhardt, *Shakespearean Meanings* (Princeton, 1968), 24–5. Burckhardt’s comment is cited in part by Danson, *op. cit.*, 27, n. 2.

7. Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague, 1956), 62; cited by Danson, *op. cit.*, 27, n. 3.

8. See, e.g., Paul de Man’s discussion of Locke’s condemnation of *catachresis*, the trope that most notoriously dramatizes the difficulty of grounding a theory of figurative language in a concept of referential correspondence between words and “reality”; “The epistemology of metaphor,” in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago and London, 1979), 11–28. Locke’s condemnation of *catachresis*, in *The Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, eventually “takes all language for its target,” de Man argues, “for at no point in the course of the demonstration can the empirical entity be sheltered from tropological deformation” (19–20).

9. On Latin as a *sermo patrius*, see my *Trials of Desire: Renaissance Defenses of Poetry* (New Haven and London, 1983), 24, and Leo Spitzer, “Muttersprache und Muttererziehung,” in *Essays in Historical Semantics* (New York, 1948), 15–65.

10. See Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (Cambridge, 1980), for a survey of Renaissance authors who adopted the Aristotelian scheme of dualities “in which one element is superior and the other inferior. The male principle in nature is associated with active, formative, and perfected characteristics, while the female is passive, material, and deprived” (8). See also Linda Woodbridge, *Woman and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womanhood, 1540–1620* (Urbana and Chicago, 1984), esp. ch. 3. It seems likely that an association between baseness, “matter,” and his mother is at work even earlier in the play, when Hamlet vows that the Ghost’s “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!” (I.v.102–5). Cf. Avi Erlich’s comments about this passage in *Hamlet’s Absent Father* (Princeton, 1977), 218.

11. Freud’s famous discussion of Hamlet as a “hysteric” whose guilt about his own repressed oedipal wishes prevents him from taking vengeance “on the man who did away with his father and took that father’s place with his mother” was originally published as a footnote to ch. 5 of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900); from 1914 onward the passage was included in the text. See *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et al., 4 (London, 1953), 264–6. See also Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (Garden City, 1949). But see also, for a critique of the “Freud–Jones” interpretation and a discussion of other psychoanalytic readings of *Hamlet*, Theodore Lidz, *Hamlet’s Enemy: Madness and Myth in “Hamlet”* (New York, 1975), esp. 9–13, 184–6.

12. Jacques Lacan, “Desire and the interpretation of desire in *Hamlet*,” tr. James Hulbert, French text ed. Jacques-Alain Miller from transcripts of Lacan’s seminar, in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (*Yale French Studies*, 55–6 (1977), 11–52). The mention of *dénégation* occurs on p. 50; my explanation of the term draws on the translator’s note 6. I should observe, however, that Lacan’s analysis departs from Freud’s, or rather claims to “shed light on what Freud [had to] . . . leave out” (48), by interpreting the play with reference to the Lacanian theory of the “phallus.” The fundamental reason why Hamlet cannot raise his arm against Claudius, Lacan argues, is that “he knows that he must strike something other than what’s there” (51). That “something other” is the phallus, the symbolic object which, for Lacan, signifies “the law of the father,” and which cannot be mastered by the individual subject because it is an effect of repression and of one’s insertion into a cultural system of meaning. “[O]ne cannot strike the phallus,” Lacan asserts, “because the phallus, even the real phallus, is a *ghost*” (50).

13. Many critics have succumbed to the temptation to reproach Hamlet for incompetence (Bradley) or for possessing “a moral sensibility inferior to our own,” as Helen Gardner characterizes T. S. Eliot’s rebuke to Hamlet for “dying fairly well pleased with himself” despite the fact that he has made “a pretty considerable mess of things” (“The stoicism of Shakespeare and Seneca,” cited in Gardner’s useful survey of the problems critics have encountered in trying to find ethical or logical “consistency” in the drama; see her chapter on “The historical approach: *Hamlet*,” in *The Business of Criticism* (Oxford, 1959), 35–51).

14. The Norman’s name is spelled “Lamord” in the Second Quarto and in many modern editions of the play, e.g. the Arden, the Signet, the Riverside; the entire passage is absent from the First (“Bad”) Quarto.

15. See the variants and notes for IV.vii.93 in the New Variorum *Hamlet*, ed. H. H. Furness, 5th edn (Philadelphia, 1877), I, 363. The Variorum itself prints the name as “Lamond.”

16. Although most modern editors who use the Second Quarto’s spelling of the name do so without explaining their choice, Harold Jenkins in the New Arden edition does comment on his decision, suggesting that “the name of the ‘wondrous’ messenger (91) is a presage of fatality” and is most plausibly interpreted as a play on “La Mort” (see his note to IV.vii.91, p. 369, and his longer note about the passage on 543–4). To the best of my knowledge, Harry Levin is the only other modern commentator who has devoted much attention to the passage; in *The Question of Hamlet* (New York, 1959), Levin discusses the “easily possible slip of typography or pronunciation” that would make “La Mort” into the Second Quarto’s “Lamord” (95).

17. The common Renaissance allegorization of the horse as a symbol for those passions which need to be controlled by reason (figured in the rider or driver) frequently harks back to Plato’s image of the soul as a charioteer with two winged horses (*Phaedrus*, 246–8). Shakespeare uses the horse as a figure for uncontrolled anger in *2 Henry IV*, I.i.9–11, and again in *Henry VIII*, I.i.133.

18. See Levin, *op. cit.*, 95; see also Harold Jenkins’s editorial comment (*op. cit.*, 544) that the description of Lamord recalls the image of Claudius as a satyr (I.ii.140) and “kindred animal images, even while the horseman, in contrast with the satyr, is invested with a splendour of which no touch is ever given to Claudius.”

19. Cf. Lacan’s remarks on Hamlet’s rejection of Ophelia once she becomes, in his eyes, “the childbearer to every sin”; she is then “the phallus, exteriorized and rejected by the subject as a symbol signifying life” (Lacan, *op. cit.*, 23).

20. My favorite example, for which I am indebted to Joseph Shork, of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, is the following:

Amour en latin faict amor;  
Or donc provient d’amour la mort,  
Et par avant, soulcy qui mord,  
Deuils, plours, pieges, forfaitz, remords.

Stendhal uses this *blason* as an epigraph to chapter 15 of *Le Rouge et le Noir*. I have been unable to locate a Renaissance source for this epigraph and it may of course have been composed by Stendhal himself; nonetheless, “se non è vero, è ben trovato.” Its play on “mordre” as “to bite” makes it a particularly apt gloss on the Lamord passage, since one editor of *Hamlet*, Edward Dowden, connects the Second Quarto’s Lamord with the French *mords*, a horse’s bit. For simpler examples of wordplay on love and death in sixteenth-century French poetry, see *Poètes du XVIe siècle*, ed. Albert-Marie Schmidt (Paris, 1953), 725 (Jodelle’s *Les Amours*, Sonnet 35), and 827, 823, 820 (poems from Philippe Desportes’s *Les Amours d’Hippolyte*).

21. For whatever reasons—one possibly having to do with the complex publication and production history of *Hamlet* in Shakespeare’s own lifetime—the play emphasizes the difference between written scripts and actors’ versions of them in a way unique in Shakespeare’s canon; see, e.g., Hamlet’s remark to the Player in II.ii.430–1 apropos the speech that “was never acted” (“’twas caviare to the general”) and his later directive, again addressed to the Player, that “your clowns speak no more than is set down for them” (III.ii.38–9). The play is also unusually full of references to books, tablets, letters, and forgeries of written texts; some critics have



suspected that Hamlet's letter to Ophelia (II.ii.109ff.) is a forgery by Polonius. For a discussion of the theme of writing in the play, see Daniel Sibony, "Hamlet: a writing effect" (*Yale French Studies*, 55–6 (1977), 53–93). On other passages in the text that contain bi- and trilingual puns, see Lidz, *op. cit.*, 23–5.

22. As Harold Jenkins notes (*Arden Hamlet*, 369), a number of editors have suggested a "personal allusion" in the passage to the cavalier in Castiglione's *The Courtier* named Pietro Monte (rendered by Hoby in his Tudor translation as Peter Mount; cf. the Folio's "Lamound"). I do not dispute the idea of an esoteric allusion; I am simply arguing what can never be definitively proved, that an allusion to Death is more plausible.

23. See, for examples of erotic puns on "die," *Antony and Cleopatra*, I.ii.138–42 and IV.xv.38–9; *The Tempest*, III.i.79–84.



### 1986—Harold Bloom, "Introduction" from *Hamlet* (Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations)

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The last we see of Hamlet at the court in Act IV is his exit for England:

HAMLET: For England?

CLAUDIUS: Ay, Hamlet.

HAMLET: Good.

CLAUDIUS: So is it, if thou knew'st our purposes.

HAMLET: I see a cherub that sees them. But come, for England!

Farewell, dear mother.

CLAUDIUS: Thy loving father, Hamlet.

HAMLET: My mother: father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh—so my mother. Come, for England!

*Exit*

It is a critical commonplace to assert that the Hamlet of Act V is a changed man: mature rather than youthful, certainly quieter, if not quietistic, and somehow more attuned to divinity. Perhaps the truth is that he is at last himself, no longer

afflicted by mourning and melancholia, by murderous jealousy and incessant rage. Certainly he is no longer haunted by his father's ghost. It may be that the desire for revenge is fading in him. In all of Act V he does not speak once of his dead father directly. There is a single reference to "my father's signet" which serves to seal up the doom of those poor schoolfellows, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and there is the curious phrasing of "my king" rather than "my father" in the halfhearted rhetorical question the prince addresses to Horatio:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon—  
He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my mother,  
Popp'd in between th'election and my hopes,  
Thrown out his angle for my proper life  
And with such coz'nage—is't not perfect conscience  
To quit him with this arm?

When Horatio responds that Claudius will hear shortly from England, presumably that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been executed, Hamlet rather ambiguously makes what might be read as a final vow of revenge:

It will be short. The interim is mine.  
And a man's life's no more than to say "one."

However this is to be interpreted, Hamlet forms no plot, and is content with a wise passivity, knowing that Claudius must act. Except for the scheme of Claudius and Laertes, we and the prince might be confronted by a kind of endless standoff. What seems clear is that the urgency of the earlier Hamlet has gone. Instead, a mysterious and beautiful disinterestedness dominates this truer Hamlet, who compels a universal love precisely because he is beyond it, except for its exemplification by Horatio. What we overhear is an ethos so original that we still cannot assimilate it:

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting  
That would not let me sleep. Methought I lay  
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes. Rashly—  
And prais'd be rashness for it: let us know  
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well  
When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us  
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will—

Weakly read, that divinity is Jehovah, but more strongly “ends” here are not our intentions but rather our fates, and the contrast is between a force that can *shape* stone, and our wills that only hew roughly against implacable substance. Nor would a strong reading find Calvin in the echoes of the Gospel of Matthew as Hamlet sets aside his own: “Thou wouldst not think how ill all’s here about my heart.” In his heart, there is again a kind of fighting, but the readiness, rather than the ripeness, is now all:

Not a whit. We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is’t to leave betimes? Let be.

The apparent nihilism more than negates the text cited from Matthew, yet the epistemological despair does not present itself as despair, but as an achieved serenity. Above all else, these are not the accents of an avenger, or even of someone who still mourns, or who continues to suffer the selfish virtues of the natural heart. Not nihilism but authentic disinterestedness, and yet what is that? No Elizabethan lore, no reading in Aristotle, or even in Montaigne, can help to answer that question. We know the ethos of disinterestedness only because we know Hamlet. Nor can we hope to know Hamlet any better by knowing Freud. The dead father indeed was, during four acts, more powerful than even the living one could be, but by Act V the dead father is not even a numinous shadow. He is merely a precursor, Hamlet the Dane before this one, and this one matters much more. The tragic hero in Shakespeare, at his most universally moving, is a representation so original that conceptually *he contains us*, and fashions our psychology of motives permanently. Our map or general theory of the mind may be Freud’s, but Freud, like all the rest of us, inherits the representation of mind, at its most subtle and excellent, from Shakespeare. Freud could say that the aim of all life was death, but not that readiness is all.

Originality in regard to Shakespeare is a bewildering notion, because we have no rival to set him against. “The originals are not original,” Emerson liked to remark, but he withdrew that observation in respect to Shakespeare. If Shakespeare had a direct precursor it had to be Marlowe, who was scarcely six months older. Yet, in comparison to Shakespeare, Marlowe represents persons only by caricature. The Chaucer who could give us the Pardoner or the Wife of Bath appears to be Shakespeare’s only authentic English precursor, if we forget the English renderings of the Bible. Yet we do not take our psychology from Chaucer or even from the Bible. Like Freud himself, we owe our psychology to Shakespeare. Before Shakespeare, representations in literature may change *as* they speak, but they do not change *because* of what they say. Shakespearean representation turns upon his persons listening to themselves simultaneously with our listening, and learning and changing even as we learn and change.

Falstaff delights himself as much as he delights us, and Hamlet modifies himself by studying his own modifications. Ever since, Falstaff has been the inescapable model for nearly all wit, and Hamlet the paradigm for all introspection. When Yorick's skull replaces the helmeted ghost, then the mature Hamlet has replaced the self-chastising revenger, and a different sense of death's power over life has been created, and in more than a play or a dramatic poem:

HAMLET: To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till a find it stopping a bung-hole?

HORATIO: 'Twere to consider too curiously to consider so.

HAMLET: No, faith, not a jot, but to follow him thither with modesty enough, and likelihood to lead it.

Probability leads possibility, likelihood beckons imagination on, and Alexander is essentially a surrogate for the dead father, the Danish Alexander. Passionately reductive, Hamlet would consign his own dust to the same likelihood, but there we part from him, with Horatio as our own surrogate. Hamlet's unique praise of Horatio sets forever the paradigm of the Shakespearean reader or playgoer in relation to the Shakespearean tragic hero:

Dost thou hear?

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice,  
And could of men distinguish her election,  
Sh'ath seal'd thee for herself; for thou hast been  
As one, in suff'ring all, that suffers nothing ...

Which means, not that Horatio and the reader do not suffer with Hamlet, but rather that truly they suffer nothing precisely because they learn from Hamlet the disinterestedness they themselves cannot exemplify, though in possibility somehow share. And they survive, to tell Hamlet's story "of accidental judgments" not so accidental and perhaps not judgments, since disinterestedness does not judge, and there are no accidents.

Only Hamlet, at the last, is disinterested, since the hero we see in Act V, despite his protestations, is now beyond love, which is not to say that he never loved Gertrude, or Ophelia, or the dead father, or poor Yorick for that matter. Hamlet is an actor? Yes, earlier, but not in Act V, where he has ceased also to be a play director, and finally even abandons the profession of poet. Language, so dominant as such in the earlier Hamlet, gives almost the illusion of transparency in his last speech, if only because he verges upon saying what cannot be said:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,  
That are but mutes or audience to this act,

Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death,  
 Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you—  
 But let it be.

Evidently he does know something of what he leaves, and we ache to know what he could tell us, since it is Shakespeare's power to persuade us that Hamlet has gained a crucial knowledge. One clue is the abiding theatrical trope of "but mutes or audience," which suggests that the knowledge is itself "of" illusion. But the trope is framed by two announcements to Horatio and so to us—"I am dead"—and no other figure in Shakespeare seems to stand so authoritatively on the threshold between the worlds of life and death. When the hero's last speech moves between "O, I die, Horatio" and "the rest is silence," there is a clear sense again that much more might be said, concerning our world and not the "undiscovered country" of death. The hint is that Hamlet could tell us something he has learned about the nature of representation, because he has learned what it is that he himself represents.

Shakespeare gives Fortinbras the last word on this, but that word is irony, since Fortinbras represents only the formula of repetition: like father, like son. "The soldier's music and the rite of war" speak loudly for the dead father, but not for this dead son, who had watched the army of Fortinbras march past to gain its little patch of ground and had mused that: "Rightly to be great / Is not to stir without great argument." The reader's last word has to be Horatio's, who more truly than Fortinbras has Hamlet's dying voice: "and from his mouth whose voice will draw on more," which only in a minor key means draw more supporters to the election of Fortinbras. Horatio represents the audience, while Fortinbras represents all the dead fathers.

We love Hamlet, then, for whatever reasons Horatio loves him. Of Horatio we know best that what distinguishes him from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and indeed from Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, and Gertrude, is that Claudius *cannot use him*. Critics have remarked upon Horatio's ambiguously shifting status at the court of Denmark, and the late William Empson confessed a certain irritation at Hamlet's discovery of virtues in Horatio that the prince could not find in himself. Yet Shakespeare gives us a Hamlet we must love while knowing our inferiority, since he has the qualities we lack, and so he also gives us Horatio, our representative, who loves so stoically for the rest of us. Horatio is loyal, and limited; skeptical as befits a fellow student of the profoundly skeptical Hamlet, yet never skeptical about Hamlet. Take Horatio out of the play, and you take us out of the play. The plot could be rearranged to spare the wretched Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, even to spare Laertes, let alone Fortinbras, but remove Horatio, and Hamlet becomes so estranged from us that we scarcely can hope to account for that universality of appeal which is his, and the play's, most original characteristic.

Horatio, then, represents by way of our positive association with him; it is a commonplace, but not less true for that, to say that Hamlet represents by negation. I think this negation is Biblical in origin, which is why it seems so Freudian to us, because Freudian negation is Biblical and not Hegelian, as it were. Hamlet is Biblical rather than Homeric or Sophoclean. Like the Hebrew hero confronting Yahweh, Hamlet needs to be everything in himself yet knows the sense in which he is nothing in himself. What Hamlet takes back from repression is returned only cognitively, never affectively, so that in him thought is liberated from its sexual past, but at the high expense of a continued and augmenting sense of sexual disgust. And what Hamlet at first loves is what Biblical and Freudian man loves: the image of authority, the dead father, and the object of the dead father's love, who is also the object of Claudius' love. When Hamlet matures, or returns fully to himself, he transcends the love of authority, and ceases to love at all, and perhaps he can be said to be dying throughout all of Act V, and not just in the scene of the duel.

In Freud, we love authority, but authority does not love us in return. Nowhere in the play are we told, by Hamlet or by anyone else, of the love of the dead king for his son, but only for Gertrude. That Hamlet hovers always beyond our comprehension must be granted, yet he is not so far beyond as to cause us to see him with the vision of Fortinbras, rather than the vision of Horatio. We think of him not necessarily as royal, but more as noble, in the archaic sense of "noble" which is to be a seeing soul. It is surely no accident that Horatio is made to emphasize the word "noble" in his elegy for Hamlet, which contrasts angelic song to "the soldier's music" of Fortinbras. As a noble or seeing heart, Hamlet indeed sees feelingly. Short of T. S. Eliot's judgment that the play is an aesthetic failure, the oddest opinion in the *Hamlet* criticism of our time was that of W. H. Auden in his Ibsen essay, "Genius and Apostle," which contrasts Hamlet as a mere actor to Don Quixote as the antithesis of an actor:

Hamlet lacks faith in God and in himself. Consequently he must define his existence in terms of others, e.g., I am the man whose mother married his uncle who murdered his father. He would like to become what the Greek tragic hero is, a creature of situation. Hence his inability to act, for he can only "act," i.e., play at possibilities.

Harold Goddard, whose *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (1951) seems to me still the most illuminating single book on Shakespeare, remarked that, "Hamlet is his own Falstaff." In Goddard's spirit, I might venture the formula that Brutus plus Falstaff equals Hamlet, though "equals" is hardly an accurate word here. A better formula was proposed by A. C. Bradley, when he suggested that Hamlet was the only Shakespearean character whom we could think had written Shakespeare's plays. Goddard built on this by saying of Shakespeare: "He is an unfallen

Hamlet.” From a scholarly or any Formalist perspective, Goddard’s aphorism is not criticism, but neither historical research nor Formalist modes of criticism have helped us much in learning to describe the unassimilated originality that Shakespearean representation still constitutes. Because we are formed by Shakespeare, paradoxically most fully where we cannot assimilate him, we are a little blinded by what might be called the originality of this originality. Only a few critics (A. D. Nuttall among them) have seen that the central element in this originality is its cognitive power. Without Shakespeare (and the Bible as his precursor text) we would not know of a literary representation that worked so as to compel “reality” (be it Platonic or Humean, Hegelian or Freudian) to reveal aspects of itself we previously could not discern. Such a representation cannot be considered antimimetic or an effect of language alone.

One way, by no means unproductive, of accounting for the force of Shakespearean representation is to see it as the supreme instance of what the late Paul de Man called a poetics of modernity, of a revisionism of older literary conventions that at once subsumed and cancelled the illusions always present in all figurative language. Howard Felperin, working in de Man’s mode, adroitly reads Macbeth’s “modernity” as the dilemma of a figure totally unable to take his own nature for granted: “He cannot quite rest content in an action in which his role and his nature are determined in advance, but must continuously reinvent himself in the process of acting them out.” In such a view, Macbeth is a strong misreading of a figure like Herod in the old morality plays. I would go further and suggest that the drama *Macbeth* is an allusive triumph over more formidable precursors, just as *King Lear* is. The Shakespearean Sublime, too strong to find agonists in Seneca or in the native tradition (even in Marlowe), and too remote from Athenian drama to feel its force, confronts instead the Sublime of the Bible. What breaks loose in the apocalyptic cosmos of *Macbeth* or of *Lear* is an energy of the abyss or the original chaos that is ignored in the priestly first chapter of Genesis, but which wars fiercely against Jehovah in crucial passages of Job, the Psalms, and Isaiah. To subsume and supersede the Bible could not have been the conscious ambition of Shakespeare, but if we are to measure the preternatural energies of *Macbeth* or of *Lear*, then we will require Job or Isaiah or certain Psalms as the standard of measurement.

What is the advance, cognitive and figurative, that Shakespearean representation achieves over Biblical depiction? The question is absurdly difficult, yet anything but meaningless. If Shakespeare has a true Western rival, then he is either the Yahwist, the Hebrew Bible’s great original, or the Homer of the *Iliad*. Can there be an advance over Jacob or Achilles as representations of reality, whatever that is taken to be? What the question reduces to is the unanswerable: can there be advances in reality? The arts, as Hazlitt insisted, are not progressive, and if reality is, then its progression suspiciously resembles a speeding up of what Freud called the death drive. Reality testing, like the reality principle, is Freud’s

only transcendentalism, his last vestige of Platonism. Freud's own originality, as deeply sensed, tends to evaporate when brought too near either to the originality of the Yahwist or to the originality of Shakespeare. This may be the true cause of the disaster that is *Moses and Monotheism*, and of Freud's own passion for the lunatic thesis that Shakespeare's plays were written by the Earl of Oxford.

By Nietzsche's genealogical test for the memorable, which is cognitive pain, Job is no more nor less forgettable than *Macbeth* or *Lear*. The rhetorical economy of Job's wife, in her one appearance, unmatched even out of context, is overwhelming within context, and may have set for Shakespeare one of the limits of representation:

So went Satan forth from the presence of the Lord, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown.

And he took him a potsherd to scrape himself withal; and he sat down among the ashes.

Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? Curse God, and die.

Lear's Queen, the mother of Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia, had she survived to accompany her husband onto the heath, hardly could have said more in less. In Shakespeare's tragedies there are moments of compressed urgency that represent uncanny yet persuasive change with Biblical economy. The dying Edmund sees the bodies of Goneril and Regan brought in, and belatedly turns his lifetime about in four words: "Yet Edmund was belov'd." The phrase is a vain attempt to countermand his own order for the murder of Cordelia. "Yet Edmund was belov'd"—though loved by two fiends, the shock of knowing he *was* loved, unto death, undoes "mine own nature." One thinks of Hamlet's "Let be" that concludes his "We defy augury" speech, as he goes into the trap of Claudius' last plot. "Let be" epitomizes what I have called "disinterestedness," though Horatio's word "noble" may be more apt. That laconic "Let be," repeated as "Let it be" in Hamlet's death speech, is itself a kind of catastrophe creation, even as it marks another phase in Hamlet's release from what Freud called the family romance, and even as it compels another transference for our veneration to Hamlet. Catastrophe creation, family romance, transference: these are the stigmata and consequently the paradigms for imaginative originality in the Bible and, greatly shadowed, in Freud, and I suggest now that they can be useful paradigms for the apprehension of originality in Shakespeare's tragic representations. The fantasy of rescuing the mother from degradation is palpable in Hamlet; less palpable and far more revelatory is the sense in which the prince has molded himself into a pragmatic changeling. The ghost is armed for war, and Hamlet, grappling with Laertes in the graveyard, accurately warns Laertes (being to that extent his father's son) that as the prince he has something dangerous in him. But



is Hamlet psychically ever armed for war? Claudius, popping in between the election and Hamlet's hopes, could have shrewdly pled more than his nephew's youth and inexperience while properly arguing that his own nature was better qualified for the throne. Hamlet, in the graveyard, shocked back from beyond affect, accurately indicates whose true son he first became as changeling:

Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now—how abhorred in my imagination it is. My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft . . .

Harry Levin, for whom strong misreading is not serendipity but misfortune, advises us that "Hamlet without *Hamlet* has been thought about all too much." One might reply, in all mildness, that little memorable has been written about *Hamlet* that does not fall into the mode of "Hamlet without *Hamlet*." Far more even than *Lear* or *Macbeth*, the play is the figure; the question of *Hamlet* only can be Hamlet. He does not move in a Sublime cosmos, and truly has no world except himself, which would appear to be what he has learned in the interim between Acts IV and V. Changelings who move from fantasy to fact are possible only in romance, and alas Shakespeare wrote the tragedy of Hamlet, and not the romance of Hamlet instead. But the originality of Shakespearean representation in tragedy, and particularly in *Hamlet*, hardly can be overstressed. Shakespeare's version of the family romance always compounds it with two other paradigms for his exuberant originality: with a catastrophe that creates and with a carrying across from earlier ambivalences within the audience to an ambivalence that is a kind of taboo settling in about the tragic hero like an aura. At the close of *Hamlet*, only Horatio and Fortinbras are survivors. Fortinbras presumably will be another warrior-king of Denmark. Horatio does not go home with us, but vanishes into the aura of Hamlet's afterlight, perhaps to serve as witness of Hamlet's story over and over again. The hero leaves us with a sense that finally he has fathered himself, that he was beyond our touch though not beyond our affections, and that the catastrophes he helped provoke have brought about, not a new creation, but a fresh revelation of what was latent in reality but not evident without his own disaster.

As a coda, I return to my earlier implication that Shakespearean originality is the consequence of diction or a will over language changing his characters, and not of language itself. More than any other writer, Shakespeare is able to exemplify how meaning gets started rather than just renewed. Auden remarked that Falstaff is free of the superego; there is no over-I or above-I for that triumph of wit. Nietzsche, attempting to represent a man without a superego, gave us Zarathustra, a mixed achievement in himself, but a very poor representation when read side by side with Falstaff. Falstaff or Zarathustra? No conceivable reader would choose the Nietzschean rather than the Shakespearean over-man.

Falstaff indeed *is* how meaning gets started: by excess, overflow, emanation, contamination, the will to life. Zarathustra is a juggler of perspectives, a receptive will to interpretation. Poor Falstaff ends in tragedy; his catastrophe is his dreadfully authentic love for Hal. Zarathustra loves only a trope, the solar trajectory, and essentially is himself a trope; he is Nietzsche's metalepsis or transumption of the philosophical tradition. A Formalist critic would say that Falstaff is a trope also, a gorgeous and glowing hyperbole. Say rather that Falstaff is a representation, in himself, of how meaning gets started, of how invention is accomplished and manifested. But we remember Falstaff as we want to remember him, triumphant in the tavern, and not rejected in the street. We remember Hamlet as he wanted us to remember him, as Horatio remembers him, without having to neglect his end. Perhaps Hamlet is a representation, in himself, not just of how meaning gets started, but also of how meaning itself is invention, of how meaning refuses to be deferred or to be ended. Perhaps again that is why we can imagine Hamlet as the author of *Hamlet*, as the original we call Shakespeare.



### 1987—Graham Bradshaw. “*Hamlet and the Art of Grafting*,” from *Shakespeare’s Scepticism*

Graham Bradshaw is a professor of English at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland who rejects much of the criticism offered by “new historicist” and “cultural materialist” readers of Shakespeare. Bradshaw’s books include *Shakespeare’s Scepticism* and *Misrepresentations: Shakespeare and the Materialists* (1993). He also serves as an editor for the *Shakespearean International Yearbook*.

We are to think, apparently, that Shakespeare wrote a play which was extremely successful at the time (none more so, to judge by the references) and continued to hold the stage, and yet that nearly two hundred years had to go by before anyone had even a glimmering of what it was about. This is a good story, but it is rather too magical.

William Empson, ‘*Hamlet When New*’

### The Problem of the problem

I take it that Empson is right: because it took so long for *Hamlet* to seem in any serious sense a ‘problem’ we must confront the problem of the problem. One

bibliography of *Hamlet* criticism records that 2,167 items of one kind or another appeared between 1877 and 1935; since later critics have not been more reticent there have been several critical studies of *Hamlet* criticism, notably those by Morris Weitz and Paul Gottschalk. In the case of *King Lear* there is at least a received reading to think from or against: as A. L. French observes, testily, it was adumbrated by Dowden, reached full explicitness in Bradley, is developed by Traversi, Danby, Heilman, L. C. Knights, G. I. Duthie and Kenneth Muir, and is 'generally associated with a sort of unctuous religiosity which I, for one, find most distasteful in itself as well as absurdly inappropriate to the spirit of Shakespeare's play' (144). There is also, as I shall argue, a received reading of *Macbeth*, in which critics repeatedly make just that 'interpretative leap' to an externalised moral and spiritual Order which the play—terrifyingly—refuses to make. Yet in the case of *Hamlet* the staggering proliferation of conflicting, utterly incompatible readings makes it desperately hard even to agree on what the critically relevant *questions* are.

Eighteenth-century critics barely discussed that 'melancholy' which figures so prominently in almost any Romantic account of the play that one can think of. Even if we were so perverse as to want to read Hamlet as though Goethe and Mackenzie, Turgenev and Freud had never existed we still could not do so, any more than we can see what our grandparents saw in photographs of our parents as children—the intervening writers have shaped the sensibilities we bring to *Hamlet*. Trying, like Stoll, Schücking or Lily Campbell, to cut out the intervening commentary by seeing the play in strictly 'Elizabethan' terms is *unhistorical* as well as aesthetically impossible: the Elizabethan audience was no monolithic entity, and, as Empson drily observes, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as in our own, men killed each other because they thought differently about matters large and small. The *Scrutiny* critics lambasted Bradley for reading plays as though they were novels, but the essays by Leavis and others on 'The Novel as Dramatic Poem' shows that *their* idea of how the greatest novelists should be read actually corresponds with their view of Shakespeare. Two familiar examples may suggest a yet more unnerving general reflection: that the most vital and original thinking about *Hamlet* has tended to appear in those very interpretations that seem off-beat, maverick, partial and perverse. And the examples will also help me to formulate what I take to be the two crucial questions we must ask about this play.

Ernest Jones's notorious psychoanalytical account explains Hamlet's unconscious repugnance for his task in terms of the so-called Oedipal process. After assuming the existence, and universality, of this process, Jones argues that Hamlet's Oedipal feelings are reactivated by Claudius's crime: 'through Claudius Hamlet has vicariously accomplished the Oedipal feat of murdering his father and marrying his mother', and the supposedly 'unconscious' disturbance that follows *explains* Hamlet's near-paralysis. Jones does not explain how a marriage may be 'vicarious', or why all of Hamlet's references to his father are loving—save by his

argument that Shakespeare himself was suffering from a repressed but reactivated Oedipal process that made *him* 'unconscious of what the play projects'. It readily follows that any reader who is unable to accept so many assumptions about Hamlet's, Shakespeare's and the universal human condition must be similarly disabled: arguments of this kind are satisfying, and bad, precisely because they discount contrary evidence and are not open to refutation.

Yet Jones made a crucial contribution to our thinking about *Hamlet*: as A. J. A. Waldock points out in his book on the play, earlier critics had never attended so closely to the play's 'sexual quality'. Hamlet's nausea in the first soliloquy is markedly sexual, like his appalled and appalling fascination with what goes on in an 'unseamed bed', with his mother's 'honying and making love / Over the nasty Styne'; a woman is involved—Ophelia, Gertrude, 'Hecuba'—each time he loses control; and later critics have repeatedly recognised that these things are there in the text. Where and how far we go in pursuing them is another matter, but we are forever indebted to Jones for making us look and see.

Similarly, we might argue that every chapter of Wilson Knight's *The Wheel of Fire* is perverse and unacceptable, but contains insights so vital that in comparison, sober and judicious critics appear to be marking time. Knight argues that *Hamlet* is centred on a metaphoric conflict between life and death, good and evil, health and disease—all familiar enough, save that for Knight it is Hamlet who represents death, evil and disease: 'Except for the original murder of Hamlet's father, the *Hamlet* universe is one of health and robust life, good nature, humour, romantic strength, and welfare; against this background is the figure of Hamlet pale with the consciousness of death' (32). 'He is the ambassador of death amid life'; the Court and Claudius symbolise humanity—'with all its failings it is true'—but whereas they have failings, Hamlet is radically sick. Knight does not explain what distinguishes sickness from mere, ordinary human failings like murder or incest, and of course the obvious objection to his extended metaphor is (as Francis Fergusson and others have complained) that it is the wrong way round. Hamlet is (or at any rate was) healthy, while the Court's 'life' is founded on deception, intrigue, murder and (less clearly, I think) incest. And, even if we feel that Wilson Knight or D. H. Lawrence (whose somewhat similar view of 'Amleto' appears in *Twilight in Italy*) have some excuse to find Hamlet repellent, he plainly cannot be regarded only as a symbol of death: there is more, indeed rather a lot, to him: he likes plays, for instance, just as Mark Antony likes fishing.

Yet if we glance back, and across the Channel, we find that there was a long preparation for what looks at first like a sudden reversal of the accepted English wisdom about Hamlet. In France at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Châteaubriand was alarmed by the new 'leaning towards Shakespeare': 'In the English, it is simply ignorance; in us, it is depravity'—of a kind which not even Ophelia's 'ravishing ideality' could excuse. Yet the great master of the

unideal ravishing or *fiasco* gave his characteristically candid testimony on the spreading of this rot: by the age of nineteen, Stendhal confesses, he spent 'more time thinking about *Hamlet* and *Le Misanthrope* than about real life'; and by the 1830s Hamlet had possessed Paris and obsessed artists as unlike as Musset, Delacroix and Berlioz. The reaction—not only to *Hamlet*, but to the native traditions—followed. By 1871 Taine could describe the history of Hamlet as 'the story of a moral poisoning', and by the end of the century Hamlet was being transformed into a peculiarly French, *fin-de-siècle* dandy, who seemed to have studied Schopenhauer and Villiers de l'Isle Adam in Wittenberg. Mallarmé is fascinated by the way in which Hamlet makes the real world of Elsinore seem unreal, and 'effaces the too clearly defined beings about him by the disquieting or funereal invasion of his presence', moving through his play as 'the dark presence of the doubter'. Laforgue's Hamlet is an artist beset by 'universal nausea': his sterile promontory has a geographical location and psychological landmark in the artist-hero's lonely tower, which has at its base all the rotting refuse from the palace greenhouses (rather as if Shakespeare's Hamlet had to supervise the palace laundry), and Ophelia is a little 'upstart' who writes her letters on heavy, expensive paper, so that when our neurasthenic hero tears them up his delicate fingertips smart.

In Germany, we need only compare Schlegel's early 'Etwas über William Shakespeare, bei Gelegenheit Wilhelm Meisters' (1796: this essay still awaits an English translation) with the 1808 Vienna lectures to see how his Hamlet is becoming more crooked and dangerous, less like Goethe's and perhaps more like Goethe. And Turgenev was evidently influenced by Schlegel in his magnificent essay on 'Hamlet and Don Quixote' (1860), where he writes of Hamlet's 'sickly inanity': 'What does Hamlet represent?—Analysis, first of all, and egotism . . . Hamlet embodies the doctrine of negation'. Here too there was a movement away from the early Romantic Hamlet of Mackenzie and Goethe—from the Werther-like Man of Feeling who only lacks the strength of nerve which forms a hero. Rebecca West pleaded in vain with her Yugoslav friends that the Hamlet they described was more like Goncharov's Oblomov—and just how much *Hamlet* mattered as an influence on Russian literature is very pregnantly suggested by a note in Grigori Kozintsev's diary, which was printed in *Shakespeare: Time and Conscience*: 'Hamlet is Lermontovian in the "Mouse-trap" scene, and Pushkinian at the end' (267). In Russia Hamlet was assimilated to the idea of the 'superfluous man', was associated with Onegin and Pechorin, with Turgenev's 'Hamlet of the Schigrov District' and Saltykov-Schedrin's 'Hamlet of Krutogor Province'. By the 1880s the changing view of Hamlet was informed—as in France and Germany—by changing views of the native tradition: Chekhov's Ivanov is disgusted with himself for becoming 'a sort of Hamlet, a Manfred'. By the 1890s Mikhailovski took a morally muscular view of Hamlet as 'an idler and a milquetoast, and from this angle, idlers and milquetoasts can recognise

themselves in him'. Oddly enough, the wheel would come full circle in Soviet Russia when the nobly introspective Prince finally reappears transformed into the Christ-like, self-sacrificing hero of Pasternak's various versions of *Hamlet* and his poems which refer to Hamlet. Such a transformation could be managed only by glossing over or omitting uncongenial Shakespearean matter, especially those frightening images of internal corruption and the hints that Hamlet's mind *has* been 'tainted' by things rank and gross in nature.

This is a mere sampling, culled from LeWinter's *Shakespeare in Europe*, Eleanor Rowe's *Hamlet: A Window on Russia*, and the works already mentioned; and plainly the net could be cast wider. But it is not a very long step from Turgenev's embodiment of 'negation' or Mallarmé's dark presence of the doubter to Wilson Knight and Lawrence: it seems longer than it should because the English criticism in the century that separates Coleridge from Bradley and Wilson Knight is so settled in its assumptions, dull and provincial. Disconcertingly, different ages seem to be reading different texts of *Hamlet*, and indeed the history of *Hamlet* criticism is a very pungent reminder that there are no purely literary values. Goethe's Werther and Mackenzie's Man of Feeling have something in common with each other, which reappears in their creators' influential readings of *Hamlet* (Mackenzie's essay was published in 1780, before *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*). But, strikingly, Hamlet has never suffered an eclipse—unlike Werther or the Man of Feeling, who both caused a sensation and a splash of suicides but became less interesting to succeeding generations. That *Hamlet* has—without interruption, although in very different ways—compelled and inspired the western imagination for nearly four centuries is surely a most important fact about the play. To my mind, this suggests why it will not do to 'explain' Hamlet's melancholy with reference to Timothy Bright or Burton, unless we are also remembering that it is expressed in poetry no age is willing to forget. Similarly, everything that *Hamlet* does not have in common with so-called revenge plays—which did not even interest English audiences for many years—must be vastly more important than any connections.

This brings me to my two leading questions. The first must surely be, *What kind of play could so enthral the western imagination?*, and must no less surely receive the kind of humbled answer that begins, 'This truly miraculous achievement . . .'. But then we have also to ask a second, sourer question: *How could any work have seemed to submit to so many divergent and incompatible readings, without being in itself flawed and obscure?* The second question might be restated as a condition: there can be no convincing reading of *Hamlet* which does not also explain or suggest why it has been so long in coming. Most critics make some approach, however indirect, to the first question and disregard the second; but the nights are drawing in, and it seems ever harder to set out as though it were dawn. At any rate, I must start setting out my own reasons for thinking that being unable to understand *Hamlet* is not part of the irreversible doom of man.

Since *Hamlet* criticism is what it is, the reader may still find himself echoing that legendary remark which confronted a luckless student: 'This is both good and original: unfortunately, the good parts are not original and the original parts are not good.'

### *Hamlet without the prince*

I doubt whether we can tackle the second question without adopting something like Empson's strategy of thinking about the play's first audience. This need not lead to silly speculations. We know from those references which survive from the late 1580s and early 1590s that the old, pre-Shakespearean play had been a roaring success and that intellectuals were rather sniffy about it. We know there was a Ghost; that Hamlet was mad or pretended to be, like Kyd's Hieronimo; that he bellowed 'Revenge' in a way that came to seem funny; we may be sure that the finale was bloody. One early reference plays on Kyd's name; if, as is thought likely, Kyd was the author of the old play, it is also likely that it had included a play-within-a-play like that in *The Spanish Tragedy*: the device worked very well and, as Empson puts it, Kyd 'had a powerful but narrow, one might say miserly, theatrical talent, likely to repeat a success.' That Shakespeare, at the height of his powers and success, had chosen to redress this somewhat tarnished popular success must have aroused a stir of curious anticipation like that which would follow, today, if it were announced that Ingmar Bergman was remaking *High Noon* or that Samuel Beckett was revamping Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*. Our hypothetical spectator—who did exist, and about whom I shall try not to speculate—would have watched the new play while remembering the earlier play, as we remember *Hamlet* in watching *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

It is worth remarking that we do not know where our spectator would have been. The Bad Quarto tells us that *Hamlet* was performed at the Universities, and several scholars and critics (notably J. B. Nosworthy) have found this suggestive. The circumstances of a special performance—a gala, given by wandering players like those in the play, in a University building with interior lighting—would allow for a longer play than was the rule at the Globe; and *Hamlet* is very long. It is also packed with students: Hamlet, Horatio, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern—and even Laertes if we think, like Nosworthy, that Laertes leaves for the University of Paris; and Laertes' father blethers happily about drama in his Varsity days. And of course *Hamlet* is a markedly intellectual play; its nearest rivals in this respect—*Troilus* and *Measure*—belong to the same period; that *Troilus* seems never to have had a public staging in Shakespeare's lifetime has encouraged many scholars to suppose that it was staged in the Inns of Court.

Nor do we *know* whether the early play was anything like as taut and exciting as *Hamlet*, which is, even if we consider it merely as a scenario or melodrama, superb 'theatre'; this seems to me unlikely, but Empson thinks that Shakespeare could have kept Kyd's structure. Several critics have remarked on the way the

play is stunningly constructed as a series of tense and exciting movements; this is worth emphasising, since it is not uncommon for critics to underestimate the importance of the 'action' in their concern with the prince.

The atmosphere of foreboding is marvellously conveyed in the first scene: a king dead, his country rearming; a prince not on the throne; raw-nerved soldiers, tired and apprehensive as they keep their midnight watch. As this first movement develops in the second scene we take in the relations of the two chief families while observing the initial opposition between Hamlet and Claudius, the mighty opposites. And these early scenes reverberate against each other, as has been well brought out in Emrys Jones' and David Rose's discussions of their scenic form: a stepfather advises his stepson; Polonius advises his son—who is, unlike Hamlet, allowed to leave Denmark, and would be alive at the end of the play if he had kept his father's fussy but shrewd advice; a dead father advises his son.

In the second movement tension mounts with the postponement of a direct clash between the mighty opposites; we see Hamlet and Claudius circling each other, intriguing, manoeuvring for advantage. So, for example, Hamlet quickly establishes that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been sent to spy on him; since they naturally keep this from Claudius, Hamlet could exploit his advantage—but throws it away in the nunnery scene when he starts snarling about one marriage he will not tolerate. Much of the suspense depends on our knowing what Hamlet or Claudius don't know. The third movement brings what Dover Wilson liked to call the 'climax'—that is, the stage in a Shakespeare play when the action reaches a high point, that will determine the eventual outcome. At last we have the direct confrontation, in the Mouse-trap scene—but then, in an excitingly unexpected way, the 'climax' is spread to the scene where Hamlet confronts his mother. Once again he loses the initiative: by publicly threatening the King in the one scene and killing Polonius in the other, Hamlet allows Claudius to dispose of him, and his departure marks the brief anticlimactic period that is characteristic of Shakespeare's dramatic structures. Then, after this momentary relaxation or *Luftpause*, there is a rapid revival and increase of tension when Hamlet returns to Denmark and steps into a grave: by the end, Denmark's two main families are entirely destroyed and the country itself is delivered to Fortinbras.

Plainly, this kind of résumé is anything but inward, but then my purpose is to recall the play's external strengths in order to establish what I take to be a crucial contrast. The scenario owes something, perhaps a great deal, to the old play—and yet, even though the phrase 'Hamlet without the prince' is now a synonym for something absurd and unimaginable (like omelettes without eggs), this is precisely what the old play must have offered. 'Must have' may suggest that I am now speculating, but the prince who dominates Shakespeare's play was and probably still is the most complex character ever to have appeared on an English stage, and such astonishing originality is the prerogative of genius. Nobody has ever suggested that Kyd or any other candidate for the authorship of the old play



had that kind of genius, or that the old 'Hamlet'—who bellowed 'Revenge' and made intellectuals snicker—was the model for that prince who has compelled the western imagination for four centuries. It follows that Shakespeare was grafting *his* prince onto the old play, and that Hamlet's psychological complexity, the inwardness of the dramatic conception, the tenor, authority and searing power of his pessimistic scepticism, were all *new*. Indeed, if our hypothetical spectator had not read Montaigne in French—for Florio's translation had yet to be published—these things would have seemed all the more unprecedented.

This of course suggests one answer to my first question. What would have astonished our hypothetical spectator and has never lost its hold on the imagination of audiences—in Schlegel's Germany or Pasternak's Russia—is the intensely inward and original rendering, *in* Hamlet's tortured consciousness, of that momentous Renaissance conflict between different conceptions of the nature of Nature, of human nature and human potentialities, and of Value. Since western man has never ceased to feel the consequences of these cataclysmic cultural developments, such an answer seems intrinsically more plausible, more likely to account for the play's continuing and extensive appeal, than, say, ingenious arguments about the duality of the revenger as agent and victim. In emphasising those perceptions which *Hamlet* has in common with Montaigne's great 'Apology', rather than those things which Hamlet has in common with Kyd's Hieronimo, such an answer would also help to explain why writers like Wilson Knight, Taine, Turgenev or Mallarmé saw Hamlet as a negative portent, associated with death, negation and corrosive doubt. And yet this also suggests something deficient or incomplete in such an answer: those problems which could never be resolved by killing Claudius—the problems that are still with us—would seem to have only a circumstantial connection with the father's death and the mother's remarriage. In sharp contrast, that 'duality of the revenger' theory which Nigel Alexander outlined in *Poison, Play and Duel* and which Harold Jenkins elaborates in the New Arden *Hamlet*, would seem to stand in a nearer relation to the play's 'action'; in this case the difficulty is rather that of explaining why the play which Jenkins explains seems so unlike, and so much smaller than, the play which obsessed Goethe and Schlegel, Turgenev and Pasternak. To put this in different terms, which remind us that the play is a 'graft': what seems obscure is the *connection* between the 'action' which is partially or largely inherited from the old play and the new play's prince and central nervous system.

If we are trying, as I think we should, to weigh what would have startled and impressed an audience which remembered the old play and those things which have compelled the western imagination ever since, we must also attach some weight to another kind of 'appeal', which is closely connected with the play's extraordinary theatricality. In turning through Mander and Mitchenson's useful compilation, *Hamlet through the Ages*, it is indeed fascinating to see how the changing images of Hamlet accommodate and reflect changing notions of

what is 'attractive'—from the Coleridgean Kean to Forbes Robertson's clean-cut manly hero, from Sarah Bernhardt's Proustian matinée idol to Mikhail Chekhov's passionately soulful Slav. Much of the comedy in Lawrence's account of Hamlet in *Twilight in Italy* derives from the unfortunate actor's inability to conform with prevailing notions of the attractive hero, which soon launches Lawrence into his argument that Hamlet really is not attractive in any deeper sense. Even provocatively unattractive recent Hamlets, like those of David Warner or Nicol Williamson, reflected the prevailing attraction to Angry Young Men and 'anti-heroes', which had its parallel in the images of fashion magazines. This suggests that some image of the beautiful young man, suffering the slings and arrows of fortune like a St Sebastian idealisation of our suffering selves, exerts a potent and insidious appeal. And throughout *Hamlet* Shakespeare's prince is the constant focus of attention: even when he is not on stage the other characters are discussing him and worrying about him. Hamlet is overwhelmingly *present* to us, whether or not we find this presence agreeable.

This helps us to account for the Pirandellian effect that strikes so many readers: Hamlet seems to be a 'real' man who finds himself trapped in a play and forced to perform, or act. Even when he is obscure or inconsequential—as when he says, 'I, but while the grasse growes, the Proverbe is something musty'—we are less likely to think that Shakespeare is nodding than we are to reflect on the verisimilitude of such incoherence. Mallarmé was responding to this effect when he wrote that Hamlet 'effaces the too clearly defined beings about him' and makes the real world of Elsinore seem unreal; so was Victor Hugo, when he remarked that Hamlet seems like a somnambulist. But here we might once again consider the kind of surprise this held for our hypothetical spectator who *knew* the old play and was curious to see what kind of facelift Shakespeare had given to a protagonist whose melodramatic bellows of 'Revenge' were recalled in street jokes like the catch-phrases of a modern television series. For our spectator, the immediately interesting issue in the second scene would be not whether Shakespeare *makes* Hamlet theatrical, but what he does with the original Hamlet's melodramatic theatricality.

His prince does indeed make a highly theatrical entry. As Dover Wilson showed, the second Quarto stage entry at the beginning of this scene shows that Hamlet is subverting the new King's first Council meeting from the start. Instead of entering with the King and Queen, he is drooping behind like Apemantus, tetchily detached from, and contemptuous of, the routines of Court. After some cryptic comments in which he seems to speak for his own satisfaction or relief, Hamlet delivers his first speech—and reflects on that ostentation which has isolated him from the glittering court:

Seemes Maddam, nay it is, I know not seemes,  
Tis not alone my incky cloake good mother

Nor customary suites of soleme blacke  
 Nor windie suspiration of forst breath  
 No, nor the fruitfull river in the eye,  
 Nor the dejected havior of the visage  
 Together with all formes, moodes, shapes of grieffe  
 That can denote me truely, these indeede seeme,  
 For they are actions that a man might play  
 But I have that within which passes showe  
 These but the trappings and the suites of woe. (1.2.76–86; Q2)

This prompts Howard Jacobson to comment, in *Shakespeare's Magnanimity*:

the inevitable question is: why, in that case, the ostentation of the trappings? A sharper mother than Gertrude might have put that brutally. As it is Gertrude doesn't put it at all, and we, I think, should put it gently. (28)

A. L. French is not inclined to put this gently, and writes that such 'artificiality' and 'conceitedness' could not be the result of 'mere inadvertence' on Shakespeare's part:

Hamlet's winds and rivers don't invoke the natural world or point the inwardness of his suffering; rather, they recall the conventionally literary world of Petrarchan poetic diction. There is, one feels, a certain unreality in his grief, a certain kind of histrionic self-regard. (45)

Yet Hamlet does *not* say that his inky cloak and 'customary' signs of grief do not denote him truly; if he said that, Jacobson's *riposte* would be deserved. What he says is that the 'trappings' cannot *alone* denote him truly, although he feels obliged to wear them. He is painfully aware of what may be taken for ostentation—of what *has* already seemed like the melodramatic theatricality of his predecessor in the old play: but he intercepts criticism by insisting that there is no way of showing grief that cannot be dissimulated, and no way of making visible that authenticating inner grief which passeth show. He is objecting—in a way that launches elaborately reflexive ironies—to the impossible part he must play, and one wants to ask the hostile critics what Hamlet could do instead. To appear as a mourner at a coronation, wedding and Council meeting cannot but seem like an ostentatious gesture—but should he therefore dress gaily, and play the game? I take it that our worries about Hamlet's behaviour in this scene are of a different kind.

Similarly, it seems that there is nothing that Claudius could do or say, or not do and not say, in this scene, which would forestall his determined critics—but

why are they so determined, if we do not yet know that Claudius is a murderer? One paradox in this scene is that we find ourselves watching the villain struggle, rather manfully, to say and do the right thing, while the hero is spitefully intent on disruption: the main business of the Council meeting could hardly be more urgent, but Hamlet is entirely indifferent to the threat of invasion. We discover that Claudius has already dealt with this danger, very shrewdly, and we see him trying to be the magnanimous ruler—and solicitous father. His first speech is obviously prepared, for the no less obvious reason that it is working through the Council agenda: that he begins by paying tribute to King Hamlet shows that this is the first Council meeting; he then reports the emergency and his responses, before considering the less urgent item. Plainly he cannot feel deep grief over a calamity from which he gained a much desired wife and throne; no less plainly, he is expected to pay a preliminary tribute to his predecessor, just as the present British Prime Minister was expected to commend an outgoing Prime Minister whose policies she deplored: public office calls for some ceremonious insincerities.

It is axiomatic in dramatic criticism that we should keep close to the dramatic process of unfolding, without assuming in Act 1 what a play does not tell us until Act 3. None the less, critics are apt to pounce on Claudius from the first, as the villain of this piece, even while they pay lip-service to this fundamental principle. So, for example, L. C. Knights argues that ‘even before we know that Claudius is a murderer, it is clear on his first appearance that we are intended to register something repulsive’; after quoting Claudius’s first seven lines, Knights remarks that we must all ‘react to those unctuous verse rhythms with some such comment as “Slimy beast!”’ (1960: 41–2). But that comment is one we might rather reserve for Hamlet’s apology to Laertes in Act 5. The stylistic crash in Claudius’s reference to ‘one Auspicious, and one Dropping eye’ is very obvious in the Folio, and only a little softer in the second Quarto’s ‘an auspicious, and a dropping eye’, but how much follows from this? Claudius is addressing a crisis not a convention of literary critics, and perhaps only literary critics would attach so much more importance to a lack of rhetorical finesse than to the efficient diplomacy which has saved Denmark from war. We might be more concerned by Hamlet’s lack of concern over the threat of invasion—which suggests that the dangers of excessive grief may be national as well as spiritual, and that it is a good thing for Denmark that Claudius is on the throne. Ironically, Claudius simply assumes that discretion should fight with nature in his first, carefully rehearsed speech, and is then forced by an immediate and unexpected emergency to develop this difficult theme in an entirely unrehearsed speech to his new stepson.

Shakespeare’s consummate mastery of scenic form appears in these subtly counterpointed contrasts, which introduce the play’s two ‘mighty opposites’. Claudius’s first speech shows him struggling in an effortful but creditable way to

do those things which a good king should do: apart from the rhetorical lapses in his tribute to the dead king (which at least does not pretend that his grief is unmixed with delight), we might notice how his elaborately effusive encouragement to Laertes is overdone, and suggests a chairman who has not yet mastered the knack of seeming caressingly and magnanimously informal while pressing on through the less pressing parts of an agenda. In sharp contrast with the King's attempts to *stage* himself as a good king, Hamlet refuses to behave as a prince should behave; his anguished reflections on how he must stage himself—in giving private grief absolute priority—insist on the gulf between appearance or 'show' and inwardly apprehended reality. This presents Claudius with an unexpected and trying test of his ability to respond as a wise king *and* as a loving stepfather: with more than regal patience he chooses to ignore what is bloody-minded in Hamlet's behaviour and tries, instead, to address Hamlet's misery. Given the demanding circumstances, his impromptu speech is far from unimpressive: we see him struggling to be solicitous and tender, and to suppress his exasperation at having to instruct an intellectual stepson on what an unschooled understanding knows to be 'as common / As any the most vulgar thing'. And when Hamlet responds to this with a brutally deliberate snub, by speaking only to his mother, Claudius tries to deflect, or ignore, that, and commends what is patently not, so far as he is concerned, 'a loving and a faire reply'.

If we are seeing Claudius from the first as a slimy 'Belial', like Knights, or as Bradley's (and Hamlet's) drunken bloat king, we will miss the disconcertingly subtle and worldly, even Chaucerian, ironies of Shakespeare's characterisation. Despite his contrary protestation, I cannot but believe that Knights subjects Claudius's first speech to a blast of unworldly, inflexibly high-minded censure *because* he knows that Claudius is a murderer. Wilson Knight provides a sharp and telling critical contrast by going to the other extreme: when, as we have seen, he commends this king and Court for robust health and sanity *he* is responding like someone who genuinely does not know that Claudius is a murderer.

Nor is it clear that Claudius's solicitousness is not genuinely kindly and perceptive. Why are the King and Queen so anxious that Hamlet should not leave Denmark? The question is the more pressing if we are allowing ourselves to remember that Claudius is a murderer and that Hamlet has no means of knowing this. Claudius has nothing to fear from Hamlet—but Hamlet's own behaviour suggests why there is a reason to fear *for* him: if that thought has not occurred to us already it should occur a moment later, when the King and Court leave and Hamlet's first soliloquy confirms that he has been considering 'self-slaughter'.

Indeed we observe how Claudius's bewilderment and irritation grows through the first half of the play, until the emotional release of that moment in 3.3 when he at last announces, in flatly final terms, 'I like him not'. Here we might notice how a great critic plays fast and loose with the text, on what is not

a complicated interpretative problem but an ascertainable matter of fact. The text tells us that Claudius resolves to send Hamlet to England to collect a 'neglected Tribute' (3.1.169–70), immediately after hearing Hamlet swear that of those 'that are married already, all but one shall live'; then that Claudius decides to do this 'forthwith', after he and the Court have watched a play in which a nephew kills his royal uncle (3.3.1–7); and finally that Claudius decides to have Hamlet killed in England, after Hamlet has butchered Polonius (4.3.58–68). There is no textual authority for Bradley's assurance that Claudius is already planning his second murder in 3.3, when he is at prayer (1965: 138–9); and yet, as A. L. French points out, other critics, including Morris Weitz and W. W. Robson, treat this unwarranted assumption as fact (77–8). This might be compared with the way in which it is frequently supposed that Gertrude summons Hamlet to her bedroom *because* of the Mouse-trap: in his recent book on *Hamlet*, Andrew Gurr speaks of the Queen's being finally stirred to action (50). Yet if the Queen entertained any suspicion that her second husband had killed her first husband, her first words to Hamlet ('*Hamlet*, thou hast they father much offended') would be both amazingly self-possessed and morally monstrous. And of course Gertrude is merely carrying out the plan which was suggested by Polonius and approved by Claudius *before* the Mouse-trap:

my Lord, doe as you please,  
 But if you hold it fit, after the play,  
 Let his Queene-mother all alone intreate him  
 To show his grieffe, let her be round with him,  
 And Ile be plac'd (so please you) in the eare  
 Of all their conference. If she find him not,  
 To England send him: or confine him where  
 Your wisdome best shall thinke. (3.1.180–7)

Just as the critics are unwilling to suppose that Claudius first plans to send Hamlet to England in the hope that 'seas, and countries different' will improve his health, they are unwilling to suppose that the only effect the Mouse-trap has on Gertrude is to confirm that Hamlet is now not only off his head but dangerous. But the text runs differently, subverting and complicating that simple outline which the critics would prefer; and Claudius's solicitousness on Hamlet's behalf is gradually eroded by his recognition that to let Hamlet's madness range is becoming more and more dangerous.

A. L. French is pointing towards the basic difficulty when he remarks that the fact that we do not *know* that Claudius is a murderer until the 'revelation' in 3.3 leaves us wondering 'why Shakespeare has hitherto thrown us off the scent by making him considerate and affable' (75); and yet French himself is not taking the full measure of the difficulty. In fact, because *Hamlet* is a national classic,

we do all know that Claudius is a murderer, just as we all know that Oedipus killed his father. The problem is what we are to do with knowledge which the play itself takes so long to confirm. And here we are let down very badly by that fundamental principle that we should not assume in Act 1 what we only learn in Act 3 and should rather be trying to put ourselves in the position of a first audience.

For our hypothetical spectator would also have known—from the old play which had been such a popular success and was not then very old—who killed King Hamlet. Instead of being thrown ‘off the track’, in French’s sense, his interest would have been concentrated on the new play’s deliberate and intriguing departures from the familiar track. He would have been surprised when the second scene worked against his expectations by contrasting the villain’s good qualities with the hero’s questionable qualities. As Empson observes, the first audience could not have known that it was watching our national classic: there was rather a danger that Hamlet’s melodramatic entry would provoke a laugh of recognition and memories of his ranting predecessor—but Hamlet’s first speech is brilliantly calculated to exploit such potentially disruptive memories. When Hamlet begins to protest against the role he is being forced to play, what I have called the ‘Pirandellian effect’ would be accentuated by memories of the old play: this overwhelmingly original prince has been grafted onto, and is indeed trapped within, a framework provided by what had been ‘Hamlet without the prince’.

All of this makes for an exceedingly uncomfortable paradox. We have no access to that old play on which Shakespeare was working brilliant variations; yet the principled modern critic who tries not to assume what he has not yet been told is in a position as ludicrous as that of a critic who tries to suppress all knowledge of *Hamlet* while watching *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

### Coming of age in Shakespeare’s Denmark

I have so far been trying to limit myself to that internal evidence which Shakespeare’s play provides, and to the surviving scraps of reliable information about the old play. I have certainly been less speculative than those critics who assume that when *Hamlet* was first staged there was already a distinct genre of so-called ‘revenge drama’ which Elizabethan critics irritatingly forget to mention.

At this point the temptation to speculate is actually very strong, and, although I think we should continue to resist it, it is worth recalling a few of those questions which the new play poses but refuses to answer, and which knowledge of the old play might have clarified. Why, for example, does Shakespeare’s Hamlet send Claudius that extraordinary letter, begging leave to see his kingly eyes and promising to ask for a royal pardon (4.2.42–7)? It is hard to suppose that Hamlet is prosecuting some devious plan, when the Hamlet of Act 5 is so resigned and fatalistic, and appears to have no plan of any kind. He drifts into the

obviously suspicious fencing match, ignoring Horatio's warning. For all that the text tells us, even the change of swords is an accident, while Hamlet's decision to kill Claudius is a sudden, furious and impulsive act of retribution which avenges his mother's accidental death rather than his father's murder.

It would obviously be helpful to know how the old play had presented the Queen. The new play does not make clear whether her relationship with Claudius changes significantly after the promises she makes to Hamlet in the bedroom scene. Nor do we ever know how guilty she was, since we do not know whether she was adulterous before her first husband's death, or what we are to make of the fact that, apart from Hamlet and the Ghost, nobody worries about the issue of incest. In the terms of Elizabethan law her second marriage was technically incestuous; but, although modern Scottish laws on incest are still based on *Leviticus* and until recently made no distinction between sleeping with a brother and sleeping with a brother-in-law, most modern Scots would doubtless think the distinction important, and we have no right to assume that an Elizabethan audience's thought about such matters could never be more intelligent than the law.

That last problem is compounded by an internal twist within the new play. Claudius expresses his love for Gertrude rather movingly on more than one occasion, and it is presumably for her sake that he protects Hamlet's reputation even after the killing of Polonius; there is no obvious warrant for Hamlet's assumption, in the bedroom scene, that their relationship is merely lustful. In sharp contrast, the Ghost's dreadful image of lust preying on garbage (1.5.53–7) does not convey *love* for Gertrude. If anything, it suggests that the purgatorial fires are failing in their intended effect, since he casts himself in the metaphorical role of a 'radiant Angell', and speaks with far more obvious interest and passion of 'my smooth body' and of the 'naturall gifts' which should have made the marital bed 'celestiall'. And although the Ghost insists that Gertrude must be spared and left to feel the pricks and stings of conscience, it is Claudius, not Gertrude, who appears as the desperately suffering sinner.

Kind, stable Horatio has nothing to say to Hamlet's grumbles about incest, and lets us down on two other occasions where we might long for more clarity and the opportunity to make a detailed comparison with the old play. His remarks after the Mouse-trap are ambiguous: 'Half a share' seems to be an embarrassed joke, prevaricating over the fact that what he has seen has not been enough to convince him of Claudius' guilt (3.2.273). And when Hamlet gloatingly explains that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have gone to their deaths with no 'shriving time allow'd', Horatio's subdued response prompts Hamlet's indignant (and untruthful) protest: 'Why man they did make love to this employment' (5.2.56–7). Horatio's stoicism is something of a puzzle, since it is not clear whether it should reflect on Hamlet's wickedness: some of Hamlet's speeches are critical of Christian-Stoic fortitude, and there is an



awkward gap, which might be variously explained, between Hamlet's painful sense of the need to 'be' and do, and his professed admiration for the friend who refuses to be passion's slave.

These are all cases where we might regret the disappearance of the old play, and its rediscovery would of course help us to trace the Shakespearean variations. It is possible that the Player's speech on Hecuba is itself a very good in-joke, recalling the play which Shakespeare has made new: it is equally possible that it is not, and the dangers of speculation are more obvious than the temptations. On the other hand, if we agree that members of the first audience would have known something of the old play, it is clear that they would have been curious to see what Shakespeare had done with the inherited 'big moments': the appearance of the Ghost, mad Hamlet, Hamlet bellowing for revenge, the play within a play (probably), and the final bloodbath. These are preserved in the new play, but take complicated, ambivalent forms. The Ghost is an original and disturbing figure, for we are forced—for the first time in English drama, unless we think that this may have been a feature of the old play—to consider his moral nature, and whether he is a 'Spirit of health, or Goblin damn'd'. As for mad Hamlet, Shakespeare's prince resolves to adopt madness as a cover, but it is not clear when he is feigning and when he is out of control: there is, as Claudius and Polonius quickly recognise, often reason in his madness, while the soliloquy on Fortinbras shows how much madness there is in Hamlet's reason and how that madness is related, in Shakespeare's play, to problems which could not be resolved by killing Claudius. This play's Denmark has come of age, in that the new prince is intensely troubled by those moral, metaphysical and cultural strains which made Donne write of the new philosophy calling all in doubt. Here it is impossible to suppose that the earlier play had been so resonant and challenging; and in general terms Shakespeare appears to be recalling the old play in some respects while introducing unexpected profundities, twists and complications. What then should we make of the Mouse-trap, and should we join with the New Arden editor in simply and confidently dismissing those 'notorious' doubts which have troubled critics like W. W. Greg, W. W. Robson and A. L. French?

Hamlet's reasons for devising the Mouse-trap are clearly stated, both at the end of Act 2 and in his brief exchange with Horatio when he tells him what to watch for:

... Observe my Uncle, if his occulted guilt  
Does not it selfe unkennill in one speech,  
It is a damned ghost that we have seene,  
And my imaginations are as foule  
As *Vulcans* stithy; give him heedfull note,  
For I mine eyes will rivet to his face,

And after we will both our judgements joyne  
 In censure of his seeming. (3.2.78–85)

Despite Hamlet's confidence that the grounds for 'censure' will appear as more than foul imaginings, he is scrupulously recognising the need to establish *two* things: his uncle's guilt, and the Ghost's provenance. Horatio watches and is, as we have seen, far less convinced than Hamlet that either of these things has been established. One difficulty is obvious: even if the King were as innocent as a lamb he would have every reason to terminate this performance. The play's subject—the killing of a king by his *nephew* (not brother)—is all the more grossly provocative for being accompanied by Hamlet's commentary and his attempts to wound and humiliate the Queen; her 'the Lady doth protest too much mee thinks' is an impressively cool deflation, entirely beyond the range of Bradley's 'sheep in the sun' Gertrude. It is quite naturally assumed that Hamlet is publicly threatening his royal uncle; as Claudius observes in the next scene, to 'let his madnesse range' is clearly no longer 'safe', after this astonishing performance.

We shall of course learn—or have it finally confirmed—that Claudius is a murderer when we hear him at prayer. But Hamlet does not hear the prayer, and has no reason for feeling confirmed in his suspicion, unless we infer that the King must have betrayed his guilt before then. It is true, and important, that the printed text of a drama is at best an imperfect record, and may exclude significant stage business; but to suppose that Claudius betrays his guilt while watching the play creates more difficulties than it resolves. The Court shows no sign of suspecting that Claudius has killed the King. If there were the merest suspicion of this, the diffident and deferential Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would never dare to babble to Claudius about 'the cesse of Majestie' in the next scene: they clearly think that Hamlet is the (potential) king-killer. So does Polonius, to judge from his reference to Hamlet's 'prancks', which have become 'too broad to beare with' (3.4.2). And so does Gertrude, who was in a position to observe the King very closely: if her first complaint to Hamlet is crafty simulation we must think her a very nasty piece of work indeed, but critics dodge this problem.

It would be remarkable if Shakespeare had included so many suggestions that the Mouse-trap aborts, while making its success depend on a precarious and intricate piece of stage business which the text does not record. There could be no revealing exchange of glances, for instance, since Claudius would then know that Hamlet suspects him, and it is clear that Claudius does not know this. In the prayer scene he assumes that nobody, apart from God, knows of his crime. He refers to shuffling successfully in this world and speaks of *retaining* 'th' offence': this is why he cannot fully repent, yet he could not hope to retain 'My Crowne, mine owne Ambition, and my Queene' if he knew, or feared, that he had just betrayed his guilt in public—and Shakespearean characters do not lie in soliloquies, although they may, like Macbeth, deceive themselves. Not even

Horatio, who was so carefully briefed, is convinced that Claudius has revealed his guilt, and the conclusion seems unavoidable: he has not, so that we must explain not how he has but why Hamlet thinks he has. The speech in which Hamlet briefed Horatio provides that explanation: his imagination *is*, as he fears, as foul as Vulcan's stithy. Here is the most devastating twist of all: that Hamlet's foul imaginings are also correct. And here we may remember that Hamlet suspected Claudius even before he saw the Ghost, and greeted the Ghost's revelations with the exclamation, 'O my propheticke soule!' Such a reading is consonant with the view that Hamlet's once noble mind is 'tainted' and 'o'erthrown': he realises that he should test both the Ghost and Claudius, but will not see that the test has been a lamentable failure.

Let us consider the Ghost more carefully. It is generally agreed, now, that we can no longer accept Bradley's view of the Ghost as a nobly suffering apparition of great moral majesty, a representative of the hidden ultimate power of divine justice. Moral majesty is precisely what the Ghost lacks since, as Dover Wilson and Eleanor Prosser have shown, Shakespeare raises so many doubts about the Ghost's provenance. The Ghost's injunctions are contrary to the Scriptures; he starts like a guilty thing when the cock crows; in the notoriously difficult cellarage scene he behaves like a stage devil, and Hamlet addresses him as one—as 'boy', 'truepenny', 'old Mole', 'worthy Pioner'. Indeed, the question is not so much whether the Ghost is divine or infernal, 'wicked or charitable', 'a Spirit of Health, or Goblin damn'd'—for if those are the only alternatives there is far more evidence of his infernal origin; rather, the dramatic question is whether we conclude, very quickly, that 'this fellowe in the Sellerige' is an instrument of darkness, or whether Shakespeare somehow manages to make us share Hamlet's own doubts.

Protestantism had of course dispensed with Purgatory, as a Roman invention; Eleanor Prosser's *Hamlet and Revenge* collects a large body of evidence to show how Elizabethans were 'bombarded' with reminders that souls could not return since they were justified by faith alone and proceeded directly to Heaven or the other place. But it is hard to see why the sustained bombardment could ever have been thought necessary, unless people 'needed' it—because their ideas about the after-life were far more confused and jumbled with scraps of folklore and Catholicism than some tidy-minded historians care to suspect. This casts doubt on the historical plausibility of Prosser's contention that the same Elizabethans would have been quick to see that the Ghost is an instrument of darkness sent to ensnare Hamlet when his melancholy has made him deeply vulnerable and indeed suicidal. And there is a complementary critical objection to Prosser's thesis, since it reduces the whole scope and interest of the play if we suppose that the Ghost is, from the first, clearly infernal. The sceptical pessimism that invades and corrodes Hamlet's mind, and which he expresses in poetry no age has been willing to forget, would be placed as 'sinful' for dogmatic, *a priori* reasons, before

it could take hold of the imagination. The play would shrink into a period piece showing how immoderate grief is as wicked and dangerous as Claudius suggests, and showing how melancholy is a weapon taken into Satan's hand. Prosser's answer to the second of the two questions which I suggested any convincing reading of *Hamlet* must address would deprive us of any plausible and satisfying answer to the first of these questions.

Hamlet himself sees from the first that the Ghost *may* be an instrument of darkness sent to ensnare his soul, and the doubts which appear in his first words to the Ghost are the best possible reason for not rushing, thoughtlessly, to his revenge:

Angels and Ministers of grace defend us:  
 Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damn'd,  
 Bring with thee ayres from heaven, or blasts from hell,  
 Be thy intents wicked, or charitable,  
 Thou com'st in such a questionable shape. . . . (1.4.39–43)

Horatio is more certain that the apparition is infernal and may yet 'assume some other horrible forme' to 'deprive your soveraigntie of reason' and 'draw you into madness' (1.4.72–4). I take it that we follow Hamlet in believing that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in Horatio's philosophy, and in being suspicious about the Ghost but *not sure*. Since the grounds for suspicion and the dangers this may represent for Hamlet are both being emphasised from the first, we should also be noticing those moments when Hamlet is tempted to believe the Ghost on insufficient grounds. 'O my propheticke soule' reveals Hamlet's inclination to believe in the truth of a foul imagining, and it never occurs to him that the Ghost may be both infernal *and* telling the truth (Hamlet has not seen *Macbeth*). The rogue and peasant slave shows Hamlet first yielding to, and then resisting, this dangerous inclination to believe the Ghost on insufficient 'grounds'. He declares, quite illogically, that he is 'prompted' to revenge by 'Heaven' *and* 'Hell'; and then he picks himself up, forcing himself to remember that

The spirit that I have seene  
 May be a devle, and the devle hath power  
 T'assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,  
 Out of my weakenes, and my melancholy,  
 As he is very potent with such spirits,  
 Abuses me to damne me; Ile have grounds. . . . (2.2.594–9)

The Mouse-trap is to provide the 'grounds', but we have already seen how confident Hamlet is, when he briefs Horatio, that the 'grounds' for censure

*will* appear. As the play is being performed he anticipates the result again, and jeopardises the test with an insulting choric commentary which would prompt an innocent king to terminate this performance. And when the Mouse-trap aborts, Hamlet refuses to see what has happened—yielding at last to the temptation, and the foul imaginings, which he has known he should resist.

Why is Hamlet so determined to insult and compromise the King, even in the second scene, before he has any knowledge of the Ghost, and any grounds for suspicion? What leads Hamlet himself to concede the likelihood that his ‘propheticke soul’ was giving credence to ‘imaginations are as foule / As *Vulcans* stithy’? Here, I suggest, we need to give more weight to that ‘sexual quality’ in the play which, as Waldock remarked, has gone on interesting critics ever since Jones developed his discredited thesis. And instead of supposing, like Jones, that Hamlet’s situation is like that of Oedipus, when the obvious classical analogy is with Orestes, we should notice how Hamlet is disposed from the first to loathe the man who has replaced an idealised, deeply loved father in his mother’s bed.

I suggested earlier that the old play was ‘Hamlet without the prince’, and that Shakespeare’s Denmark ‘comes of age’ when he grafts onto the old play’s framework a prince who is overwhelmingly modern and representative in his tortured sense of the insecurities engendered by the ‘new Philosophy’. I also suggested that, although this provides one answer to my first question by explaining Hamlet’s continuing appeal, the answer seems insufficient in another sense. For it would then seem that Shakespeare is exploiting the inherited situation: the death of Hamlet’s father and his mother’s remarriage provide a sufficient *occasion* for a mental disturbance which Shakespeare renders with unprecedented profundity—but then Hamlet’s most profoundly representative problems could never be resolved by killing the King. Moreover, this kind of answer to the first question does not engage with the play that was interesting Ernest Jones or D. H. Lawrence; it does not explain that ‘erotic’ appeal which made Mackenzie speak of Hamlet’s ‘overwhelming charm’ and has tempted innumerable readers to see Hamlet as an idealised projection of their suffering adolescent selves. Growing up—‘coming of age’ in the other sense, which concerns individual rather than cultural development—involves coming to terms with one’s own sexuality and also with one’s middle-aged parents’ sexuality. Here too Hamlet’s problems cannot be resolved by killing a man whom his mother plainly loves, or by seeing that love as a perverse and obscene lust, or by hysterical outbursts of sex-nausea. But here the specific occasion for Hamlet’s more inclusive disturbance matters very much: the death of the idealised father and the remarriage of a mother whose sexuality Hamlet cannot accept provides a sufficient explanation for Hamlet’s fatal inclination to believe the worst of Claudius before he has ‘grounds’, and for the foul imaginings which distort his

impressions not only of the loathed Claudius, but of his mother, Polonius, and even Ophelia. Hamlet's disturbance is sexual as well as moral and metaphysical. His mind is 'orethrowne'—to use the word Ophelia uses in contrasting the Hamlet we see with the humanistic paragon she remembers and loves—not only by its intense registering of the kinds of 'problem' which are also treated in Montaigne's 'Apology' for Sebonde, but by an extreme form of a developmental crisis which we must all live through.

### Grafting problems

When Mozart was considering his handling of the oracle in *Idomeneo* he remarked to his father that the longer a supernatural being is on stage the more critical our inspection of it becomes: 'If the speech of the Ghost in *Hamlet* were not so long, it would be far more effective.' This is not a damaging criticism of *Hamlet* if we suppose that we are indeed encouraged to inspect the Ghost very closely; but that inspection reveals a more pressing problem, in the discrepancy between those ultimate sanctions which the Ghost invokes. The Ghost sets Hamlet two tasks, not one. He must kill Claudius; this is, at best, the Old Testament of revenge at its most primitive and barbaric. But Hamlet is also told that he must not 'taint' his mind, and must leave his mother 'to heaven' and to those thorns that in her bosom lodge to prick and sting her: this invokes the New Testament ethic, with its emphasis on inner repentance and its absolute prohibition of revenge. Here Hamlet never asks the obviously pressing question, although his failure to ask it in simple, direct terms is not conspicuous while he is recognising that the Ghost may be of infernal origin.

Let us approach the problem from another direction. The idea that even the best of men must burn in hellish or purgatorial fires if he has the bad luck to die unaneled and unannointed is itself barbaric; yet this is the reason for those torments which the Ghost says he cannot divulge, and then divulges. Divine justice would appear to have the morals of a fruit machine; but for much of the play this barbaric idea seems to function as a premise. It reappears as Hamlet's reason for not slaughtering the King while he is at prayer (3.3.73–94); there the moral barbarism of the premise is accentuated by the irony that it is Claudius, not Gertrude, who feels the stinging thorns of conscience and acknowledges the Christian demand for what he cannot manage—a radically inward and comprehensive repentance. And the barbaric premise reappears when Hamlet gloatingly reflects that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were unshriven. But the premise is *apparently* forgotten at the end of the play, when Horatio imagines flights of angels singing the unaneled, unshriven Hamlet to his rest. And it is *certainly* forgotten in the play's most famous soliloquy, when Hamlet speculates on whether death may be followed by anything more, and even describes death as the undiscovered country from which *no* traveller returns (3.1.79–80). In his

*Mélanges littéraires* (1802) Châteaubriand remarked on the considerable problem this presents:

I always ask myself how the philosophic Prince of Denmark could entertain the doubts which he expresses on the subject of a future state. After his conversation with the 'poor ghost' of the King, his father, ought not his doubts to have been at an end? (LeWinter: 72)

It is true that the needs of a play sometimes require that we do not press its premises too hard. It would be fatuous to suppose that *Hamlet* will tell us whether Shakespeare accepted or rejected Protestant teaching on purgatory, for example. But in a great play we expect the premises to withstand a little pressure—and all the more when the play is one which most critics and readers have felt engages with life's ultimate issues. It is true that a play may enlist our sympathies in internally coherent ways, which allow us to forget or disregard divine prohibitions: we respond differently to the suicides in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar*, and nobody ever seems to be shocked when Macduff takes his revenge on Macbeth. And it is true that a character's incoherence about religious matters need not suggest that the play is confused. Hamlet's allusion to the 'Everlasting', his appeal to 'Angels and Ministers of grace', or his references to 'Heaven' are at odds with doubts about what follows death, but this is dramatically intelligible—consistent with our impression that these are the natural reflexes of the mind which Ophelia recalls, and which has now been shattered but not altogether shattered: his earlier, habitual beliefs still reappear, like his logical and analytical habits. Yet a fundamental difficulty remains.

However disturbed and 'orethrowne' Hamlet's mind is, it is still obviously subtle and powerful. And yet, although he addresses the western imagination with such unprecedented forcefulness, he cannot address his own dramatic situation with as much intellectual acuity as we might confidently expect from a Banquo. He never asks the obviously pressing question about the ethics of revenge. In his Montaignian aspects he speculates, profoundly, on man's place in what may be an unaccommodated universe; but he never asks questions about the moral nature of a deity who will fry his father for allowing himself to be murdered before he had engaged a priest. Here an appropriate contrast would be with Laertes' finest moment, when he scorns the 'churlish Priest' who refused to enlarge his sister's obsequies—or with the moral revulsion which would follow any suggestion, in *Macbeth*, that the murdered Duncan is bound for the flames. But Hamlet cannot be permitted to ask such questions, because the play's inherited framework—which deploys supernatural interventions as plot mechanisms—would begin to disintegrate. And the questions which Hamlet cannot ask are the very questions which bear most obviously on what, in his particular situation, he must do or must not do.

This suggests an answer to the second of the two questions which I suggested any new reading of *Hamlet* should address. It is not surprising that the innumerable critics who feel, quite rightly, that Shakespeare's play engages profound questions about life none the less keep running down different blind alleys. There was a limit to the miracles which Shakespeare could work with the old play; nor could he skirt this difficulty by leaving out his play's more inward moral resonances (beginning with that injunction to leave Gertrude to heaven and her conscience), since there would then be no place for his unprecedentedly inward, intellectual prince. *Hamlet* is the 'graft' which could not take, since it could only take if Shakespeare had been content to write an inferior play.

It will be apparent to anybody acquainted with J.M. Robertson's *The Problem of Hamlet* (1919) that I have arrived, though by a very different route, at conclusions similar to his. My reasons for not mentioning his name before might, if quartered, show 'but one part wisdom, / And ever three parts coward', for Robertson unfortunately harnessed his reading to an extraordinary series of speculations on the nature and content of the old play, and on the provenance of the bad Quarto. His speculative arguments were eventually keelhaunched by another Scot, G. I. Duthie, and now, if we may judge from a book like Weitz's *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*, there is a general feeling that Robertson was dealt with and duly dispatched. Now he is read, if at all, by those with an interest in T. S. Eliot's essay on *Hamlet*, which owes still more to Robertson than to Stoll. But then—with respect to Weitz, who is a philosopher as well as a critic—in logic a conclusion may be valid without being true, and may be true even though the establishing argument is invalid. Robertson's taste for ingeniously speculative reconstructions cannot be defended; despite the date of his book, we might borrow a phrase from Thomas Mann and describe its *method* as 'bad nineteenth century'. But in criticism this is not necessarily—and in logic, it is necessarily not—a reason for dismissing his conclusions.

These might be summarily presented in quotations which offer to answer my two basic questions. What is it that has made *Hamlet* compel the western imagination for four centuries?—

Utter sickness of heart, revealing itself in pessimism, is again and again dramatically obtruded as if to set us feeling that for a heart so crushed revenge is *no remedy*. And this implicit pessimism is Shakespeare's personal contribution; his verdict on the situation set out by the play.  
(73–4)

How could this play have seemed to submit so many divergent and incompatible readings, if it is not in itself flawed?

The ultimate fact is that Shakespeare *could not* make a psychological or otherwise consistent play out of a plot which retained a strictly



barbaric action while the hero was transformed into a supersubtle Elizabethan. (74)

Robertson sees that the second question must be asked, and that its answer is to be sought in the new play's relationship to the play on which it was working such brilliant variations. This, I have argued, can be established from the play we have and from the little we know about the play we have lost, without recourse to further speculation.

It will be clear that I do not think Robertson's answer to the first question sufficient; and I hope it is clear that it would be absurd to suggest that the most important critical conclusion about Shakespeare's miraculous achievement should be diagnostic. Indeed, both Robertson and Eliot went some way—though not nearly far enough—to qualify their accounts of the play's 'artistic failure'. Some supreme works of the human spirit admit flaws: it should not seem shocking to suggest that *Hamlet* calls, like *War and Peace* or *Die Zauberflöte*, for some sifting and disentangling. It remains a momentous achievement, both in itself and within the *oeuvre*, where it represents Shakespeare's first attempt to explore, in a wholly serious and sustained manner, the consequences of the collision between different accounts of Nature and Value. And if we judge this play to be a 'failure', God help the successes.



### 1990—Harold Bloom. "Introduction," from *Hamlet* (Major Literary Characters)

Hamlet is the most persuasive representative we have of intellectual skepticism, with the single exception of Montaigne's self-portrayal, which would appear to have had considerable effect upon Shakespeare the dramatist. Montaigne's skepticism was so beautifully sustained that he very nearly could persuade us to share his conviction that Plato essentially was a skeptic. Hamlet's skepticism, though powerful and protracted, dominates the prince rather less than Montaigne's preoccupies the greatest of all essayists. In the mimesis of a consciousness, Hamlet exceeds Montaigne's image of himself as man thinking. Even Plato's Socrates does not provide us with so powerful and influential an instance of cognition in all its processes as does Hamlet.

Yet Hamlet is as much a man of action as he is an intellectual. His intellectuality indeed is an anomaly; by rights he should resemble Fortinbras more than he does those equally formidable wits, Rosalind and Falstaff, or those brilliant skeptics gone rancid, Iago and Edmund. We tend not to situate

Hamlet between Rosalind and Edmund, since good and evil hardly seem fit antinomies to enfold the Western hero of consciousness, the role that Hamlet has fulfilled since he first was enacted. Harry Levin eloquently warns against sentimentalizing Hamlet's tragedy, against "the obscurantist conclusion that thought is Hamlet's tragedy; Hamlet is the man who thinks too much; ineffectual because he is intellectual; his nemesis is failure of nerve, a nervous prostration." Surely Levin is accurate; Hamlet thinks not too much but too well, and so is a more-than-Nietzsche, well in advance of Nietzsche. Hamlet abandons art, and perishes of the truth, even becomes the truth in the act of perishing. His tragedy is not the tragedy of thought, but the Nietzschean tragedy of truth.

The character of Hamlet is the largest literary instance of what Max Weber meant by charisma, the power of a single individual over nature, and so at last over death. What matters most about Hamlet is the universality of his appeal; the only rival representation of a secular personality would appear to be that of King David in 2 Samuel, and David is both of vast historical consequence, and perhaps not wholly secular, so that Hamlet's uniqueness is not much diminished. David, after all, has the eternal blessing of Yahweh, while Hamlet's aura is self-generated, and therefore more mysterious. No other figure in secular literature induces love in so universal an audience, and no one else seems to need or want that love so little. It may be that negative elements in Hamlet's charisma are the largest single component in our general psychological sense that it is easier to love than to accept love. Hamlet is the subject and object of his own quest, an intolerable truth that helps render him into so destructive an angel, so dangerous an aesthetic pleasure that he can survive only as a story able to be told by Horatio, who loves Hamlet precisely as the audience does, because we are Horatio. Remove Horatio from the play, and we would have no way into the play, whether now or later.

What are we to make of Horatio as a literary character? He is the character as playgoer and reader, passive yet passionately receptive, and necessarily the most important figure in the tragedy except for Hamlet himself. Why? Because, without Horatio, Hamlet is forbiddingly beyond us. The prince is an agonist who engages supernal powers, even while he attempts to see his uncle Claudius as his almighty opposite. Hamlet's contention is with forces within his own labyrinthine nature, and so with the spirit of evil in heavenly places. Like wrestling Jacob, Hamlet confronts a nameless one among the Elohim, a stranger god who is his own Angel of Death. Does Hamlet win a new name? Without Horatio, the question would be unanswerable, but the presence of Horatio at the close allows us to see that the new name is the old one, but cleansed from the image of the dead father. Horatio is the witness who testifies to the apotheosis of the dead son, whose transfiguration has moved him, and

us, from the aesthetics of being outraged to the purified aesthetic dignity of a final disinterestedness, beyond ritual sacrifice, and beyond the romances of the family and of society.

Why does Horatio attempt suicide, when he realizes that Hamlet is dying? I blink at this moment, which strikes me as the most negative of all the many negative moments in the play:

HAMLET: Horatio, I am dead,  
Thou livest. Report me and my cause aright  
To the unsatisfied.

HORATIO: Never believe it,  
I am more an antique Roman than a Dane.  
Here's yet some liquor left.

Are we to associate Horatio with Eros, Antony's follower who kills himself to "escape the sorrow / Of Anthony's death," or with other heroic sacrificers to a shame culture? The court and kingdom of the wretched Claudius constitute something much closer to a guilt culture, and Horatio, despite his assertion of identity, hardly has wandered in from one of Shakespeare's Roman tragedies. Horatio's desire to die with Hamlet is a contamination from the audience that Shakespeare creates as a crucial element in *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Even as Iago writes a play with Othello and Desdemona as characters, or as Edmund writes with Gloucester and Edgar, so Shakespeare writes with Horatio and ourselves. Freud's Death Drive beyond the Pleasure Principle is a hyperbolic trope that we barely recognize as a trope, and similarly, we have difficulty seeing that Horatio's suicidal impulse is a metaphor for the little death that we die in conjunction with the apocalyptic end of a charismatic leader. Horatio truly resembles not the self-slain Eros of *Antony and Cleopatra* but the self-castrating Walt Whitman who gives up his tally of the sprig of lilac in his extraordinary elegy for Lincoln, the best of all American poems ever. The most extraordinary of Hamlet's universal aspects is his relationship to death. Whitman's Lincoln dies the exemplary death of the martyred father, the death of God, but Hamlet dies the death of the hero, by which I do not mean the death so much of the hero of tragedy but of the hero of Scripture, the death of Jonathan slain upon the high places. The death of Hamlet is upon the highest of all high places, the place of a final disinterestedness, which is otherwise inaccessible to us.

Can we not name that highest of high places as Hamlet's place, a new kind of stance, one that he himself does not assume until he returns in Act V from his abortive voyage to England? Strangely purged of mourning and melancholia for the dead father, Hamlet seems also beyond incestuous jealousy and a revenger's fury. In his heart there is a kind of fighting, and a sense of foreboding, not of

death but of the inadequacies of life: "Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart." Speaking to Horatio, and so to us, Hamlet announces a new sense that there are no accidents, or need not be:

If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.

"It" has to be the moment of dying, and "the readiness is all" might be regarded as Hamlet's motto throughout Act V. "To be or not to be" is answered now by "let be," which is a sort of heroic quietism, and clearly is the prince's final advice to the audience. There is an ultimate skepticism in Hamlet's assurance that none of us knows anything of what we will leave behind us when we die, and yet this skepticism does not dominate the prince as he dies:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,  
That are but mutes or audience to this act,  
Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death,  
Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you—  
But let it be.

What he could tell us might concern a knowledge that indeed he has achieved, which I think is a knowledge of his relationship to us, and necessarily to our surrogate, Horatio. Hamlet's extraordinary earlier praise of Horatio (Act III, Scene 2, lines 54–74) may seem excessive or even hyperbolic, but not when we consider it as being in what Emerson called the optative mood, particularly in regard to the audience, or to the ideal of an audience:

... for thou hast been  
As one in suff'ring all that suffers nothing,  
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards  
Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those  
Whose blood and judgment are so well co-meddled,  
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger  
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man  
That is not passions' slave, and I will wear him  
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,  
As I do thee.

Hamlet himself is hardly one who, in suffering all, suffers nothing, but then Hamlet is the hero, beyond Horatio and ourselves, and perhaps, at the close, so far beyond that he transcends the limits of the human. Horatio is the man

that the wily Claudius would not be able to use, partly because Horatio, like the audience, loves Hamlet, but partly also because Horatio stands apart from passion, from self-interest, from life. We are Horatio because he too is a spectator at Elsinore, yet a spectator who has taken sides, once and for all. Hamlet does not need Horatio's love, or ours, though he has it anyway. He needs Horatio to survive to tell his story, and us to receive his story, but he does not need our passion.

To discuss Hamlet as a literary character is to enter a labyrinth of speculation, past and present, that is bewildering in its diversity and in its self-contradictions. The personalities of Hamlet are a manifold, a veritable picnic of selves. Excess is the mark of Hamlet as it is of Falstaff, but the Falstaffian gusto, despite all its complexities, does not compare either to Hamlet's vitalism or to Hamlet's negative exuberance. To be the foremost single representation in all of Western literature, you ought to be the hero of an epic or at least a chronicle, but not the protagonist of a revenge tragedy. A consciousness as vast as Hamlet's ought to have been assigned a Faustian quest, or a journey to God, or a national project of renewal. All Hamlet has to do (if indeed he ought to do it) is chop down Claudius. Avenging the father does not require a Hamlet; a Fortinbras would be more than sufficient. What it was that could have inspired Shakespeare to this amazing disproportion between personage and enterprise seems to me fit subject for wonder.

The wonder is not that Hamlet should be too large for Elsinore, but that he may be too comprehensive for tragedy, just as Nietzsche may be too aesthetic for philosophy. We can envision Hamlet debating Freud, or Nietzsche; hardly a role for Lear or Othello. Yet we do not think of Hamlet as running away from the play, the way that Falstaff takes on a mimetic force that dwarfs the action of *Henry the Fourth, Part One*. Rather, Hamlet transforms his drama from within, so that as its center he becomes also a circumference that will not cease expanding. Long as the play is, we sense that Shakespeare legitimately could have made it much longer, by allowing Hamlet even more meditations upon the perplexities of being human. Indeed it is hardly possible to exclude any matter whatsoever as being irrelevant to a literary work centering upon Hamlet. We welcome Hamlet's opinions upon everything, just as we search the writings of Nietzsche or of Freud to see what they say upon jealousy or mourning or art or authority or whatsoever. Hamlet, a mere literary character, seems the only literary character who has and is an authorial presence, who could as well be a Montaigne, or a Proust, or a Freud. How Shakespeare renders such an illusion persuasive has been illuminated by a rich tradition of criticism. Why he should have ventured so drastic and original an illusion remains a burden for critics to come.

Doubtless it is wrong to see Hamlet as a Shakespearean self-portrait, but though wrong it seems inevitable, and has a sanction in Joyce's witty interpretation, when Stephen expounds his theory of *Hamlet* in *Ulysses*. What is clear is that Shakespeare has lavished intelligence upon Hamlet, who is not so much the most intelligent personage ever to be represented in language, as he is a new kind of intelligence, one without faith either in itself or in language. Hamlet is the precursor of Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein, as well as of Nietzsche and Freud. The prince understands that each of us is her own worst enemy, unable to distinguish desire from playacting, and liable to create disaster out of her equivocal doom-eagerness, a drive against death that courts death. The diseases of consciousness, one by one, seem invented by Hamlet as defenses that contaminate and are contaminated by the drive. Hamlet invents Freud in the sense that Freud is always in Hamlet's wake, condemned to map Hamlet's mind as the only route to a general map of the mind.

The consequence is that *Hamlet* is a Shakespearean reading of Freud that makes redundant any Freudian reading of Shakespeare. Hamlet is the theologian of the unconscious, anticipating Wordsworth as well as Freud. In the same way, Hamlet precedes Kafka and Beckett, by systematically evading every interpretation that might confine him to some reductive scheme that too easily transcends the realities of suffering. Hamlet, as an intelligence, is perpetually ahead of all later literature, which cannot deconstruct his dilemmas any more forcefully or overtly than he himself has done. Shakespeare makes all theorists of interpretation into so many instances of poor Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who would pluck out the heart of the mystery yet cannot play upon Hamlet, call him what instrument they will. Historicizing Hamlet, whether in old modes or new, ends in reducing the exegete to an antiquarian, unable to separate past values from impending immediacies. There is a politics to Hamlet's spirit, but it is not our politics, though it remains our spirit.

The sickness of the spirit, in Hamlet as in our lives, is perhaps the most perplexing issue of the tragedy. Feigning derangement, Hamlet also becomes deranged, and then returns, apparently self-purged of his alienations from reality. We never do learn the precise nature of his illness, except that it ensued from the trauma brought on by the murder of the father and the mother's fast remarriage. But for a moral intelligence that extraordinary, the squalors of the family romance, or even the king's murder, do not seem the necessary origins of the falling away from selfhood. Imaginative revulsion seems the source of madness in Shakespeare, whether in *Hamlet*, *Timon of Athens*, or *Macbeth*. Hamlet was as much a new kind of man as the King David of 2 Samuel had been: a figure who seemed to realize all of human possibility, an ultimate charismatic whose aura promised almost a triumph over nature. The biblical David has a superb pragmatic intelligence, but his changes are natural,

or else presided over by the favor of God's blessing. Hamlet changes in the Shakespearean way, by overhearing himself, whether he speaks to himself or to others. His study of himself is absolute, and founded upon a pondering of his own words. Divinity lies principally within himself, and manifests itself in his fate, as in the fates of all connected with him. His character is his *daimon*, and overdetermines every event.

Literary character, like authorial presence, always returns, whatever the tides of critical fashion. Hamlet's particular union of representational force and linguistic authority has much to do with his universal appeal, and makes it likely also that a return to the study of personality in literature must find one of its centers in this most radiant of all fictional consciousnesses.



**1995—Harold Bloom. “Introduction,”  
from *Hamlet* (Bloom's Notes)**

The largest mistake we can make about the play *Hamlet* is to think that it is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind, because (presumably) he thinks too much. Though Shakespeare adopts the subgenre of revenge tragedy, his drama has only superficial resemblances to other Elizabethan and Jacobean visions of revenge. The fundamental fact about Hamlet is not that he thinks too much, but that he thinks much too well. His is simply the most intelligent role ever written for the Western stage; indeed, he may be the most intelligent figure in all of world literature, West or East. Unable to rest in illusions of any kind, he thinks his way through to the truth, which may be a pure nihilism, yet a nihilism so purified that it possesses an absolute nobility, even a kind of transcendentalism. At the close Hamlet reasons that, since none of us knows anything about anyone else he leaves behind, what does it matter whether we leave at one time or another? Therefore let it be: the readiness or willingness to depart for that undiscovered country, death, from which no traveler returns, is for the matured Hamlet all in all. The rest is silence.

Shakespeare's longest and most notorious drama, *Hamlet* has imbued four centuries of interpreters with an endless capacity for wonder. We can be spurred to perpetually fresh surmises each time Hamlet speaks, because of a singular element in his consciousness. No other figure in the world's literature seems so much an authorial consciousness in his own right, as though he himself were composing Shakespeare's tragedy. The play itself tells us that he composes a small but significant part of it, by revising *The Murder of Gonzago* (a nonexistent work) into *The Mousetrap*, in order to catch the conscience of the murderous usurper, King Claudius. We do not know exactly which are Hamlet's contributions,

but I must think that they include the great speech of the Player-King that concludes:

Our wills and fates do so contrary run  
That our devices still are overthrown,  
Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.

Freud thought that there were no accidents, so that there was sense in everything, our characters being one with our fates. Hamlet teaches us otherwise, when his Player-King says: "Purpose is but the slave to memory." We find Hamlet's bleak wisdom difficult to absorb, if only because Hamlet is so charismatic a personality, as much so as King David in 2 Samuel or any other secular figure. I use "charismatic" in the sociologist Max Weber's sense: charisma is something that comes from outside the natural sphere, analogous to divine grace, though a displacement of it. Hamlet has an aura about him that never abandons him, even when his feigned madness crosses the line into serious disorder. Shakespeare has a handful of roles almost as intelligent as Hamlet's: Falstaff in the *Henry IV* plays, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Cleopatra, and the great villains Iago in *Othello* and Edmund in *King Lear*. But not even Falstaff and Cleopatra have a charisma comparable to Hamlet's. He is beyond us; G. Wilson Knight suggested that Hamlet was death's ambassador to us. Perhaps he is; in Act V, Hamlet speaks with the authority of that undiscovered country, and he hints that he could tell us something crucial if only he had time enough. Death does not permit it, but we receive a hint that the hero's final awareness of eternity is centered in his relation to us, in his concern not to leave a wounded name behind him.

Nietzsche, in the spirit of Hamlet, observed that we only can find words for that which is already dead in our hearts, so that there always is a kind of contempt in the act of speaking. But that is the earlier Hamlet, who seems at least a decade younger than the disinterested sage who returns from the sea to endure the catastrophe of the play's final act. The matured Hamlet who speaks to Horatio has no contempt for expression when he says: "Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart—." There no longer is a kind of fighting in his heart; the civil war within him has been replaced by intimations of the end. If, as Horatio elegizes, a noble heart cracks with Hamlet's death, we can interpret "noble" in its original sense of "seeing." A seeing heart is Hamlet's final identity, which is very different from the grief-filled, almost traumatized prince whom we encounter as the play opens. Shakespeare, the greatest master of representing changes in the soul, created the most mutable of all his protagonists in Hamlet. Each time that he overhears himself, Hamlet changes, and his radical inwardness continues to augment. Insofar as the history of Western consciousness features a perpetually growing inward self, Hamlet is the central hero of that consciousness.



Some critics have felt that Hamlet is too large a figure even for his own play; that seems to be the true basis for T. S. Eliot's peculiar judgment that his drama was "an aesthetic failure." What, one wonders, is an aesthetic success if *Hamlet* is a failure? And yet, Hamlet does walk out of his play, much as Sir John Falstaff seems to stride out of the two parts of *Henry IV*. Like the Don Quixote and Sancho Panza of Cervantes, Hamlet and Falstaff are universal creations, who stimulate us to envision them in situations and in enterprises not necessarily present in the original texts. Still, the qualities that elevate these four above other literary characters *are* very much present upon the page. In Hamlet's case, it is manifest that revenge is hardly a suitable quest for his greatness, even if revenge were morally less equivocal than it actually is. For so large and exalted a consciousness, one wants a quest comparable in scope to that of Dante the Pilgrim in *The Divine Comedy*. Hamlet palpably is aware of the disproportion between his spirit and the project of revenge; the enigma is why Shakespeare designed his most capacious role as the centerpiece in a domestic tragedy of blood.

A multitude of readers and playgoers, rightly or wrongly, have felt that there must be a very personal relationship between Hamlet and Shakespeare. We know that Shakespeare himself acted the part of the ghost of Hamlet's father when the play was first staged. To think of Hamlet as Shakespeare's son is a very fanciful notion, brilliantly worked out by James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus in the Library scene of *Ulysses*. Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, whose name differs from Hamlet's by only a single letter, died in 1596 at the age of eleven, less than five years before the play was written. What seems more apposite is A. C. Bradley's observation that Hamlet is the only Shakespearean character who seems capable of writing the play in which he appears. It would be extraordinary if Shakespeare, who imagined Hamlet, had possessed aspects of consciousness left unexplored in Hamlet. Sometimes I entertain another fancy, which is that Hamlet, who uncovers elements of reality that we would not have found for ourselves without him, performed something of the same function for Shakespeare himself.



# HAMLET

## IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY



“We defy augury,” Hamlet declares as he approaches his tragic end. More often, however, augury defies us. That said, a few things about critical trends about *Hamlet* in the twenty-first century already seem clear and can be shared without too much fear of being victimized by that strumpet Fortune.

First, less than a decade into this new century, the diversity of *Hamlet* criticism continued to flourish not only intellectually, but also in quantitative terms. By 2007, at least one major book-length study of *Hamlet* had appeared for each year of the new millennium. A brief overview will highlight the breadth of approaches among these studies.

John Lee in *Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” and the Controversies of Self* (2000) participated in the recent resurgence of character criticism by addressing a question that is central to the history of *Hamlet* criticism: Does Hamlet have a “self-constituting sense of self”? Lee returned to the play’s earliest critics to better understand why contemporary critics, especially New Historicists and Cultural Materialists, ignore or attack the play’s treatment of identity and “inner life.” Lee sets himself apart by claiming that Hamlet’s sense of self is central to the tragedy.

Alexander Welsh, in his 2001 study *Hamlet and His Modern Guises*, contended that Hamlet became a modern hero as soon as Shakespeare created him. Welsh wrote that Shakespeare’s awareness of his own father’s impending death in 1601 spurred the composition of his tragedy, which “put in order his experience, and that of so many other sons and fathers.” According to Welsh, Shakespeare’s contemporary playwrights and also later novelists such as Charles Dickens were “parodists of sorts” for whom *Hamlet* became a “tragicomedy of modern consciousness.”

In *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* (2003) Harold Bloom offered a “postlude” to his full-scale study, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998). This shorter, more concentrated volume redirected focus away from that of the prior book (the play’s origins) in order to arrive at questions not encountered there—in particular, the “question of Shakespeare himself.” “Where does he stand,

implicitly, in relation to his own work?" Bloom asked. How does Shakespeare handle the play's many mysteries?

Stephen Greenblatt, the most prominent of the critics in the New Historicist movement, demonstrated the cultural and contextual emphases of this reigning critical method in *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2003). His study explores the effects of the English Reformation on contemporary notions of the afterlife, especially with regard to spirits of the dead and the Catholic notion of purgatory. A central subject for this inquiry is the ghost: What are its nature, identity, and motivations? And consequently, how sound is Hamlet's justification as an avenger? Previous Shakespeare critics had addressed this question using different critical principles. They included: Fredson Bowers ("Hamlet as Minister and Scourge," 1951) and particularly Eleanor Prosser (*Hamlet and Revenge*, 1967), who weighed the evidence for the ghost's actually being a demon intent on damning Hamlet rather than the spirit of his father.

Another recent historicist study is Adrian A. Husain's *Politics and Genre in "Hamlet"* (2005). Here Husain has used genre as a means of analyzing popular historicist subjects such as identity and power. In particular, Husain described generic models for Shakespeare's plays in the Italian Renaissance writings of Machiavelli and Castiglione.

Two very recent studies have considered Hamlet in a present-day context, namely the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. Linda Charnes argued in *Hamlet's Heirs: Shakespeare and the Politics of a New Millennium* (2006) that all people today are Hamlet's heirs, facing many of the dilemmas endured by the prince. Legacy and responsibility to other generations are themes resonating in both *Hamlet* and current American and British political culture, she wrote. If Shakespeare is to matter and to offer his own legacy to a Western democratic culture (which itself has "mutated" in recent years), Charnes insisted, he must be read differently. Contemporary urgency is less explicit in Margreta de Grazia's *"Hamlet" Without Hamlet* (2007), but it certainly informed her views. Too frequently, de Grazia insisted, critics' questions about the character and consciousness of Hamlet have abstracted the play. This, she said, precludes a full appreciation of the play's central strengths and worldly concerns—such as genealogy, property, and inheritance.

Finally, James Shapiro in *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare, 1599* (2005) provided a study of Shakespeare with an intensive, single-year focus. Shapiro argued that in 1599 Shakespeare went from being a strong playwright with a series of masterpieces already behind him to the truly remarkable, unparalleled writer so admired today. It was a miraculous year, said Shapiro, when the uncertainties surrounding Shakespeare's playing company were resolved in the creation of the Globe Theatre. This "new start," he wrote, gave the playwright greater freedom of conception and stimulated the quick writing of some of his

greatest works, including *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It*, and at least the first draft of *Hamlet*. Shapiro approached *Hamlet* from a variety of angles. He speculated on the influence of the French essayist Michel de Montaigne on Shakespeare's creation of a new kind of personality in the character of Hamlet, and he keeps in mind the theatrical limitations that must have necessitated some of the play's revisions. Always appreciative but unwilling to sanctify his subject, Shapiro observed amid the different versions of the play a degree of uncertainty in the playwright as to where exactly his play was going. He furthermore sensed a shift in the hero from the "impossibility of knowing" to the "unimportance of having." Shapiro's book reflects the promise of Shakespeare criticism in the twenty-first century and its recent willingness to address a less specialized, common readership.

Another certainty about Shakespeare and *Hamlet* in the twenty-first century is this: Students of Shakespeare will have access to a greater variety of aids to facilitate their study than at any previous time. Readers determined to understand *Hamlet* in the broader contexts of modernity and of the previous century's intellectual environments have many texts to assist them.

In addition to the critical works already described—and a host of others—is a broad array of media resources that will only expand as time goes by. The performance of *Hamlet* is also experiencing a vibrant present, both on stage and screen. A wide range of productions are available on DVD, including Peter Hall's experimental version (affectionately called "the naked Hamlet"); Peter Brook's *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, starring Adrian Lester in the lead role; and Michael Almereyda's big-screen modernization with Ethan Hawke in a slick, corporate Manhattan setting. Other versions feature actors Nicol Williamson, Derek Jacobi, Mel Gibson, Kevin Kline, Kenneth Branagh, and Campbell Scott. A host of books suggests how quickly the critical discourse about "multimedia Shakespeare" is developing.

Two other areas of acute contemporary interest—globalization and technology—easily connect with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Students interested in critics' increasing inclination to think "globally" about Shakespeare will be happy to know about a project of the University of Delaware (a nation-specific series of essay collections about Shakespeare's influence in particular countries) as well as a collection titled *Thirty-One New Essays on Hamlet* (2000), published in Delhi and reprinting articles from the Indian journal *Hamlet Studies*. Arguably the strongest impetus to globalize is the World Wide Web, and Shakespeare and his play enjoy a large and ever-growing online presence. Recommended Web sites include World Shakespeare Online, Arden Net, SHAKSPER, and those sites maintained by Folger Shakespeare Library and MIT. Favorite sites specific to *Hamlet* include Blogging the Dane, Hamlet on the Ramparts, Hamlet Online, and the Hamlet Homepage. Hamlet Works deserves special mention for its scholarly thoroughness and excellent presentation of *Hamlet's* multiple texts; the

site is connected with the New Variorum *Hamlet* project and is edited by Bernice W. Kliman and several others. Finally, the World Shakespeare Bibliography is a database available at many college libraries, providing students with an unparalleled wealth of annotated entries.

Predictions about *Hamlet* in the twenty-first century include this final certainty: *Hamlet* and its characters will continue to pervade contemporary culture. No matter how heightened one's attention is to signs of Shakespeare's influence, the landscape will always be more populated by Hamlet and his afterlives than at first believed or perceived. (Consider this random sampling: Pop music versions of the play, called *Hamlet Remix'd* and *I Am Hamlet*, have appeared recently. A theater troupe in Utah known as Poor Yorick Studios is alive and well. A 2006 travel section of the *Chicago Tribune* featured a cover story on Kronberg Castle—"Where Sweden meets Denmark—and Hamlet." An undergraduate from Rutgers University recently won a prize for her essay "Hamletito: My Quest for an Hispanic Hamlet." At the beginning of the new millennium, an edition of *Hamlet* was published in Klingon, the language made popular by the television show *Star Trek*. Recently in London's *Observer*, the movie star Alan Cumming admitted that a nervous breakdown he suffered in 1993 was brought on, he thinks, by the demands of performing as Hamlet. The poet David Wright wrote, "Some undressed corpse returning to the clay / becomes occasion for soliloquy," and the world is fuller than ever with soliloquies—not *by* Hamlet, but because of him.)

The catalog of *Hamlet* references in the twenty-first century is indeed exhausting. But the sheer breadth of *Hamlet*'s presence in the world's cultural history confirms that the play continues to flourish more than 400 years after it was first performed.

### 2005—James Shapiro.

#### From *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare, 1599*

James Shapiro is a professor of English at Columbia University. His other books include *Rival Playwrights* (1991), which examines Shakespeare's relationship to Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson, and *Shakespeare and the Jews* (1992).

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### Hamlet: A New Protagonist (from p. 302)

In locating the conflict of the play within his protagonist, Shakespeare transformed forever the traditional revenge play in which that conflict had until now been externalized, fought out between the hero and powerful adversaries, and in which a hero (like the Amleth of Shakespeare's sources) had to delay

for practical, self-protective reasons. This was one of the great breakthroughs in his career. Yet in revising his first draft of *Hamlet* . . . Shakespeare discovered that he had pressed his experiment too far and belatedly recognized that there were unforeseen dangers in locating too much of the conflict in Hamlet's consciousness. The lesson learned, Shakespeare revised until he got the balance right. He had at last found a path into tragedy, one that soon led him into the divided souls of *Othello* and *Macbeth*. The innovation inspired by the essay-like soliloquy opened the way as well into the world of his dark and brilliant Jacobean problem comedies *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That End's Well*, which turn not on comedy's familiar obstacles but rather on the wrenching internalized struggle of characters like Isabella and Bertram.

### An Example of Revision (from p. 311–312)

“How all occasions” is a fitting culmination to the sequence of soliloquies that preceded it—but only if we want to see the resolution of the play as dark and existential. Hamlet knows that he has to kill Claudius but cannot justify such an action since the traditional avenger's appeal to honor rings hollow. This bitter and hard-won knowledge serves as a capstone to earlier, anguished soliloquies. Yet as Shakespeare saw, it derailed the revenge plot. The resolution of the play was now a problem, for it had to be more motivated than the “accidental judgments” and “casual slaughters” Horatio describes (5.2.361). Yet for a resigned Hamlet—capable only of bloody “thoughts” not deeds (4.4.66)—to take revenge after this is to concede that he is no better than Fortinbras. In the final scene, mortally wounded and having killed Claudius, Hamlet hears the “warlike noise” (5.2.349) of Fortinbras's approaching army and declares, “I do prophesy th' election lights / On Fortinbras; he has my dying voice” (5.2.355–56). What could possibly justify Hamlet's urging Fortinbras's succession? These words are either spoken ironically or are the stoical observation of someone who knows that even Alexander the Great and Caesar return to dust. The entry of Fortinbras backed by his lawless troops confirms that there will be no “election” in Denmark—the country is his for the taking. Hamlet can have no illusions about the fate of Denmark under the rule of an opportunist willing to sacrifice the lives of his own followers. A play that began with hurried defensive preparations to withstand Fortinbras's troops ends with a capitulation to them, the poisoned bodies of the Danish ruling family sprawled onstage, a fitting image of the “impostume of much wealth and peace, / That inward breaks.”





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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



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