Hamlet

William Shakespeare

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Introduction

Hamlet is without question the most famous play in the English language. Probably written in 1601 or 1602, the tragedy is a milestone in Shakespeare's dramatic development; according to most critics, the playwright achieved artistic maturity in this work through his brilliant depiction of the hero's struggle with two opposing forces: moral integrity and the need to avenge his father's murder. Shakespeare's focus on this conflict was a revolutionary departure from contemporary revenge tragedies which tended to graphically dramatize violent acts on stage in that it emphasized the hero's dilemma rather than the depiction of bloody deeds. The dramatist's genius is also evident in his transformation of the play's literary sources--especially the contemporaneous *Ur-Hamlet*--into an exceptional tragedy.

The *Ur-Hamlet*, or "original *Hamlet*," is a lost play that scholars believe was written mere decades before Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, providing much of the dramatic context for the later tragedy. Numerous sixteenth-century records attest to the existence of the *Ur-Hamlet*, with some references linking its composition to Thomas Kyd, the author of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Other principal sources available to Shakespeare were Saxo Grammaticus's *Historiae Danicae* (circa 1200), which features a popular legend with a plot similar to *Hamlet*, and Francois de Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques, Extraicts des Oeuvres Italiennes de Bandel* (7 Vols.; 1559-80), which provides an expanded account of the story recorded in the *Historiae Danicae*. From these sources Shakespeare created *Hamlet*, a supremely rich and complex literary work that continues to delight both readers and audiences with its myriad meanings and interpretations.

Plot Synopsis

Act I:

For two nights, the Ghost of King Hamlet has haunted the soldiers guarding Elsinore castle. On the third night, Horatio joins the watch; when the Ghost appears, however, it does not speak. Horatio surmises that the spirit represents abad omen of Denmark's future. The next day, Claudius addresses the assembled aristocrats at court; he thanks them for helping him to succeed to the throne of Denmark and for permitting his hasty marriage to Gertrude. The king then directs two ambassadors to travel to Norway and resolve the conflict with Fortinbras, who threatens Denmark with war. Claudius next turns his attention to Hamlet, whom he and Gertrude chide for expressing excessive melancholy over his father's death. Once alone, Hamlet describes the depth of his grief and his disgust at Gertrude's marriage to Claudius so soon after her husband's death. After the prince's speech, Horatio enters and tells him about the Ghost; Hamlet decides to stand watch with the guards that night. Elsewhere, Laertes, who has secured the king's permission to return to his studies in Paris, warns Opheliato beware Hamlet's romantic advances. When Polonius enters, he gives Laertes some parting advice and upon learning of his daughter's budding relationship with Hamlet, forbids her to see him again. That night the Ghost appears to Hamlet, demanding revenge for his murder at the hands of Claudius. The prince promises to undertake the task, swearing that he will concentrate on nothing else until it is accomplished.

Act II:

Though several weeks have passed since Hamlet's meeting with the Ghost, he cannot bring himself to act. He not only dislikes the bloody deed he must perform, but, in adeep depression, begins to suspect that the Ghost is an evil spirit trying to trick him. While the prince bides his time, he assumes an "antic disposition" and at one point frightens Opheliawith his madness. Because the girl has ended their relationship,

Polonius concludes that Hamlet's insanity reflects lovesickness. He reports his observations to Claudius, and the two men plot ameeting between the prince and Opheliato further determine the nature of Hamlet's madness. Meanwhile, Claudius enlists Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to discern the cause of the prince's insanity. A troupe of actors arrives at Elsinore after Hamlet's school friends, and the prince resolves to have them perform before Claudius that evening areenactment of King Hamlet's murder. Hamlet concludes that any demonstration of guilt by his uncle during the performance will confirm the Ghost's story and justify his revenge.

Act III:

The next day Polonius and Claudius eavesdrop on Hamlet and Opheliaas the prince abuses the girl with violent denunciations of women and marriage. After Hamlet storms away, Polonius recommends that they attempt asimilar interview between Hamlet and Gertrude; Claudius agrees, but concerned with the prince's increasingly dangerous behavior, decides to send him to England. Later, the players follow Hamlet's instructions and re-enact Claudius's crime before the royal court. After witnessing the performance, the king flees the hall in astate of distress. Alone in his chambers, Claudius tries to pray. Hamlet discovers his uncle knelt in prayer and, though the moment is ideal, restrains himself from taking revenge, reasoning that if the king is killed in an act of repentance his soul will immediately go to heaven. Instead, the prince proceeds to Gertrude's chamber, where he denounces her so violently that Polonius-who is concealed behind acurtain-becomes alarmed and cries for help. **In** arage, Hamlet thrusts his sword through the curtain and fatally stabs the counselor. The prince resumes berating his mother until the Ghost reappears to remind him of his mission; Hamlet implores her to repent of her sins before leaving with Polonius's body.

Act IV:

After Hamlet leaves his mother, Gertrude informs Claudius that the prince has killed Polonius. Following aface-to-face encounter, the king orders Hamlet to leave immediately for England and gives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern asealed letter authorizing the prince's execution. As he prepares to board ship, Hamlet observes Fortinbras's army encamped nearby. In along soliloquy he compares his own dilemmato the impending slaughter that Fortinbras's forces will surely face over aworthless plot of land. He ultimately resolves that from now on he will show no mercy in his quest for revenge. Meanwhile, Laertes returns from France, furiously demanding an explanation for his father's murder. The youth's grief and anger mounts when he discovers that Opheliahas gone insane. While Claudius attempts to placate the incensed youth, sailors arrive at Elsinore bearing letters from Hamlet. Horatio receives the first note, which describes how the prince was taken prisoner by pirates who attacked his ship on the high seas and thereafter returned him to Denmark. Hamlet's note to Claudius announces his imminent return to Elsinore, prompting the king and Laertes to devise aplot to murder him during afencing match in which Laertes will fight with apoison-tipped foil. Gertrude then enters in adistraught state and informs the two men that Opheliahas drowned.

Act V:

Hamlet and Horatio meet in agraveyard near Elsinore where the prince and agravedigger have acandid discussion about corpses. As Ophelia's funeral procession approaches, the two men conceal themselves to watch the ceremony. When Hamlet realizes that the funeral is Ophelia's. he reveals himself and protests that his love for the girl was greater than Laertes's, whereupon the two men scuffle over the grave. Later, Hamlet tells Horatio about Claudius's plot to have him killed in England and about switching the king's letter with one ordering the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead. When acourtier enters with Laertes's invitation to afencing match, Horatio warns Hamlet of atrap. The prince accepts the challenge, however,

maintaining that he must yield his fate to divine will. During the match. Claudius drops apoisoned pearl in acup of wine intended for the prince. When Hamlet refuses the proffered drink. Gertrude unwittingly drinks it herself. *As* they continue the match, Laertes cuts the prince with his tainted sword; Hamlet furiously retaliates, the two switch foils, and the prince in turn wounds Laertes with the poisoned weapon. When Gertrude collapses, Laertes realizes Claudius's treachery; he begs Hamlet's forgiveness and blames the king before he dies. Hamlet attacks Claudius, stabbing him first with his sword and then forcing him to drink from the venomous cup before he, too, succumbs to the effects of the poison. Distressed at the sight of his dying friend, Horatio tries to drink some tainted wine, but Hamlet prevents him, telling him that he must explain to the world how such acatastrophe happened. The prince then names Fortinbras king of Denmark. After Hamlet dies, the prince of Norway enters, having victoriously returned from the war with Poland, and orders some of his soldiers to bury Hamlet with full military honors.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

It is bitter cold. Outside a castle in Elsinore, Denmark, Bernardo, an officer in the King's service, reports promptly to Francisco, who is on watch, at his post. He tells Francisco to go to bed. Before he does, Marcellus and Horatio approach them. Marcellus asks Bernardo if the "thing" has appeared again during his watch. Bernardo says Marcellus has brought Horatio to confirm what they have seen. Just as they are about to relate their story to Horatio, the Ghost appears. Horatio confirms it looks like the recently deceased King when he, in full armor, battled Norway. But when questioned, the Ghost vanishes. When the Ghost returns, Horatio tries again, but it disappears with the cock's crow. Bernardo says it was about to speak. Horatio will now tell Prince Hamlet.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

This famous opening scene focuses on the strange appearance of a Ghost to several soldiers. The Ghost appears to be the recently deceased King of Denmark, Hamlet's father. It is confronted by Hamlet's friend, Horatio. The Ghost's appearance seems to indicate a need to communicate, yet a frustration or inability to present its case. This is a powerful way of setting up the story- with a mysterious apparition that seems to definitely invoke Prince Hamlet's participation.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

This scene takes place in a room of state in the Castle. Claudius, the present King of Denmark, who has replaced Hamlet's father, speaks with pain of his brother's death and his sad marriage to Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. Fortinbras, son of the King of Norway, who was killed in battle by the Danes, now seeks his lands returned. Claudius dispatches Cornelius and Voltimand to "Old Norway" to make the peace. Laertes, the son of Polonius, petitions Claudius, who he has visited for his coronation, to let him return to France. After Polonius' consent is clear, Claudius gives him permission. Claudius then turns to Hamlet, who is beside himself with grief and suspicious of Claudius. Hamlet's grief, as he tells his mother, Gertrude, is beyond mere signs and black capes which are only "the trappings and the suits of woe." Claudius takes him to task for this. Taken beyond a certain point, grief is "unmanly," an affront to Heaven. Claudius does not want him to go to school in Wittenberg but to stay in Court with Gertrude and himself. Hamlet accedes to Claudius and his mother's request. They all exit, leaving Hamlet alone. In his soliloquy, he mourns the death of his father. He is disconsolate with pain, wishing his "flesh would melt and resolve itself into a dew." He resents most keenly his mother's quick marriage to Claudius, forgetting his father, who she had clung to, originally, with unabated appetite. Horatio, Marcellus and Bernardo enter. Horatio, Hamlet's close friend, tells him how he has seen the apparition the night before, its pale countenance filled more with sorrow than anger. Hamlet swears he will speak to it though Hell itself should protest and open its jaws to consume him.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

This is a complex scene. Claudius seems, in his opening speech, to try and justify his position and his marriage. Claudius allows Polonius' son, Laertes, to return to France. He sends two peacekeepers to Norway to try and mollify the Norwegian Prince,

Fortinbras, now an enemy of Denmark. It is clear that Hamlet gravely distrusts Claudius and resents his quick marriage to Gertrude his mother. Hamlet's grief is enormous and fills his actions eventually with complex and murderous intent. In this scene, he is more mournful and confused at his mother's sudden marriage. He tells this with great bitterness to his visiting friend, Horatio, who has come to speak with him about the Ghost. Once hearing of his Father's Ghost, Hamlet is determined to speak with it. Hamlet, whose mourning is bigger than life, seems tragically imprisoned by his grief.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

This scene takes place in a room in Polonius' house. Polonius is the father of Laertes and Ophelia, who speak with each other in the beginning of the scene. Laertes warns his sister against Hamlet's profession of love. As Prince, he is "subject to his birth" and his love is entwined with matters of state. Their father, Polonius, then enters. He is happy to see them both, but then gives Laertes some words of wisdom before his departure. In this famous speech, he tells him neither "a borrower nor lender be;" to buy costly, but not ostentatious clothes; to listen to others, but to lend his voice carefully and to be true to himself. Laertes leaves. Polonius hears of Hamlet's entreaties of love, but, like Laertes, warns her against Hamlet and asks her to stay away from him.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

Even those who are close to Hamlet are fearful of his intentions. To Laertes and to Polonius, Hamlet's profession of love to Ophelia is a dangerous and impermanent affiliation, despite his proximity to the throne. This scene shows how, despite his great grief, Hamlet is in the throes of love and adoration. Still, can his stability and intentions be trust in light of the political intrigues common to his high position and the ravaging passions of his grief? In this play, in respect of and in contrast to Polonius' memorable injunction to his son, Hamlet is not true to any man. Is it because Hamlet, in some sense, is not true to himself? In the classical description of tragedy by Aristotle, the protagonist must have, at his core, some fatal quality of *hubris* or pride. Is there such a flaw in Hamlet, who doubtless has been grievously betrayed by his parents?

Act 1, Scene 4

Act 1, Scene 4 Summary

This scene takes place again outside the castle in Elsinore, Denmark, where the Ghost was first sighted. The witching hour has struck and Hamlet, with Marcellus and Horatio, waits for the Ghost. There are trumpets and the firing of ordinance in the distance. The King has begun his nightly revelries which, by Hamlet's account, has made the Danes appear as drunkards to other states in Europe. Now the Ghost appears and, although Marcellus and Horatio try to stop him, Hamlet goes off with the Ghost. His friends disobey his wishes and follow him.

Act 1, Scene 4 Analysis

When Hamlet encounters the Ghost, he speaks of it as something imperfect- that makes the "night hideous." Still, he follows it unquestioningly. Perhaps Hamlet's flaw is his desire for revenge. Is this not shown in his eagerness to obey a creature who admits to its own terrible sins? Is Hamlet willing to forge a bond with Hell to make revenge upon his enemies? When does one overstep justice in allowing the pleasures of retribution to dominate one the light of the soul?

Act 1, Scene 5

Act 1, Scene 5 Summary

And, now, at last, the Ghost talks to Hamlet. It claims, indeed, to be his father, who "walks the night," but in the day experiences a hellish existence, part of a kind of purgatory to burn away the sins of his life. He tells Hamlet that, if he knew about his sufferings, Hamlet's hairs would stand up like the quills of a "fretful porcupine." His father then asks him to avenge his murder. Indeed, it is Claudius who seduced his queen, an act of incest to his father, and then killed him by pouring the poison, habenon, in his ears while he lay sleeping in his orchard. Hamlet now swears revenge against his uncle. He then swears his friends, Horatio and Marcellus, to secrecy about the Ghost.

Act 1, Scene 5 Analysis

Before his encounter with the Ghost, Hamlet has been walking in instinct, not knowledge about his father's fate. It is interesting to see how Hamlet regards the Ghost- not as if he is speaking to his father himself, but rather as a kind of dark and somewhat frightening shadow of his father. He is allied with this being, but it is not a warm, friendly alliance- for he seems more horrified than delighted in its presence.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

This scene is set in a room in Polonius' house. Polonius has decided to hire Reynaldo to surreptitiously investigate his son's behavior. Does he game, does he drink, does he go to brothels? He cautions discretion and does not want to cause him embarrassment, yet he wants to draw him out by creating certain incidents that will force him disclose his actions and his views. Ophelia then comes in. Hamlet, disarrayed in attire and disposition, comes to her and stares at her long and perhaps lovingly, sighing deeply and then departs. Polonius is now afraid that Hamlet is desperately caught up in love of Ophelia and may have handled the situation wrong and is determined to right it.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

When Laertes left for France, Polonius gave him some extensive advice. We now see how serious Polonius is to assure that Laertes will be a virtuous victor over life. He has actually hired Reynaldo to monitor and perhaps coax his son along the path to virtue. This play is a lot about distrust- with one person pitted against the other. Polonius distrusts his son and Hamlet; Hamlet distrusts his mother and father; Ophelia distrusts Hamlet. Suspicion is like a giant sun in this play, blotting out compassion and love and other human virtues. When Ophelia comes in, Polonius sees, for the moment, the limitations of his attitude towards Hamlet and is seriously concerned about the state of his passion for Ophelia.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

This scene takes place in a room in the castle. The first part of this scene takes place with the introduction of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's old friends. They have been sent to the Court to seek out the cause of Hamlet's affliction. They are dismissed and Polonius enters. He, indeed, believes that he has found the problem with Hamlet, the cause of his seeming madness. But before he will explain it, he brings Voltimand and Cornelius, the ambassadors to Norway, to the royal couple. They have affected some kind of peace between Denmark and Norway, Fortinbras, the angered Prince, having been mollified. They leave and Polonius now can reveal that Hamlet is deeply involved with his daughter, Ophelia. He reads Hamlet's note to her to Claudius and Gertrude. They decide to hide while Polonius confronts Hamlet. At first, Hamlet, appearing to have lost his wits, seems to mistake him for a fishmonger but still mentions his daughter. Hamlet's act convinces appears to connect Ophelia with his madness. Polonius leaves and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern greet their old friend. Hamlet says that he knows they have been sent by Claudius and Gertrude. Hamlet confesses that he has "lost all mirth" and sees Earth as a "sterile promontory." His friends reply that they have brought some players to entertain him. Polonius comes in with the players. They talk about various plays and then all leave with Polonius except for one of the actors. Hamlet talks to him about putting on a variation of the Murder of Gonzago in which Hamlet will insert a few lines. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave Hamlet alone on the stage. He tells how he will use this play to reenact the murder of his father and thereby see if he can "catch the conscience of the king" or discern the guilt of Claudius. After all, it is possible that the Ghost he saw was the devil itself and was deceiving him. Hamlet wants to know the truth about his father's death.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

The royal couple, supposedly alarmed at Hamlet's behavior, have summoned his good friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to find the cause of his aberration. On the same hand, Polonius believes he has found the answer in Hamlet's love for his daughter. Is the royal couple truly seeking a cure for Hamlet for his benefit or do they harbor suspicions about the reality of his madness? They seem, on the surface, to be concerned for his welfare, to find a therapy for his madness.

In this complex scene, Hamlet reveals himself to be very sly and treacherous. He feigns madness before Polonius and the hidden royal couple, creating some credibility for Polonius' claim that Hamlet's behavior is caused by the love of his daughter, but leaving no doubt as to his aberrated state of mind. Becoming somewhat more lucid, he tells his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he knows who sent them. He has decided to use a play to provoke the truth from the King, trusting his own judgment in the matter over the Ghostly apparition's. Hamlet distrusts the Ghost. Is Hamlet's feigned madness a truly useful tactic or is it a flawed strategy that yields results harmful to Hamlet himself?

Act 3, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

This scene takes place in a castle in Elsinore with Polonius and Ophelia present with the royal couple as well as Hamlet's two friends from Wittenberg. It is clear that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seemed bewildered as how to unravel the truth of Hamlet's disposition. Still, they clearly convey their skepticism to the King. Claudius who is relieved to hear of Hamlet's pleasure in contemplating the evening's play. His friends leave. Gertrude then leaves so that Claudius can watch a so-called private encounter Hamlet and Ophelia. In the encounter, Hamlet questions life itself in his famous, "to be or not to be," speech. Further, he denies his love for Ophelia and tells her to "get thee to a nunnery." Claudius wonders at his denial and wonders if there is not something more than Polonius assertion that Ophelia is the cause of his condition. He is thinking of sending Hamlet to England if this matter cannot be quickly resolved.

Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

Much of this scene is a further attempt to unravel the cause and perhaps the veracity of Hamlet's madness. Yet, in another way, is it not true that Hamlet's behavior, in its most rational moments, is driven by an almost suicidal despair, a morbid depression with the world? Is there not a real madness to his feigned madness? If there is, it is in the direction of taking a moribund stance on reality. Indeed, if Hamlet loves Ophelia, in reality, does he not impose some of his real perspective on her, his cancellation of the joys and hopes of human existence? By adopting a feigned madness, Hamlet imposes on himself and his victims, both good and evil, a confusion about the reality around them. And does not Hamlet get caught in his own game?

Act 3, Scene 2

Act 3, Scene 2 Summary

Hamlet coaches the First Player on how to give his speech. He asks Horatio to watch Claudius as to his reaction to a certain scene. He refuses to sit by his mother, but asks to lay his head on Ophelia's lap while laying at her feet. He laments the cheerfulness of his mother in light of his father's recent death. A "dumb show" or silent pantomime begins, which depicts the scenario presented by the Ghost as to the poisoning of Hamlet's father. Later on, as the play recapitulates the death scene, Claudius calls for the lights. He lives. Hamlet calls for music as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern re-enter. Guildenstern has been sent to Hamlet by the Queen, who is extremely upset. She calls for him. Then, Polonius beseeches his presence for the same reason. Hamlet will now go to his mother in this strange, "witching time" of night. He will speak "daggers" to her. He will stab her with his words, but he will not kill her.

Act 3, Scene 2 Analysis

This is a triumphant moment for Hamlet because he is about to set the wheels in motion to test Claudius and Gertrude. He presents a variation on a popular play that is customized to represent the actual actions which caused his father's death. The results are staggering. Indeed, upon the murder be recounted for the second time (the first was in silence), Claudius calls for the lights to come on. It is enough for Hamlet and his friend, Horatio. This play within a play is the testing ground for truth for Hamlet. As it succeeds, it also unleashes the power of his retribution. Again, is this retribution a healthy thing for men in Hamlet's position or is there another road?

Act 3, Scene 3

Act 3, Scene 3 Summary

Claudius now wants Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to take Hamlet to England on a political mission. They accede to his command and leave. Polonius now enters. He tells Claudius he will hide behind a curtain while Hamlet speaks to his mother. Now Claudius, believing he is alone, confesses his crime to heaven. There is a futility in his gesture. Does he not have the crown, the wealth and the Queen? What good is repentance with all these things? Hamlet comes, knowing Claudius' guilt. But he does not wish to kill him at the moment, while he is praying. For if he did, perhaps he would send Claudius to heaven. He would rather choose a less spiritually propitious moment and dispatch him to Hell forthrightly.

Act 3, Scene 3 Analysis

Hamlet now has all the knowledge he needs a personal confession from Claudius. Shall he kill him when he is praying? If we did not see it before, we see it now. Hamlet wants not just justice, but dire vengeance so much he is willing to withhold his sword until the right moment. The Ghost's story has been vindicated and Hamlet's oath is on its way to fulfillment. The tragedy of Hamlet is not what has happened to Hamlet's father but will happen to Hamlet when he puts revenge above love to Ophelia, his public image as the sole an heir to the throne of Denmark and his covenant with Heaven to respect its wishes and purposes.

Act 3, Scene 4

Act 3, Scene 4 Summary

Polonius hides as Hamlet visits his mother. When she calls for help, Polonius calls out and Hamlet kills him with his sword through the arras. Moments later, he discovers he has killed Polonius. Hamlet bitterly berates Gertrude, saying her blood, with age, should be tame enough to temper her love with wisdom. He dwells on her fiendish, incestuous acts until she herself tells him- enough! She now sees how black her soul is. The Ghost then appears. Gertrude, seeing him talking, thinks that he is mad and asks to whom he speaks. He tells her of the Ghost but she thinks he has contrived it with his mind. He asks her to repent and to refrain from his uncle's bed. No matter what happens, she must not tell the King that Hamlet is not mad. She swears she will not. He drags Polonius' body out of the room.

Act 3, Scene 4 Analysis

In this scene, Hamlet's plans now crystallize into action. His suspicions have now been transformed into certainties. When visits him mother, he tells her she cannot go until he has set up a glass for her to see the deepest part of herself. She misinterprets him, thinking he means to kill her and cries for help, alarming the hidden Polonius. Thinking perhaps Polonius is Claudius, he kills him. In this scene, the murder of Polonius proves that Hamlet is ready to kill to find justice. Polonius is just an accidental outcropping of this intention, which he sees as mostly inconsequential. Hamlet is all about revenge. He does not truly repent of Polonius' death. He is a man obsessed.

Act 4, Scene 1

Act 4, Scene 1 Summary

Claudius solicits Gertrude the reason for her heavy sighs. She says she has seen Hamlet, and he is mad. In fact, in his madness, he has slain Polonius. He asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to go find Hamlet and take Polonius' body to the chapel. They must take Hamlet away with them to England.

Act 4, Scene 1 Analysis

Gertrude now knows she cannot level with the King. Her loyalty, perhaps out self-preservation, is with her son. So she co-operates with Hamlet in presenting his madness to the King.

Act 4, Scene 2

Act 4, Scene 2 Summary

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go to see Hamlet, trying to locate the body of the slain Polonius. But Hamlet is not co-operative, playing word games with Rosencrantz, referring to him as the King's sponge

Act 4, Scene 2 Analysis

Hamlet is back to his old tricks again, apparently feigning madness. Is he setting up some kind of fox chase- for the body of Polonius or for the King himself?

Act 4, Scene 3

Act 4, Scene 3 Summary

Claudius now perceives Hamlet's madness as dangerous and is wary of his favor with the people of Denmark, whose judgment will be on appearance, not reality. Claudius has Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bring him to his presence. He asks where Polonius is. Hamlet replies he is at supper, meaning, really, is at the supper- of worms. At last, Hamlet tells him where the body is and he is told to go to England. Alone, Claudius confesses that he wishes Hamlet to be murdered in England, an England that loves him and fears the Danish sword.

Act 4, Scene 3 Analysis

Claudius, with the death of Polonius, is now fully alarmed at Hamlet's intentions. He sends him off to England, where he hopes he will be murdered. The fox is now wary that he is the game. Has Hamlet's madness been too conspicuous, attracting too much suspicion to him?

Act 4, Scene 4

Act 4, Scene 4 Summary

On a plain in Denmark, en route to England, Hamlet encounters vestiges of the Dane's almost foe, Fortinbras, who now goes after a meaningless "little patch of ground" in Poland for which many will now die. The thought of all this warring and death over something so little steels Hamlet to possess, unyielding, "bloody" thought of revenge. For, if Fortinbras will die over nothing, Hamlet, who has an incestuous mother and a murdering father, has cause for concentration and focus.

Act 4, Scene 4 Analysis

A small encounter with Fortinbras small determined army now reminds Hamlet, who is leaving is home, not to pause in his reflections of revenge. He has no excuse not to focus on the destruction of Claudius until he has completely destroyed him. This is yet another redundant, but telling, rehearsing of Hamlet's fatal injunction to himself- seek ye first the kingdom of revenge- not God, justice or love, but revenge.

Act 4, Scene 5

Act 4, Scene 5 Summary

Ophelia appears before the royal couple. She is beside herself with grief. Her father, who she loved dearly, was murdered by her suitor, Hamlet. She sings strange songs in her madness. She leaves and suddenly an enraged Laertes and his followers, who call for Laertes to be kind, come before Claudius. Laertes thinks that Claudius is responsible for his father's death. Ophelia comes in, again showing how her grief has led to madness. Claudius tells Laertes he is not guilty and will prove it to him.

Act 4, Scene 5 Analysis

Ophelia, if anyone, is truly a victim of Hamlet's revenge, as well of her father's poorly intended conspiracy on behalf of the royal couple. Laertes is also a victim. Instead of being destroyed by Hamlet's act, he has become a rival of Claudius for the throne through an act of rebellion, as well as a rival of Hamlet, who is heir to the throne. When he first encounters Claudius, he believes that Claudius has murdered his father. The consequences of Hamlet's accidental murder spin off in strange directions.

Act 4, Scene 6

Act 4, Scene 6 Summary

Some sailors come to see Horatio. They have a letter for him from Hamlet. In the letter, Hamlet says he has been taken by pirates, but that they have treated him well. He asks Horatio to give some letters to the King and then to come to his presence. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are on their way to England. Horatio dispatches the letters to the King.

Act 4, Scene 6 Analysis

A strange turn of events has left Hamlet a captive by pirates who treat him well but wish to bring something of their concerns to the King. Hamlet does this through Horatio, who he asks to have his letters brought to the King.

Act 4, Scene 7

Act 4, Scene 7 Summary

Laertes asks Claudius why he has not avenged his father's death. Claudius replies that there are two reasons: first, for the sake of his wife, who loves Hamlet dearly, and second, he is worried about the reactions of his subjects, who love Hamlet. He tells Laertes he loved his father and will avenge him. News arrives that Hamlet has been brought "naked" back to Denmark and will appear in Court to beg his pardon. Claudius asks Laertes if he will obey him. Laertes replies if he will not restrain him. Claudius says that he will see that an accident befalls Hamlet. They will arrange a duel for sport. But Laertes' sword will be poisoned so that the slightest scratch will kill Hamlet. And, if that doesn't work, Claudius will prepare a poison drink for Hamlet if anything goes wrong with the plan. Gertrude enters and tells Laertes that Ophelia has drowned. She died, weighted down by flowers and weeds, drowning in her heavy garments singing songs driven by her lunacy. After Laertes exits, Claudius says that after all his attempts to calm Laertes, he fears Ophelia death will drive Laertes to something erratic and premature.

Act 4, Scene 7 Analysis

Claudius tells Laertes that wisdom has directed his restraint against Hamlet. It is quite clear that there is truth to that. For Claudius, now perceiving Hamlet as an enemy, knows he must proceed cautiously because Hamlet is a popular and wily enemy. But now, with Ophelia's death, it is Laertes who is the danger. Claudius, who is a successful usurper of the throne of Denmark, has succeeded because he makes his plans carefully with a knowledge and respect for the power of his opponent.

Act 5, Scene 1

Act 5, Scene 1 Summary

Ophelia is being buried in a full Christian burial by two clowns. They debate whether it is possible for a person, who has drowned, can be anything but a suicide. The clowns joke together a gallows-maker builds stronger than a mason, ship-maker or carpenter because his handiwork will last more than a thousand tenants. Another answer? A gravedigger because his house lasts forever. One sings merrily in the midst of this macabre task as Hamlet and Horatio appear. As the clowns dig up skulls, Hamlet conjectures on who they might be. They come upon the skull of the court jester, Yorick, someone who Hamlet knew well. Hamlet laments the fate of men. Even Alexander and Caesar will become like Yorick. Hamlet's reveries are interrupted by a royal procession, carrying with it the body of Ophelia. A priest comments that Ophelia's remains should probably be allowed to rest in a suicide's grave, but a royal order has overridden that possibility. Laertes takes offense at her inadequate burial, but the priests feel they have done enough, considering the nature of her death. Hamlet, overcome with grief, leaps into her grave only to be overcome by Laertes, who is trying to choke him to death. Attendants pull them apart and they leave the grave. He leaves, having, again, acted insane in the presence of Laertes and the royal couple. Claudius vows to act shortly.

Act 5, Scene 1 Analysis

This is one of the great existential scenes in Shakespeare. The very real nature of life and death is tossed, almost casually, to the audience with the same playfulness as the clowns gaily toss out the skulls they have dug up out of the grave. Hamlet barely has time to comment on this to Horatio, lamenting on how death equalizes all men, when a procession carrying his Ophelia appears. Hamlet still seems to be feigning madness as he leaps into her grave, ultimately battling with her brother, Laertes, whose grief he pits against his own. Claudius watches all this, noting that Hamlet's moment will

arrive soon.

Act 5, Scene 2

Act 5, Scene 2 Summary

The final scene culminates in a duel with Laertes. The poisoned sword switches hands so both Laertes and Hamlet succumb to the same sword. Queen Gertrude takes the poisoned chalice by accident and dies. Hamlet, knowing he has been poisoned by Laertes' sword, stabs Claudius. As Claudius dies, Hamlet forces him to drink from the chalice that poisoned his wife. Hamlet tells Horatio to tell his story, and he drinks from the poisoned chalice himself. Fortinbras will arrive soon and Hamlet wishes him well. Fortinbras and some English ambassadors arrive, witnessing the grim scene. The ambassadors tell Horatio that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead by Hamlet's command. Horatio denies this. He says to put the bodies on a "high stage." He will tell the story of homicide and accidental death, of jealousy and betrayal. Fortinbras has Hamlet taken away by four soldiers and after all the bodies have been taken removed, a shot of ordinance is fired in honor of Horatio's "sweet prince," now departed to his eternal rest.

Act 5, Scene 2 Analysis

As Hamlet killed Polonius in error, thinking he was Claudius, now Gertrude dies by accident, drinking the poison prepared for Hamlet by Claudius. Laertes realizes his folly in killing Hamlet, who is essentially innocent of intending harm to his sister and father. Laertes unwittingly is responsible for the death of Hamlet, a victim of Claudius rather than a hostile murderer. Even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have died, at the hand of the English, through an intrigue blamed on Hamlet. Hamlet's quest for blood has wreaked its havoc on both guilty and innocent alike. It is a complete tragedy with hardly any of the main players, except Horatio, perhaps, escaping the axe of a tragic, ill-fated death.

Characters

Attendants:

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

Barnardo:

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

Claudius (King Claudius of Denmark):

Claudius is the king of Denmark and brother of the dead king, which makes him Hamlet's uncle. Claudius has killed his brother to gain the throne and has married his brother's wife, Gertrude. Throughout the play, the nature of Claudius's kingship is displayed. Because Claudius is shrewd and able, though not always ethical or moral, Ham let describes the contest of intelligence and will between them as that of "mighty opposites" (V.ii.62). Claudius has a number of foreign and domestic problems to contend with. One of the first internal problems is to have the country accept him as king. This is handled by having the Council support his marriage to Gertrude and his kingship, and Claudius refers to their support that they "have freely gone / With this affair along" (I.ii.15-6) in his opening remarks as he sits in state.

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

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

Meanwhile, the ghost appears to Hamlet, who subsequently vows revenge for the death of his father. Hamlet however avoids acting on this promise. The king sends for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, friends of Hamlet from his youth, to try to learn what is troubling him. Claudius also listens to Polonius's claim that Hamlet is troubled by lovesickness for Ophelia. He agrees to test this theory by observing Hamlet in conversation with Ophelia. Though Polonius continues to be convinced of his own view, the king alertly dismisses this view after their concealed observation of Hamlet. He says: "Love? his affections do not that way tend" (III.i.162) and realizes "There's something in his soul / O'er which his melancholy sits on brood" (III.i. 164-5). Claudius plans to send Hamlet to England for a change of scene. He even agrees to Polonius's suggested intermediate step of having Hamlet talk to the queen about his changed demeanor. In III.ii, the king witnesses his own crime in a play performed before the royal court. When one of the actors pours poison in another actor's ear, the king rises enraged, calling for lights, and leaves. Alone in his room, Claudius tries to pray for forgiveness for his misdeeds but acknowledges to himself that he is not truly penitent because he still enjoys, "those effects for which I did the murther [murder]: / My crown, my own ambition, and my queen" (III.iii.54-55). Fearing for his own

safety, the king commissions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to take Hamlet to England as soon as possible. However, he does not tell Gertrude that he has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sealed letters to the English king calling for Hamlet's execution in England.

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

Clowns:

See Gravediggers

Cornelius:

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

Council:

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

Doctor of Divinity:

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

English Embassadors:

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

Fortinbras:

Fortinbras is the heir to the throne of Norway. His situation resembles that of Hamlet:

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

Francisco:

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

Gentleman:

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

Gertrude (Queen Gertrude of Denmark):

Gertrude, queen of Denmark, is the widow of the late King Hamlet and the mother of Prince Hamlet, who is the title character of the play. Gertrude has recently married her

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

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

Later in Act I, Hamlet encounters the ghost of his father. The ghost accuses Claudius of murdering him and bitterly denounces his brother for seducing Gertrude. Critics continue to dispute whether the ghost's words mean that Gertrude had an adulterous relationship with Claudius before King .Hamlet's death, or whether he is referring to their relationship after his death. While demanding that Hamlet avenge his murder, the ghost orders him not to harm Gertrude. While Gertrude says relatively little, some of her comments are insightful and to the point. She cuts short a lengthy explanation from the longwinded Polonius by urging him to produce "more matter with less art" (II.ii.95). Later, during the performance by the players, the player queen makes a long and passionate declaration of devotion to her husband; Gertrude observes,' "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" (III.ii.230).

Gertrude's most dramatic moments come in the highly emotional "closet scene" (III.iv), which takes place in her private chamber or "closet." Acting on Polonius's advice ("Tell him [Hamlet] his pranks have been tobroad [unrestrained] to bear with" [III.iv.2]), the queen calls Hamlet to her chamber, where Polonius is listening behind a curtain. The queen begins by scolding Hamlet for offending Claudius. Hamlet responds by accusing her of marrying Claudius out of purely sexual desire. Hearing Polonius behind the curtain, Hamlet stabs him through the curtain and kills him, apparently mistaking him for Claudius. He then reveals to Gertrude his belief that

Claudius killed his father. Hamlet's tirade against the queen is cut short when the ghost (who is invisible to Gertrude) again appears to Hamlet and reminds him of his mission of revenge. Toward the end of the scene, Gertrude expresses remorse for her behavior. Her lines, however, do not make clear whether she already knew or, indeed, believes that Claudius murdered Hamlet's father, and whether she thinks Hamlet is sane or mad. Stage and film productions of the play have interpreted these questions in many different ways. Although Gertrude does not subsequently abandon Claudius, neither does she reveal to him Ham let's suspicions. She dies in the final scene of the play, when she drinks from a cup of poisoned wine prepared by Claudius and intended for Hamlet. In her dying words she tells Hamlet that the wine is poisoned.

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

Ghost:

Before the play begins, King Hamlet of Den mark has been found dead. His brother Claudius has become king and has married the widowed queen, Gertrude. Prince Hamlet, grieving the loss of his father and his mother's hasty and incestuous (by Elizabethan standards) remarriage, has descended into a deep melancholy. Moreover, on two consecutive nights the ghost has appeared in armor to palace guards on the battlements of the castle. The two guards have told no one about the ghost except Hamlet's friend Horatio, who has agreed to stand guard with them to see if the ghost appears again. In I.i, the ghost appears to the two guards and Horatio. Horatio commands the ghost to speak, but it does not. It then reappears and seems about to speak to Horatio, but when a cock crows, signaling daybreak, the ghost vanishes. Horatio resolves to tell Prince Hamlet about the sighting. Hamlet is startled by Horatio's story and decides to watch for the ghost himself.

In I.iv, the ghost reappears in the presence of Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus and

beckons Hamlet to withdraw privately with it. When they are alone in I.v, the ghost tells Hamlet that it is the spirit of Hamlet's father, murdered by Claudius. The ghost denounces Claudius for seducing Gertrude and calls for Hamlet to avenge his death but not to harm Gertrude. The ghost then vanishes. When Horatio and Marcellus appear, Hamlet repeatedly orders them to swear that they will not reveal what they have seen.

Hamlet vows vengeance, but later expresses doubt about the ghost's identity, speculating that it could be a devil appearing in his father's form to tempt him to sin. This reaction characterizes his attitude toward the ghost until the play scene (III.ii). Hamlet's own uncertainty is mirrored in the critical debate about the nature of the ghost. Most critics agree that Shakespeare intended audiences to accept the apparition as the ghost of Hamlet's father, but some contend that it may be an illusion or a demon. Some critics argue that the ghost is in fact a devil whose object is to lure Hamlet to his own demise by arousing his passion for vengeance. Another interpretation is that the ghost is a hallucination seen by only a few characters.

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

Gravediggers:

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

Guard:

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

Guildenstern:

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

currying royal favor with Claudius solely to remain in the good graces of the current power structure. Their exchanges with Hamlet generally reveal that he is suspicious of them, mistrustful of their purpose in court, and too wary to reveal anything about himself to them. With Rosencrantz, Guildenstern is unknowingly sent to his death in England by Hamlet's discovery of Claudius's plot and Hamlet's quick construction of a counter-plot.

Hamlet (Prince Hamlet of Denmark):

Hamlet, prince of Denmark and son of Gertrude and the late King Hamlet of Denmark, is the title character of *Hamlet.* When the play opens, he is distraught over his father's recent death, his mother's remarriage to his father's brother Claudius, and the ascension of Claudius to the throne of Denmark. Hamlet's distress turns to rage when a ghost appears in the shape of his dead father and tells Hamlet that Claudius poisoned him. Hamlet vows to avenge his father's murder. Hamlet's erratic behavior as he contemplates acting against Claudius prompts the king and his councillor, Polonius, to employ devious methods to discover the reason for Hamlet's apparent madness. To this end, Claudius and Gertrude summon to Elsinore two of Hamlet's old friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and ask them to find out what is troubling the prince. Hamlet sees through this ploy, and throughout the play treats Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and even Claudius with some contempt. Meanwhile, in several melancholy soliloquies which include reflections on mortality, suicide, honor, and the apparent futility of life, Hamlet berates himself for his long delay in taking revenge.

Hamlet's supposed insanity includes bizarre behavior towards Polonius's daughter Ophelia, whom he once courted. This convinces Polonius, who had ordered Ophelia to stop seeing Hamlet, that the prince has gone mad out of unrequited love. Claudius and Polonius spy on a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia during which Hamlet implies that he never loved Ophelia and makes several derogatory comments about women and the nature of marriage. (This scene is often called the "nunnery" scene because Hamlet repeatedly tells Ophelia to "get thee to a nunnery" [III.i.120]; "nunnery" was

often used in Elizabethan slang to mean a house of prostitution.) Unconvinced that love is at the root of Hamlet's disturbing conduct, Claudius decides to send him to England. In the meantime, doubting whether the ghost is truly his father's spirit and can thus be trusted, Hamlet arranges for a troupe of traveling actors to perform a play that closely resembles the circumstances of the murder as recount ed by the ghost. Claudius's perturbed reaction to the performance convinces Hamlet that the ghost's allegations are true. During a meeting with his mother during which he violently denounces her relationship with his uncle, Hamlet fatally stabs Polonius, who has been eavesdropping behind a curtain; apparently, the prince has mistaken him for Claudius. (When Gertrude asks Hamlet what he has done, he replies "Nay, I know not, is it the King?" [III.iv.26].) After telling Gertrude his belief that Claudius killed his father, Hamlet is interrupted by the ghost who is invisible to Gertrude and who reminds Hamlet of the need for revenge. Alarmed by Hamlet's behavior, Claudius sends him off to England immediately, accompanied by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, ostensibly on a diplomatic mission but in reality with the intention of having him killed there.

Hamlet manages to escape this plot and returns to Denmark. He finds that Ophelia has gone mad and drowned, an apparent suicide. Claudius convinces Ophelia's brother, Laertes, that Hamlet is responsible for the deaths of both his father and his sister. Learning that Hamlet has returned to Denmark, Claudius persuades Laertes to take revenge against Hamlet by means of a plot which is a bit more sly than anything Laertes conceived of. (Laertes's vengeance, we learn from his answer to Claudius's question about what Laertes would do to avenge his father, would take the form of slitting Hamlet's throat in a church [IV.vii. 125-26]). Claudius's plan involves Laertes killing Hamlet during a fencing match in which Laertes will use a rapier that has been tainted with poison. To make doubly sure of Hamlet's death, Claudius prepares a goblet of poisoned wine, which he plans to offer to Hamlet if the prince appears to be winning. During the match, both Hamlet and Laertes are wounded with the poisoned sword, and the queen drinks from the cup intended for Hamlet. As the queen dies, she *Hamlet* warns Hamlet that the wine is poisoned: Laertes then reveals the plot against Hamlet, and Hamlet finally takes his revenge, first stabbing Claudius, then forcing

him to drink from the poisoned cup. Hamlet and Laertes exchange forgiveness before both die.

Hamlet is one of the most controversial and most widely discussed characters in English literature. Scores of critics have debated the reasons for his actions, the playwright's view of his character, and the meaning of his tragedy. The primary focus of the debate has been the reason for Hamlet's long delay in carrying out his vow of revenge. An early view which survived into the twentieth century was that Hamlet was a man paralyzed by his own intelligence and introverted nature.

A psychoanalytical approach that became popular in the mid-twentieth century suggested that in creating the character of Hamlet Shakespeare anticipated by some three hundred years Sigmund Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex. In this view, Hamlet has never recovered from his natural childhood jealousy of his father. In support of this position, critics point to the prince's obsession with his mother's sexual relationship with Claudius, which has plunged him into depression even before he learns of his father's murder and which throughout the play distracts him from his task of taking revenge against his uncle. By in effect carrying out Hamlet's repressed childhood wish to kill his father and to possess his mother, the argument goes, Claudius revives Hamlet's repressed memories of forbidden childhood thoughts, thereby combining the thoughts of incest and parricide, a combination so unbearable that Hamlet finds himself incapable of taking action.

Horatio:

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

Horatio enjoys the absolute trust of those who know him: it is Horatio whom the guards ask to witness the appearance of the ghost, it is Horatio with whom Hamlet

trusts his suspicions regarding Claudius, and even Claudius trusts Horatio to look after and further restrain Hamlet after Hamlet attacks Laertes at Ophelia's funeral. In III.ii.54-87 Hamlet professes his faith in Horatio and praises his qualities of judiciousness, patience, and equanimity.

Horatio is initially skeptical about the ghost. He believes it is a "fantasy" (I.i.23) of the watch. After seeing and attempting to communicate with the ghost, Horatio speculates that its appearance might be related to possible impending war with Norway. In speaking to the ghost, Horatio implores it to tell him if he can do anything to help it, or to avoid trouble befalling his country. Noting that the ghost looks like the dead King Hamlet and seemed about to speak when it vanished with the dawn, Horatio resolves to tell Hamlet about the apparition. Horatio worries that the ghost may lead Hamlet to suicide or madness, so he and Marcellus try unsuccessfully to prevent Hamlet from meeting with the ghost. After Hamlet's private conference with the ghost, Horatio tells Hamlet that he is speaking in "wild and whirling words" (I.v.132- 33), and even jokes grimly that some of what Hamlet claims the ghost has told him is common knowledge: "There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave / To tell us this" (I.v.125).

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

King Claudius of Denmark:

See Claudius

Ladies:

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

Laertes:

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

When he appears again in I.iii, Laertes bids his sister Ophelia farewell and warns her about Hamlet. He advises her that Hamlet can't choose a mate for himself alone, but, being the prince, must think of the state. Thus, he cautions Ophelia to protect her virtue. Polonius then enters and advises his son on how to conduct himself while in France. When his father is finished, Laertes leaves for France. Laertes returns to Denmark after Polonius's death, bursting into the room with a group of followers and addressing Claudius, "O thou vile king" (IV.v.116), and vowing revenge for his father's death. Claudius assures Laertes that he played no role in the death of Polonius and asks him if he is prepared to know the truth, if in his desire for vengeance he will look to both "friend and foe" (Iv.v.143). Ophelia then enters, and Laertes realizes that his sister has gone mad. The king then tells Laertes that he will give up the kingdom, his crown and his life if Laertes and his followers find that he was involved in Polonius's death. Later, Claudius explains to Laertes that there was no formal inquiry into Polonius's death due to the queen's love for Hamlet and due to the high regard the people have for the prince. During this scene (IV.vii) a messenger arrives bearing a letter from Hamlet; Laertes and Claudius learn that the prince has returned to Denmark. The king speaks of a plot to kill Hamlet, and Laertes expresses his wish to be a part of it. When Claudius asks Laertes "What would you undertake / To show yourself indeed your father's son / More than in words?" Laertes replies that he would cut Hamlet's throat in the church (IV.vii. 124-26). After further discussion, a plan

evolves in which Laertes will fight Hamlet with a poisoned rapier, and, as an additional measure, Claudius will offer a cup of poisoned wine to Hamlet, if it appears as though Hamlet might be winning the match.

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

Lord:

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

Lords:

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

Marcellus:

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

Messengers:

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

Norwegian Captain:

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

Officers:

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

Ophelia:

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

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

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

At the beginning of Act V, two gravediggers discuss the appropriateness of Ophelia being given "Christian burial" even though her death is believed to have been suicide.

Hamlet, who has escaped his uncle's plot to have him killed in England and has returned unexpectedly to Denmark, enters with Horatio. Unaware of Ophelia's death, he engages a gravedigger and Horatio in a discussion of mortality. As the funeral procession approaches, Hamlet and Horatio hide. When Laertes shows his grief by leaping into the grave, Hamlet, realizing that the funeral is Ophelia's, follows suit, claiming that his own love for Ophelia was far greater than Laertes's. The two men grapple and have to be separated by the other mourners.

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

Orsic:

Osric is a courtier, described by Hamlet as being of little significance himself, but important insofar as he owns extensive lands. He delivers the king's challenge of a fencing match between Ham let and Laertes to Hamlet and Horatio (V.ii), speaking effusively in an affected manner which Hamlet mocks and parodies back to him. Even Horatio makes mild fun at Orsic's expense, after Hamlet's own rhetorical flourishes leave him befuddled. of being close-mouthed and discreet. In Hi Polonius instructs his servant Reynaldo to spy on Laertes in France and report on his conduct. Ophelia enters, describing Hamlet's strange behavior. This causes Polonius to question whether Hamlet is "mad for thy [Ophelia's] love" (II.i.82). Polonius discusses Hamlet's bizarre behavior concerning Ophelia with Claudius, stating bluntly "Your noble son is mad" (II.ii.92). Polonius then arranges for himself and Claudius to secretly observe an encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia to prove Hamlet's insanity to the king.

Polonius dies in III.iv. He hides behind an arras following a brief conversation with Gertrude. From his hiding place, he overhears Hamlet's confrontation with Gertrude,

during the course of which Gertrude asks Hamlet if he is going to murder her. When the queen cries out, Polonius, still behind the curtain, calls out for help. Hamlet then stabs him through the curtain and kills him, apparently thinking he was Claudius.

Prince Hamlet of Denmark:

See Hamlet

Queen Gertrude of England:

See Gertrude

Reynaldo:

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

Players:

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

Polonius:

Polonius, Laertes's and Ophelia's father, is an elderly and long-winded courtier and chief counselor in the Danish court. Polonius demonstrates a propensity for hypocrisy and spying: his first major speech (I.iii), to his departing son Laertes, is a lengthy diatribe on, among other things, the virtue

Rosencrantz:

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

Sailors:

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

Soldiers:

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

Voltemand:

Voltemand and Cornelius are Danish ambassadors, sent by King Claudius in I.ii.26-38, to the king of Norway, the uncle of young Fortinbras, to urge him to

squelch his nephew's threats against Danish land. They return in II.ii.40 to report that their mission was successful.

Character Studies

The reasons for Hamlet's delay have led to various critical interpretations of his character. One critical perspective treats the prince as atragic hero having three prominent characteristics: awillpower that surpasses average human beings, an extraordinarily intense power of feeling, and an unusually high level of intelligence. Each of these traits can be found in Hamlet, but the ambiguity surrounding his tragic flaw, or the defect in his character that leads to his downfall, remains the subject of critical debate. One argument is that the prince's fatal error which causes him to delay killing Claudius is his preoccupation with moral beauty and, with its loss in Denmark, his desire to die. Hamlet's obsession with death and suicide thus demonstrates that even before he encounters the Ghost, he has lost the will to involve himself in worldly affairs. This notion corresponds to another important reading of the prince as avictim of excessive melancholy, or of an abnormal state of depression. Hamlet's melancholy is initially attributed to his father's death and his uncle's hasty marriage to his mother. The appearance of the Ghost, however, intensifies his grief, and the spirit's demand that his son remember him arrests the natural progression of Hamlet's mourning and recovery. Further, the prince is grieved by amounting sense of loss-not only does he lose his father, but he is betrayed by his mother, he loses Ophelia's affections, and he is confronted with deception by his two friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet dwells on these problems in periods of brooding inaction that reveal the full extent of his pain and suffering. Another, more controversial, reading of the hero's character is that he suffers from an Oedipus Complex. This psychological disorder reflects the unconscious desire of ason to kill his father and replace him as the object of the mother's love. Viewed in this light, Hamlet delays killing Claudius because he subconsciously identifies with his uncl_'s crime and shares his guilt. According to some critics, Hamlet's Oedipal impillse also explains why he speaks to Gertrude like ajealous lover, why he dwells on his mother's sexual relations with Claudius, and why he treats his uncle as arival throughout the play.

Of the other major characters in *Hamlet,* the Ghost is important because his demand for revenge sets the plot into motion. The apparition's ambiguous role in the dramareflects the general confusion about spirits in Shakespeare's day. Throughout the tragedy, the Ghost is alternately viewed as an illusion, aportent foreshadowing danger to Denmark, aspirit returning from the grave because of atask left undone, aspirit from purgatory sent with divine permission, and adevil who assumes the form of adead person to lure mortals to doom.

While Hamlet is chiefly concerned with this last possibility, each of these perspectives are put to the test at some point in the play. Claudius's character provides perhaps the best illustration of the theme of appearance versus reality in *Hamlet.* Initially, Shakespeare depicts Hamlet's uncle as the consummate monarch who justifies his ascent to the throne and his marriage to Gertrude with confident eloquence and who competently handles Fortinbras's threat to Denmark. But as the play progresses, Claudius's villainy becomes more apparent, revealing that he is little more than an evil hypocrite. In addition, critics generally regard Gertrude as highly dependent on and easily manipulated by Claudius; her chief contribution to the dramais the anger and disillusionment she arouses in Hamlet by marrying his uncle. Some critics have risen to the queen's defense, however, arguing that she often offers concise and pithy remarks in the play which reflect her ability to grasp the magnitude of various situations. Moreover, she demonstrates strong character in the closet scene (Act III, scene iv) by accepting Hamlet's accusation of lust and admitting her sin. Ophelia's character represents the ideals of youth and innocence that are ultimately corrupted by the Danish court in *Hamlet.*

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

Conclusion

In the words of Ernest Johnson, "the dilemma of Hamlet the Prince and Man" is "to disentangle himself from the temptation to wreak justice for the wrong reasons and in evil passion, and to do what he must do at last for the pure sake of justice. . . . From that dilemmaof wrong feelings and right actions he ultimately emerges, solving the problem by attaining aproper state of mind:' Hamlet endures as the object of universal identification because his central moral dilemmatranscends the Elizabethan period, making him aman for all ages. In his difficult struggle to somehow act within acorrupt world and yet maintain his moral integrity, Hamlet ultimately reflects the fate of all human beings.

(See also *Shakespearean Criticism,* Vol. 1)

Principal Topics

The most fundamental issue in *Hamlet,* one which opens the door to countless readings of the play, can be stated in one simple question: Why does Hamlet delay taking revenge on Claudius? While critics offer various answers to this question. their theories generally differ in two distinct ways: one group focuses on the inner workings of Hamlet's mind as the primary cause of his procrastination; the other stresses the external obstacles that prohibit the prince from carrying out his task. Critics who find the cause of Hamlet's delay in his internal meditations typically view the prince as aman of great moral integrity who is forced to commit an act that goes against his deepest principles. On numerous occasions, the prince tries to make sense of his moral dilemmathrough personal meditations, which Shakespeare presents as soliloquies (asoliloquy is aspeech delivered while the speaker is alone and devised to inform the reader what the character is thinking, or to provide essential information concerning other participants in the action). Another perspective of Hamlet's internal struggle suggests that the prince has become so disenchanted with life since his father's death that he has neither the desire nor the will to exact revenge. In addition. Hamlet has been shocked and appalled that. in the midst of his grief, Gertrude has yielded to Claudius's affections, marrying him only two months after her husband's funeral. To the prince, these events have degraded the Danish court to nothing more than "an unweeded garden / That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely" (1. ii. 135-37). Hamlet's strongest impulse is to kill himself to avoid further debasement, and yet he fears the damning consequences of suicide. With such heavy matters weighing on his mind, the Ghost's call for revenge only complicates Hamlet's ability to make decisions. leading to many other interludes of selfquestioning and prolonged inaction.

Critics who view Hamlet's hesitation as aresult of external rather than internal obstacles often emphasize one point: the prince's difficulty in determining the difference between appearance and reality as aprimary barrier that restricts him from., taking action. For example, Hamlet questions whether the Ghost is really abenevolent

spirit or adevil who tries to trick him into killing Claudius. In addition, the Ghost's accusations pose avery practical problem for Hamlet because Claudius does not at first seem to be avillainous murderer, but rather acompetent and responsible monarch. *As* far as Hamlet is concerned. the king's only transgression is his hasty and incestuous marriage to Gertrude. Other impediments prohibit Hamlet from killing Claudius once he has convinced himself that the king is indeed guilty. The most obvious is that the monarch is almost always surrounded by guards. The one instance in which he is not protected occurs during the prayer scene (Act III, scene ill), where Hamlet hesitates killing Claudius for fear of sending his soul to heaven. The prince's inaction here is perhaps the most controversial aspect of his delay: critics who see Hamlet's procrastination as the result of an internal struggle maintain that this episode clearly demonstrates his inability to exact revenge; on the other hand. commentators who support the theory of external influences assert that the prince delays killing Claudius not only because he fears sending the king's soul to heaven, but-more importantly because he has not proven to anyone (except possibly Horatio) that his uncle is amurderer. If Hamlet is thus viewed as avictim of external influences, his internal meditations on his hesitation do not necessarily demonstrate his inability to act; rather, they reflect his need to vent his frustration through self-reproaches at the fact that he cannot find an adequate opportunity to avenge his father's murder.

Closely related to Hamlet's delay is the theme of revenge. The prince is not the only character preoccupied with revenge in *Hamlet:* Fortinbras bears agrudge against Denmark because King Hamlet killed his father, and Laertes-infuriated by Polonius's murder-threatens to overthrow the Danish government before joining Claudius in aplot to murder the prince. Further, *Hamlet* belongs to the genre of the Revenge Tragedy. Revenge Tragedy is adramatic form made popillar on the English stage by Thomas Kyd, whose *Spanish Tragedy* is an early example of the type. Such plays call for the revenge of afather's death by ason, or vice versa; this act is usually directed by the ghost of the murdered man. Other devices found in Revenge Tragedies include hesitation by the hero, real or feigned madness, suicide, intrigue, and murders on stage. Some critics theorize that Shakespeare despised the Revenge Tragedy as aform whose conventions had become trite. Yet because revenge theater was immensely

popillar with Elizabethan audiences, the playwright had to follow certain guidelines to produce afinancially successful play. As aresillt, Shakespeare modified the theatrical type by creating a*double entendre* (double meaning) in which he subtly denounced the banality of the Revenge Tragedy without denying his audience many of its popillar components. Hamlet's distaste for revenge throughout the play therefore reflects Shakespeare's disgust with revenge theater, and yet the dramatist fulfilled the audience's expectations for atragic conclusion.

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

Modern Connections

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

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

Ophelia, by contrast, is assumed by all of her observers the queen, the king, Horatio, her brother to be truly mad. In medieval times, the mad person was thought to be inhabited by an evil spirit. The treatment was identification of the spirit and exorcism by a cleric. Exorcisms of evil spirits were still conducted in Shakespeare's day. The indigent mad person was allowed to live in an almshouse and go about freely unless dangerous. General medical practice in Shakespeare's day emphasized hygiene, herbal remedies, and dietary recommendations. Even in medieval times, teaching hospitals

kept botanical gardens and made herbal medicines, and the discovery of the Americas and also voyages to India led to the introduction of many more plants and herbs to Elizabethan England. Ophelia's songs contain herbal lore linking properties and symbolism of various plants, including rosemary, pansies, fennel, columbines, rue, daisies, and violets.

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

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

In Elizabethan England, suspicion and intrigue played a role in the defense of the realm against dangers from within. Court spying in England and abroad reached an

accomplished level under Queen Elizabeth. Her employee Francis Walsingham has the distinction of being the first master of developing the modern spy state. In *Hamlet,* the intelligence-gathering done or attempted by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern was considered, at least by King Claudius, to be a necessary part of maintaining order. Disorder in a state could also be mirrored by disorder in a family. Hamlet is forced to live in a family scarred by murder and what was considered a form of incest by Elizabethan standards. Hamlet laments the disorder in his family and in the realm and exclaims against it when he says: "The time is out of joint O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!" (I.v.!88-9).

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

Physical health and political health are related to, to some extent, society's view of the universe and the place of humanity in it. The Elizabethan world view, as it was expressed in a classic phrase by the critic E. M. W. Tillyard, was hierarchical and pyramidal. The structure depicted God at the apex, angels and the spiritual world below God, the king below God and receiving his power from God, followed by nobles, gentry, and ordinary people. Below this was the animal kingdom, then plants, then minerals and stones. Each subdivision had its own order of excellence as well. This view is based on Biblical passages, including verses in Genesis. A brief, lyrical expression of the view is found in Psalm 8. Hamlet's own beliefs may be represented by this view, though when he discusses it with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he is in,

if not a state of disbelief, then a state of melancholy, disgust, and world-weariness. He says of himself "I have of late but wherefore I know not lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises" (II.ii.295-7); he refers to man as "this quintessence of dust" (II.ii.308) and says of the rest, "this goodly frame, the earth, / seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent/ canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging / firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, / why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent / congregation of vapors" (II.ii.298-303).

A related theological view is that each individual is called to an accounting of his actions at the moment of his death. Although in the Christian view atonement was gained for all men through Christ's death, the individual believer must nevertheless maintain himself in a state of grace and be a follower of Christ in his own actions. The individual who dies in a state of sin rather than a state of grace may be judged in need of purging (purgatorial) punishments or even deserving of everlasting torments, depending on the severity of the sin(s) and the disposition of the sinner. Because the fiery torments described by the ghost in Hamlet have a terminal point, the ghost is often thought of as coming from Purgatory rather than Hell. Hamlet decides not to kill Claudius while the king is in a praying, repentant state. Instead, Hamlet says he will wait to catch Claudius when he is drunk or "in th' incestious pleasure of his bed" (III.iii.90) so that Claudius will die in a state of sin, when his "soul may be as damn'd and black / As Hell, whereto it goes" (III.iii.94-5).

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

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

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- Critical Essay #18

Critical Essay #1

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

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

The basis of misunderstanding, and hence of Hamlet's estrangement, is the secret murder. Claudius, before the opening of the play, has slain his brotp.er by such cunning means that no mortal suspects him-not even at first the sorrowing Hamlet, until the ghost's horrid news awakens the unstated imaginings of Hamlet's "prophetic soul:' Ever the masterly politician, Claudius has engineered his own succession to the throne in place of his nephew Hamlet not by usurpation, but by full consent of the Danish court. Claudius is to outward appearances an apt choice. Polonius and other reputedly sage counselors welcome the rule of one so fit for soothing public utterance and for pragmatic foreign diplomacy. Claudius, to his credit, disarms the threat of invasion by young Fortinbras of Norway that hangs so ominously over the beginning of the play. The king's instructions to the ambassadors, Voltemand and Cornelius, are seasoned by years of hard political calculation. His marriage with the dead king's widow, even if technically incestuous, gives an auraof continuity to the new reign. It is without conscious irony that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, appointed guardians of the unpredictable Hamlet, echo great Elizabethan commonplaces in their defense of legitimate monarchical authority. The life of their king is threatened, and they know that majesty "Dies not alone, but like agulf doth draw What's near it with it" [III. iii. 1617]. Ophelia, ignorant of the murder, cannot fathom the sudden and vindictive hostility of one who had professed love to her "In honorable fashion" [I. iii. Ill]. Passively becoming part of ascheme designed, as far as she can tell, to help Hamlet recover his wits, Opheliainstead loses her own. Her brother Laertes' rashness is similarly made plausible, even if it cannot be condoned, by his total unawareness of Hamlet's reasons for opposing the king and Polonius. Only in the final scene does Laertes perceive too late that he is caught like "awoodcock to mine own springe" [V. ii. 306], and is "justly killed with mine own treachery" [V. ii. 307].

Hamlet by contrast is from the first astranger in the court of Denmark, despite his position as son of the dead king and as "most immediate to our throne" after Claudius [I. ii. 109]. An outsider, he returns from years of advanced study at Wittenberg to asociety he considers too worldly and corrupted. It is "as astranger" [I. v. 165] that he shares with Horatio asecret knowledge of there being "more things in heaven and earth" [I. v. 166] than are dreamt of in mere philosophy. He upbraids the Danish for

their heavy drinking, acustom better broken than observed. Well before he learns of the murder, he spurns the hypocrisy of meats baked for afuneral coldly furnishing forth the wedding festivities of his uncle-father and aunt-mother. He knows not "seems." Hamlet's innate antipathy to false appearances, exacerbated by his mother's overhasty wedding, helps explain both his suspicion of others' motives and their bafflement at his seeming caprice. Claudius is sincere in his attempts to make areconciliation with ayoung prince who is cherished by his mother and beloved by the common people. Gertrude can only suppose that her son is offended by her infidelity to the memory of her dead husband-for she like the others apparently knows nothing of the actual murder-and so she fondly hopes that Hamlet will marry Opheliaand settle down into tranquil domesticitY. Polonius, whose routine it is to make intelligence reports on potential troublemakers, finds an easy clue to Hamlet's "madness" in Ophelia's rejection of him. Rosencrantz and Guildenstem are equally convinced that Hamlet's malady is political-his lack of "advancement" to the throne.

These answers formulated by the Danish court to explain Hamlet's mystery are not unusually obtuse. They are the guesswork of shrewd observers who merely lack knowledge of Hamlet's awful truth. The answers are in fact all valid in their limited ways. Gertrude may well fear that Hamlet's distemper needs no other explanation than "His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage" [II. ii. 57J. Hamlet becomes amirror reflecting the conscience of each observer, and the guilty marriage is what Gertrude sees in herself. "You go not till I set you up aglass," he exhorts his mother, "Where you may see the inmost part of you" [III. iv. 20]. Claudius, having reason to surmise more than most, has most to fear. Polonius creates afantasy oflove based on his own stratagems in matchmaking, but his fiction only eXaMerates Hamlet's real obsession with feminine frffiIty. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speak of ambition, they are talking mostly about themselves; yet Hamlet does belatedly admit, at least to Horatio, that Claudius has "Popped in between th' election and my hopes" [V:'ii. 651. All these explorations of motive have meaning to us who know the prime cause.

What Hamlet objects to is the oversimplification and the prying that destroys the integrity of his whole and complex being. "If circumstances lead me, I will find Where

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

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

Overwhelmed by this negation, Hamlet can only suspect others of inconstancy. He need not overhear Polonius' scheme of using Opheliato bait atrap, for Hamlet is predisposed to expect collusion. He has tested womankind by the behavior of his

mother and knows them all to be false. "Frailty, thy name is woman" [I. ii. 146], he concludes in his first soliloquy. If Hamlet senses something amiss in Ophelia's suddenly returning his love letters to him, he only guesses intuitively what in fact Polonius has saiato his daughter. She must learn to playawary game to treat Hamlet's advances as "springes to catch woodcocks" [I. iii. 115], and to regard his holy vows as devices to undo her virginity. Princes are expected to claim their rights as libertines, in Polonius' complacent vision of the universallewdness in human nature. However cruel in its treatment of Ophelia, Hamlet's response is in kind. He becomes afflicted by the ruthless mores prevailing in Denmark, because he has adistasteful business to accomplish. Only too late can he publicly acknowledge that he loved the fair Ophelia, stressing the tragedy of misunderstanding that has obliged him to destroy what he most cherished. Similarly he acknowledges too late his real respect for Laertes and his regret at their fatal enmity. These two men might in better times have loved one another. A chief source of the melancholic mood in *Hamlet* derives from this sense of lost opportunity.

Hamlet does grow harsh and cynical like his opponents. Yet he never ceases to tax himself as severely as he does the others. He is indeed much like them. Polonius, his seeming opposite in so many ways, is, like Hamlet, an inveterate punster. To whom else but Polonius should Hamlet direct the taunt of "Words, words, words"? [II. ii. 192]. The aged counselor recalls that in his youth he "suffered much extremity for love, very near this" [II. ii. 189-90], and he has been an actor at the university. Polonius too has advice for the players: "Senecacannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light" [II.ii. 400-01], When Hamlet jibes at "so capital acalf" [III. ii. 105-06] enacting Julius Caesar, killed in the Capitol, he reinforces the parallel to his own playacting and anticipates the slaying of Polonius behind the arras. If Hamlet is amirror to the others, the reflection works both ways.

Perhaps the central reflection of this sort is between Hamlet and Claudius. Not only has Claudius taken Hamlet's mother and his crown, but Claudius is aprisoner of circumstance, burdened with aguilty responsibility, unable to rid himself of his enemy by forthright action. Hamlet is aconstant danger to the king, and yet no plausible

grounds can at first be discovered for proceeding against Hamlet. Only after the "mousetrap" play do both of them know that action is imperative; and yet both of them find their subsequent moves thwarted by unforeseen circumstances and deceptive appearances. Claudius is the only character other than Hamlet whom we overhear in soliloquy, and we learn on this occasion that Claudius too cannot resolve seemingly impossible alternatives. How is he to retain the queen, whom he has won by sinful lust, and at the same time free his tortured soul of guilt? It is ironically appropriate that Claudius' prayer should offer Hamlet his sole opportunity for successful revenge, an opportunity lost because Claudius gives the semblance of being in astate of contrition. Ultimately Hamlet and Claudius slay one another in afinale that neither could have anticipated.

Sharing the weaknesses of those he reviles, Hamlet turns his most unsparing criticisms upon himself. The appalling contrast between his uncle and father reminds him of the contrast between himself and Hercules-although when the fit of action is upon him he is as hardy as "The Nemean lion's nerve" [I. iv. 83]. "We are arrant knaves all," he warns Ophelia, "believe none of us" [III. i. 128]. Although more honest than most, Hamlet accounts himself unworthy to have been born: "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in" [III. i. 123-25]. His self-remonstrances repeatedly sound the note of generalization. He is like other men in being "abreeder of sinners" [III. i. 121], and he includes all mankind in his dilemmaof action: "conscience doth make cowards of us all" [III. i. 82]. Paradoxically, although he characterizes himself as avengeful man too full of sinful deeds, he reproaches himself most often for his failure to take arms against his seaof troubles. "0, what arogue and peasant slave am I!" [II. ii. 550]. The son of adear father murdered, he can only unpack his heart with words. Is this the result, he ponders, of "Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple Of thinking too precisely on th' event" [IV. iv. 40-1]. Is he allowing himself to be paralyzed into inaction by his introspection, obscuring "the native hue of resolution" and "the pale cast of thought?" [III. i. 83-4]? If Hamlet asks this question and has no clear answer, we need not be surprised that it has tantalized modern criticism.

Several limits can be placed upon the search for an explanation of Hamlet's apparent hesitation to avenge. He is not ineffectual under ordinaIY circumstances. Elizabethan theories of melancholy did not suppose the sufferer to be made necessarily inactive. Hamlet has adeserved reputation in Denmark for manliness and princely demeanor. He keeps up his fencing practice and will "win at the odds" [V. ii. 212] against Laertes. He threatens with death those who would restrain him from speaking with the ghost-even his friend Horatio-and stabs the concealed Polonius unflinchingly. On the seavoyage to England he boards apirate ship single-handed in the grapple, after having arranged without remorse for the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In light of these deeds, Hamlet's self-accusations are signs of burning impatience in one who would surely act if he could. His contemplations of suicide follow similarly upon his frustrated perceptions of an impasse; suicide is alogical alternative when action appears meaningless, even if suicide must be rejected on grounds of Christian faith.

Such considerations turn our attention from Hamlet's supposed "fault" or "tragic flaw" to the context of his world and its philosophical absurdities. Wherein can he find trust and certitude? "Say, why is this?" he begs his father's ghost. "Wherefore? what should we do?" [I. iv. 57]. According to popular Elizabethan belief, both Catholic and Protestant, spirits from the dead could indeed "assume apleasing shape" [II. ii. 599-600], in order to abuse aperson in Hamlet's vulnerable frame of mind and so lead him to damnation. If Hamlet's plan to test the ghost's message by the "mousetrap" play causes him to wonder about his own cowardice and inconstancy, the accusations are directed against the impotent and self-contradictory nature of his situation.

Even after the clear revelation of Claudius' guilt at Hamlet's play, the exact plan of action remains anything but clear. Hamlet must face the ghost once again to explain why he "lets go by Th' important acting of your dread command" [III. iv. 10708]; yet his purpose in confronting Gertrude with her weakness is the laudable one of returning her to at least an outward custom of virtue. Having *ear* lier been uncertain of appearances in the apparition of his father, Hamlet now is deceived and hence delayed in his resolve by the semblance of Claudius' praying. Hamlet has always believed that heavenly justice will prevail among men: "Foul deeds will rise, Though all the earth

overwhelm them, to men's eyes" [I. ii. 256-57]. Murder, though it have no tongue, "will speak With most miraculous organ" [II. ii. 593-94]. Nevertheless, man's perception of that divine revelation, and his role in aiding the course of justice, are obscured by man's own corruption and blindness. Whenever Hamlet moves violently, he moves in error. Horatio, in summing up the play, speaks tellingly of "accidental judgments, casual slaughters" [V. ii. 382], and of "purposes mistook Fall'n on th' inventors' heads" [V. ii. 384-85]. The judgment applies to Hamlet as to Laertes and Claudius. Hamlet has already realized that he must pay the price of heaven's displeasure for killing Polonius, just as Polonius himself has paid the price for his own meddling. "Heaven hath pleased it so, To punish me with this, and this with me." Such fitting reciprocity can be brought about only by the far-reaching arm of providence. The engineer must be "Hoist with his own petar" [III. iv. 207].

Hamlet quests for clear action, but it mockingly eludes him. He yearns to be like Fortinbras, proceeding resolutely in amilitaIY action against Poland, but perceives at the same time that Fortinbras, in his absurd campaign for apatch of barren ground, for "this straw," :for "an eggshell," must risk two thousand souls and akingly fortune. The tomb in which these vast numbers will be laid to rest for no purpose anticipates the graveyard of Yorick and Ophelia. reaching back in its universal history to King Alexander and to Adam, the first gravemaker. The magnificent Alexander and imperious Caesar, renowned for exploits greater than those of Fortin bras, are now turned to clay and can serve only to stop abunghole. This generalized vision of earthly vanity is no mere *excuse* for Hamlet's irresolution, for it shows the benign intention of providence in achieving acoherence beyond the grasp of human comprehension. Fortinbras of course succeeds politica1lywhere Hamlet must fail, and is chosen by Hamlet to restore Denmark to political health; but to acknowledge this discrepancy is merely to confirm the distance between order on earth and the higher perfection which Hamlet conceives.

It is only when Hamlet has come to terms with the absurdity of human action, and has resigned himself to the will of heaven, that away is opened for him at last. Fittingly, he achieves this detachment in the company of Horatio. However much Horatio's

philosophic skepticism may limit his own ability to perceive those "things in heaven and earth" [I. v. 116] that Hamlet would have him observe, Horatio remains the companion from whom Hamlet has most to learn. Hamlet can trust his friend not to angle for advancement, or to reveal the terrible secret of royal murder. Best of all, Horatio is "As one in suff'ririg all that suffers nothing, A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards Hast ta'en with equal thanks" [III. ii. 66-8]. The true stoic, choosing to "suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" [III. i. 57] rather than futilely oppose them, is proof against the insidious temptation of worldly success as well as against disappointment. While other courtiers gravitate to Claudius with his seemingly magical formulafor prospering, and so lose themselves in worldliness, Horatio sides with one who is sacrificed and so receives his commission as guardian of the truth. (pp. 1-7)

Structurally, the play of *Hamlet* is dominated by the pairing of various characters to reveal-one as the "foil" of another. "I'll be your foil, Laertes" [V. ii. 255], says Hamlet, punning on the resemblance that elsewhere he seriously acknowledges: "by the image of my cause I see The portraiture of his" [V. ii. 77-8]. Laertes has returned from abroad to help celebrate the royal wedding; he loses afather by violent means and seeks vengeance. The common people, usually loyal to young Hamlet, are roused to anew hero-worship upon the occasion of Laertes' second return to Denmark. "Choose wet Laertes shall be king!" [IV. v. 107]. Opheliatoo has been deprived of afather; so has Fortinbras. Hamlet stands at the center of these comparisons, the proper focus of the play. He is the composite man, graced as Opheliaobserves with "The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword" [III. i. 151].

From each comparison we see another facet of his complex being, and another danger from extremes which he must learn to avoid.

We have already seen the similarities of Claudius and Polonius to Hamlet. Laertes, burdened with aresponsibility like Hamlet's, moves to expedient action without scruple. He turns at first on Claudius, who is technically innocent ofPolonius' death. The popular insurrection will simultaneously feed Laertes' revenge and his ambition.

Presented with untested and partial evidence concerning Hamlet's part in Polonius' murder, Laertes would "cut his throat i' th' church" [IV. vii. 126]. He does in fact grapple with Hamlet in the graveyard, striking the first blow and prompting Hamlet to assure his rival that he is not "splenitive and rash" [V. i. 261]. More than that, Laertes connives with the king in underhanded murder; it is Laertes who thinks of poisoning the sword's point with an unction already bought of amountebank. This poison recalls the murder of King Hamlet and the murder of Gonzago. Purposes of this sort can only return to plague the inventor.

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

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

Hamlet's language puts much stress on the pun and other forms of wordplay. This habit of speech, so often alapse in taste, is here appropriate to the portrayal of akeen

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

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

In patterns of images, *Hamlet* employs metaphors of clothes, of acting, and of disease. Again, like the wordplay, these images aim at the discrepancy between ahandsome exterior and corrupted inner being. Hamlet decries inky cloaks, "windy suspiration offorced breath" [I. ii. 79], and other appurtenances of mourning, even though he himself is still dressed in black and so is visibly separated from the wedding party at court. Polonius reveals his trust in the game of preserving appearances by his worldly

advice to his son: "the apparel oft proclaims the man" [I. iii. 72J. This maxim loses its irony when quoted out of context. Osric's sterile infatuation with clothes and mannerisms serves as one last reminder of the world's hypocrisy that Hamlet can now regard with almost comic detachment. Hamlet as actor is amaster of many styles, frighting Opheliain his fouled stockings, ungartered "As if he had been loosed out of hell" [II. i. 80], or composing jingling love doggerel to be read solemnly in open court, or declaiming in an outmoded and stilted tragical rhetoric on the massacre of Troy. He is critical of the professional players' fondness for exaggerated gestures, interpolated bawdry, and overblown rhetoric, because they must aid him in asubtle resemblance of truth designed to lay bare ahuman conscience. They must hold "the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" [III. ii. 22-4]. Acting becomes aprocess of reality in uncovering the veneer of court life.

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

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

Critical Essay #2

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

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

[Of] all the tragic worlds that Shakespeare made, [Hamlet's is] easily the most various and brilliant, the most elusive. It is with no thought of doingjustice to it that I have singled out three of its attributes for comment. I know too well. . . that no one is likely to accept another man's reading of *Hamlet,* that anyone who tries to throw light on one part of the play usually throws the rest into deeper shadow, and that what I have to say leaves out many problems-to mention only one, the knotty problem of the text. All I would say in defense of the materials I have chosen is that they seem to me

interesting, close to the root of the matter even if we continue to differ about what the root of the matter is, and explanatory, in amodest way, of this play's peculiar hold on everyone's imagination, its almost mythic status, one might say, as aparadigm of the life of man.

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

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

Moreover, the matter goes deeper than this. Hamlet's world is preeminently in the interrogative mood. It reverberates with questions, anguished, meditative, alarmed. There are questions that in this play, to an extent I think unparalleled in any other,

mark the phases and even the nuances of the action, helping to establish its peculiar baffled tone. There are other questions whose interrogations, innocent at first glance, are subsequently seen to have reached beyond their contexts and to point towards some pervasive inscrutability in Hamlet's world as awhole. Such is that tense series of challenges with which the tragedy begins: Bernardo's of Francisco, "Who's there?" [I. i. 1] Francisco's of Horatio and Marcellus, "Who is there?" [1. 13] Horatio's of the ghost, "What art thou. . . ?" [1.46]. And then there are the famous questions. In them the interrogations seem to point not only beyond the context but beyond the play, out of Hamlet's predicaments into everyone's:

> "What apiece of work is a man!. . . And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?" [II. ii. 303-04, 308]. "To be, or not to be, that is the question" [III. i. 55]. "Get thee to anunnery. Why wouldst thou be abreeder of sinners?" [III.i.120-21]. "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?" [III. i. 123-28]. "Dost thou think Alexander look'd 0' this fashion i' th' earth? . . . And smelt so?" [V. i. 197, 200].

Further, Hamlet's world is aworld of riddles. The hero's own language is often riddling, as the critics have pointed out. When he puns, his puns have receding depths in them, like the one which constitutes his first speech: "A little more than kin, and less than kind" [I. ii. 65]. His utterances in madness, even if wild and whirling, are simultaneously, as Polonius discovers, pregnant: "Do you know me, my lord?" "Excellent well. You are afishmonger" [II. ii. 173-74]. Even the madness itself is riddling: How much is real? How much is feigned? What does it mean? Sane or mad, Hamlet's mind plays restlessly about his world, turning up one riddle upon another. The riddle of character, for example, and how it is that in aman whose virtues else are "pure as grace" [I. iv. 33], some vicious mole of nature, some "dram of eale" [I. iv. 36], can "all the noble substance oft adulter" [I. iv. 37]. Or the riddle of the player's art, and how aman can so project himself into afiction, adream of passion, that he can

weep for Hecuba. Or the riddle of action: how we may think too little-"What to ourselves in passion we propose," says the playerking, "The passion ending, doth the purpose lose" [III. ii. 194-95]; and again, how we may think too much: "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, And thus the native hue of resolution Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" [III. i. 82-5].

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

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

Meantime, such is Shakespeare's economy, asecond attribute of Hamlet's world has been put before us. This is the problematic nature of reality and the relation of reality to appearance. The play begins with an appearance, an "apparition," to use Marcellus's term-the ghost. And the ghost is somehow real, indeed the vehicle of realities.

Through its revelation, the glittering surface of Claudius's court is pierced, and Hamlet comes to know, and we do, that the king is not only hateful to him but the murderer of his father, that his mother is guilty of adultery as well as incest. Yet there is adilemmain the revelation. For possibly the apparition *is* an apparition, adevil who has assumed his father's shape.

This dilemma, once established, recurs on every hand. From the court's point of view, there is Hamlet's madness. Polonius investigates and gets some strange advice about his daughter: "Conception is ablessing, but as your. daughter may conceive, friend, look to 't" [II. ii. 184-86]. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern investigate and get the strange confidence that "Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither" [II. ii. 309]. Opheliais "loosed" to Hamlet (Polonius's vulgar word), while Polonius and the king hide behind the arras; and what they hear is astrange indictment of human nature, and ariddling threat: "Those that are married already, all but one, shall live" [III. i. 148-49].

On the other hand, from Hamlet's point of view, there is Ophelia. Kneeling here at her prayers, she seems the image of innocence and devotion. Yet she is of the sex for whom he has already found the name Frailty, and she is also, as he seems either madly or sanely to divine, adecoy in atrick. The famous cry-"Get thee to anunnery" [III. i. 120]shows the anguish of his uncertainty. If Opheliais what she seems, this dirty-minded world of murder, incest, lust, adultery, is no place for her. Were she "as chaste as ice, as pure as snow" [III. i. 135], she could not escape its calumny. And if she is not what she seems, then anunnery in its other sense of brothel is relevant to her. In the scene that follows he treats her as if she were indeed an inmate of abrothel.

Likewise, from Hamlet's point of view, there is the enigmaof the king. If the ghost is *only* an appearance, then possibly the king's appearance is reality. He must try it further. By means of asecond and different kind of "apparition," the play within the play, he does so. But then, imnediately after, he stumbles on the king at prayer. This appearance has arelish of salvation in it. If the king dies now, his soul may yet be saved. Yet actually, as we know, the king's efforts to come to terms with heaven have

been unavailing; his words fly up, his thoughts remain below. If Hamlet means the conventional revenger's reasons that he gives for sparing Claudius, it was the perfect moment not to spare him-when the sinner was acknowledging his guilt, yet unrepentant. The perfect moment, but it was hidden, like so much else in the play, behind an arras.

There are two arrases in his mother's room. Hamlet thrusts his sword through one of them. Now at last he has got to the heart of the evil, or so he thinks. But now it is the wrong man; now he himself is amurderer. The other arras he stabs through with his words-like daggers, says the queen. He makes her shrink under the contrast he points between her present husband and his father. But as the play now stands (matters are somewhat clearer in the bad Quarto), it is hard to be sure how far the queen grasps the fact that her second husband is the murderer of her first. And it is hard to say what may be signified by her inability to see the ghost, who now for the last time appears. In one sense at least, the ghost is the supreme reality, representative of the hidden ultimate power, in Bradley's terms-witnessing from beyond the grave against this hollow world. Yet the man who is capable of seeing through to this reality, the queen thinks is mad. "To whom do you speak this?" she cries to her son. "Do you see nothing there?" he asks, incredulous. And she replies:

> "Nothing at all; yet all that is I see" [III. iv. 131-33]. Here certainly we have the imperturbable selfconfidence of the worldly world, its layers on layers of habituation, so that when the reality is before its very eyes it cannot detect its presence.

Like mystery, this problem of reality is central to the play and written deep into its idiom. Shakespeare's favorite terms in *Hamlet* are words of ordinary usage that pose the question of appearances in afundamental form. "Apparition" I have already mentioned. Another term is "seems." When we say, as Opheliasays of Hamlet leaving her closet, "He seem'd to find his way without his eyes" [II. i. 95], we mean one thing. When we say, as Hamlet says to his mother in the first court-scene, "Seems, Madam! . . . I know not 'seems'" [I. ii. 76], we mean another. And when we say, as Hamlet says

to Horatio before the play within the play, "And after, we will both our judgments join In censure of his seeming" [III. ii. 86-7], we mean both at once. The ambiguities of "seem" coil and uncoil throughout this play, and over against them is set the ideaof "seeing." So Hamlet challenges the king in his triumphant letter announcing his return to Denmark: "Tomorrow shall I beg leave to see your kingly eyes" *[N.* vii. 44-5]. Yet "seeing" itself can be ambiguous, as we recognize from Hamlet's uncertainty about the ghost; or from that statement of his mother's already quoted: "Nothing at all; yet all that is I see."

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

Two other terms I wish to instance are "put on" and "shape." The shape of something is the form under which we are accustomed to apprehend it:

> "Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of acamel?" [III. ii. 376]. But ashape may also be adisguise-even, in Shakespeare's time, an actor's costume or an actor's role. This is the meaning when the king says to Laertes as they lay the plot against Hamlet's life: "Weigh what convenience both of time and means May fit us to our shape" [IV. vii. 149-50]. "Put on" supplies an analogous ambiguity. Shakespeare's mind seems to worry this phrase in the play much as Hamlet's mind worries the problem of acting in aworld of surfaces, or the king's mind worries the meaning of Hamlet's transformation. Hamlet has put an antic disposition

> on, that the king knows. But what does "put on" mean? A mask, or afrock or livery-our "habit"? The king is left guessing, and so are we. (pp.507-10)

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

The powerful sense of mortality in *Hamlet* is conveyed to us, I think, in three ways. First, there is the play's emphasis on human weakness, the instability of human purpose, the subjection of humanity to fortune-all that we might call the aspect of failure in man. Hamlet opens this theme in Act I, when he describes how from that single blemish, perhaps not even the victim's fault, aman's whole character may take corruption. Claudius dwells on it again, to an extent that goes far beyond the needs of the occasion, while engap;ed in seducing Laertes to step behind the arras of aseemer's world and dispose of Hamlet by atrick. Time qualifies everything, Claudius says, including love, including purpose. As for love-it has a"plurisy" in it and dies ofits own too much. As for purpose-"That we would do, We should do when we would, for this 'would' changes, And hath abatements and delays as many As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents; And then this 'should' is like aspendthrift's sigh, That hurts by easing" [IV. vii. 118-23]. The player-king, in his long speeches to his queen in the play within the play, sets the matter in astill darker light. She means these protestations of undying love, he knows, but our purposes depend on our memory, and our memory fades fast. Or else, he suggests, we propose something to ourselves in acondition of strong feeling, but then the feeling goes, and with it the resolve. Or else our fortunes change, he adds, and with these our loves: "The great man down, you mark his favorite flies" [III. ii. 204]. The subjection of human aims to fortune is

areiterated theme in *Hamlet,* as subsequently in *Lear.* Fortune is the harlot goddess in whose secret parts men like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern live and thrive; the strumpet who threw down Troy and Hecubaand Priam; the outrageous foe whose slings and arrows aman of principle must suffer or seek release in suicide. Horatio suffers them with composure: he is one of the blessed few "Whose blood andjudgment are so well co-mingled That they are not apipe for fortune's finger To sound what stop she please" [III. ii. 69-71]. For Hamlet the task is of agreater difficulty.

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

We must not, however, neglect to add to this what another student of Shakespeare's imagery has noticed-that the infection in Denmark is presented alternatively as poison. Here, of course, responsibility is implied, for the poisoner of the play is Claudius. The Juice he pours into the ear of the elder Hamlet is acombined poison and disease, a"leperous distilment" that curds "the thin and wholesome blood" [I. v. 701. From this fatal center, unwholesomeness spreads out till there is something rotten in all Denmark, Hamlet tells us that his "wit's diseased," the queen speaks of her "sick soul,"

the king is troubled by "the hectic" in his blood, Laertes meditates revenge to warm "the sickness in my heart" [IV. vii. 55], the people of the kingdom grow "muddied, Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts" [IV. v. 81-21; and even Ophelia's madness is said to be "the poison of deep grief" [IV. v. 75]. In the end, all save Opheliadie of that poison in aliteral as well as figurative sense.

But the chief form in which the theme of mortality reaches us, it seems to me, is as aprofound consciousness of loss. Hamlet's father expresses something of the kind when he tells Hamlet how his "most seeming-virtuous queen" [I, v. 46], betraying alove which "was of that dignity That it went hand in hand even with the vow I made to her in marriage" [I. v. 48-50], had chosen to "decline Upon awretch whose natural gifts were poor To those of mine" [11.50-2]. "0 Hamlet, what afalling off was there'" [I. v. 47]. Opheliaexpresses it again, on hearing Hamlet's denunciation of love and woman in the nunnery scene, which she takes to be the product of adisordered brain:

> 0 what anoble mind Is here o.erthrownl The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue. sword:
> Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state, The glass of fashion and the mould of form.
> Th' observ'd of all observers. quite. quite down!
> [III. 1. 150-54]

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

Time was, the play keeps reminding us, when Denmark was adifferent place. That was before Hamlet's mother took off "the rose From the fair forehead of an innocent love" [III. iv. 42-3] and set ablister there. Hamlet then was still "th' expectancy and rose of the fair state" [III. i. 152]; Ophelia, the "rose of May" [IV. v. 158]. For Denmark was

agarden then, when his father ruled. There had been something heroic about his father-akin,g who met the threats to Denmark in open battle, fought with Norway, smote the sledded Polacks on the ice, slew the elder Fortinbras in an honorable trial of strength. There had been something godlike about his father too: "Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself, An eye like Mars . . . ,A station like the herald Mercury" [III. iv. 56-8]. But, the ghost reveals, aserpent was in the garden, and "the serpent that did sting thy father's life Now wears his crown" [1. v. 39-40]. The martial virtues are put by now. The threats to Denmark are attended to by policy, by agents working deviously for and through an uncle. The moral virtues are put by too. Hyperion's throne is occupied by "avice of kings" [III. iv. 98], "aking of shreds and patches" [III. iv. 102]; Hyperion's bed, by asatyr, apaddock, abat, agib, abloat king with reechy kisses. The garden is unweeded now, and "grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature Possess it merely" [I. ii. 13637]. Even in himself he feels the taint, the taint of being his mother's son; and that other taint, from an earlier garden, of which he admonishes Ophelia: "Our virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it" [111. i. 116-17]. "Why wouldst thou be abreeder of sinners?" [III. i. 12021]. "What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?" [III. i. 126-27].

"Hamlet is painfully aware," says Professor Tillyard [in his *Shakespeare's Problem Plays],* "of the baffling human predicament between the angels and the beasts, between the glory of having been made in God's image and the incrimination of being descended from fallen Adam." To this we may add, I think, that Hamlet is more than aware of it; he exemplifies it; and it is for this reason that his problem appeals to us so powerfully as an image of our own.

Hamlet's problem, in its crudest form, is simply the problem of the avenger: he must carry out the injunction of the ghost and kill the king. But this problem, as I ventured to suggest at the outset, is presented in terms of acertain kind of world. The ghost's injunction to act becomes so inextricably bound up for Hamlet with the character of the world in which the action must be taken-its mysteriousness, its baffling appearances, its deep consciousness of infection, frailty, and loss-that he cannot come

to terms with either without coming to terms with both.

When we first see him in the play, he is clearly avery young man, sensitive and idealistic, suffering the first shock of growing up. He has taken the garden at face value, we might say, supposing mankind to be only alittle lower than the angels. Now in his mother's hasty and incestuous marriage, he discovers evidence of something else, something bestial-though even abeast, he thinks, would have mourned longer. Then comes the revelation of the ghost, bringing asecond shock. Not so much because he now knows that his serpent-uncle killed his father; his prophetic soul had almost suspected this. Not entirely, even, because he knows now how far below the angels humanity has fallen in his mother, and how lust-these were the ghost's words-"though to aradiant angel link'd Will sate itself in acefestial bed, And prey on garbage" [I. v. 55-7]. Rather, because he now sees everywhere, but especially in his own nature, the general taint, taking from life its meaning, from woman her integrity, from the will its strength, turning reason into madness. "Why wouldst thou be abreeder of sinners?" "What should such fellows as 1 do crawling between earth and heaven?" [III. i. 120-21, 126-27]. Hamlet is not the first young man to have felt the heavy and the weary weight of all this unintelligible world; and, like the others, he must come to terms with it.

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

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

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

In the last act of the play (or so it seems to me, for I know there can be differences on this point), Hamlet accepts his world and we discover adifferent man. Shakespeare does not outline for us the process of acceptance any more than he had done with

Romeo or was to do with Othello. But he leads us strongly to expect an altered Hamlet, and then, in my opinion, provides him. We must recall that at this point Hamlet has been absent from the stage during several scenes, and that such absences in Shakespearean tragedy usually warn us to be on the watch for anew phase in the development of the character. . . . Furthermore, and this is an important matter in the theatre-especially important in aplay in which the symbolism of clothing has figured largely-Hamlet now looks different. He is wearing adifferent dress probably, as [Harley] Granville-Barker thinks [in his *Preface to "Hamlet'],* his "seagown scarf'd" about him, but in any case no longer the disordered costume of his antic disposition. The effect is not entirely dissimilar to that in *Lear,* when the old king wakes out of his madness to find fresh garments on him.

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

Till his return from the voyage he had been trying to act beyond these, had been encroaching on the role of providence, if I may exaggerate to make a vital point. He had been too quick to take the burden of the whole world and its condition upon his limited and finite self. Faced with atask of sufficient difficulty in its own right, he had dilated it into acosmic problem-as indeed every task is, but if we think about this too precisely we cannot act at all. The whole time is out of joint, he feels, and in his young man's egocentricity, he will set it right. Hence he misjudges Ophelia. seeing in her only abreeder of sinners. Hence he misjudges himself, seeing himself avermin

crawling oetween earth and heaven. Hence he takes it upon himself to be his mother's conscience, though the ghost has warned that this is no fit task for him, and returns to repeat the warning: "Leave her to heaven, And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge" [I. v. 86-7]. Even with the king, Hamlet has sought to play at God. *He* it must be who decides the issue of Claudius's salvation, saving him for amore damnable occasion. Now, he has learned that there are limits to the before and after that human reason can comprehend. Rashness, even, is sometimes good. Through rashness he has saved his life from the commission for his death, "and prais'd be rashness for it" [V. ii. 7]. This happy circumstance and the unexpected arrival of the pirate ship make it plain that the roles of life are not entirely selfassigned. "There is adivinity that shapes our ends, Roughhew them how we will" [V. ii. 10-11]. Hamlet is ready now for what may happen, seeking neither to foreknow it nor avoid it. "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all" [V. ii.220-22].

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

Still, it is not the fact of death that invests this scene with its peculiar power. It is instead the haunting mystery of life itself that Hamlet's speeches point to, holding in its inscrutable folds those other mysteries that he has wrestled with so long. These he now knows for what they are, and lays them by. The mystery of evil is present herefor this is after all the universal graveyard, where, as the clown says humorously, he holds up Adam's profession; where the scheming politician, the hollow courtier, the tricky lawyer, the emperor and the clown and the beautiful young maiden, all come together

in an emblem of the world; where even, Hamlet murmurs, one might expect to stumble on "Cain's jawbone, that did the first murther" [V. i. 77]. The mystery of reality is here too-for death puts the question, "What is real?" in its irreducible form, and in the end uncovers all appearances: "Is this the fine of his fines and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt?" [V. i. 106-07]. "Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come" [V. i. 192-94]. Or ifwe need more evidence of this mystery, there is the anger of Laertes at the lack of ceremonial trappings, and the ambiguous character of Ophelia's own death. "Is she to be buried in Christian burial when she wilfully seeks her own salvation?" [V. i. 1-2] asks the gravedigger. And last of all, but most pervasive of all, there is the mystery of human limitation. The grotesque nature of man's little joys, his big ambitions. The fact that the man who used to bear us on his back is now askull that smells; that the noble dust of Alexander somewhere plugs abunghole; that "Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay, Might stop ahole to keep the wind away" [V. i. 213-14]. Above all, the fact that apit of clay is "meet" for such aguest as man, as the gravedigger tells us in his song, and yet that, de spite all frailties and limitations, "That skull had atongue in it and could sing once" [V. i. 75].

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

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

Critical Essay #3

[Hapgood examines the dramaturgy, or the dramatic representation, of "delay" in Hamlet *pointing out that while Hamlet is the primary focus of this issue, other characters-most no tably Claudius, Laertes, and Fortinbrasoften delay or are hindered during the course if events. The critic explores how action begins and ends at various moments in the play in asequence of events that often culminates in astandstill in which acharacter experiences adirect contradiction to his or her purposes. Hapgood defnes Hamlet's particular form of delay as "inertia" because he experiences dif ficulty both in getting started and in coming to astop. For instance, although it takes the prince nearly the whole play to exact his revenge on Claudius, when he .finally kills the king he does so.first with his sword and second with the poisoned wine. The critic also asserts that the dramaturgy of delay occurs in the play's dialogue. Although Hamlet's soliloquies represent aform of dramatic action and move the plotforward, ironically the character himself is physically inactive. fA soliloquy is aspeech delivered while the speaker is alone and devised to inform the reader what the character is thinking or to provide essential in formation concerning other participants in the action.) According to Hapgood, Shakespeare's dramatic representation of delay ultimately "interpenetrates with the theme of death. " The catastrophe in the play's.finale puts an end to delay, for it resolves the tragedy's three most compelling revenge motives: King Hamlet's murder, Claudius's marriage to Gertrude, and Polonius's murder.]*

I

The actions of *Hamlet* are all beginning and end, with no middle. The play takes place in the shadow of three events-the murder of King Hamlet, the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude, and the death of Polonius. The consequences of these eventsthe suffering of the wronged, the remorse of the wrongers, the extensive repercussions in subsequent events-are fully and inexorably worked out. Within this atmosphere of prolonged aftermath, numerous actions are begun, stopped, started again, stopped, and

not generally brought to completion until the finale. It is these arrested actions which set the main rhythm of the play. Of course, any powerful conflict is likely to involve strong purposes which are somehow frustrated before their decisive fulfillment. What is distinctive about *Hamlet* is that the purposes are extraordinarily strong, even vowed; the frustrations reach the point of utter deadlock and standstill: and the completions, when they finally come, are sudden, violent, and unexpected.

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

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

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

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

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

And he does make certain slight-but vexy important-delays. Although he has made up his mind to send Hamlet to England. he follows Polonius' ad vice to postpone action until after the play and a conference between Hamlet and his mother. Even after he has broken off the play and directed Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to prepare for the voyage, he delays in confining Hamlet. anearly fatal pause which receives its visual symbol as he kneels attempting to pray during Hamlet's long deliberations. His first plot on H8mlet's life is utterly frustrated, and his final one comes close to it, as Laertes repeatedly fails to score a"hit" in the fencing match. Even the slightest delay for Claudius can be disastrous. It takes only asecond's hesitation for it to be "too late" for him to stop Gertrude from drinking the poisoned wine. (pp. 132-34)

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

> . . . To whatissue will this come?
> Marcellus. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

Horatio. Heaven will direct it.
[I. iv. 89-91]

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

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

Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will. My stronger guilt defeats my strong in tent,
And like aman to double business bound I stand in pause where I shall first begin, And both neglect.
[III. iii. 38-431

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

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

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

> And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
> The time is out of joint.
> 0 cursed spite That ever I was born to set it right!
> [I. v. 187-891

before concluding: "

> Nay, come, let's go together." In the "get thee to anunnery" episode [III. i. 87ff.], he again and again tells Ophelia"farewell." . . . In the bedroom

> scene, Hamlet over and over bids his mother "goodnight." His most notable "delayed exit" comes at his death, marked as it is by his "I am dead, Horatio. . . Horatio, I am dead. . . I die, Horatio! . . . the rest is silence" [V. ii. 332-58].

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

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

Claudius succeeds in killing Hamlet by proxy, as planned, but in afashion which proves suddenly to be self-incriminating and self-destructive. Laertes, though it is almost against his conscience, completes his interrupted attack on Hamlet; yet its outcome is not, finally, the satisfaction of revenge but an exchange of forgiveness.

Curiously, Laertes' earlier threat to Claudius gets carried through in his cry, "The king, the king's to blame" [V. ii. 320]. Fortinbras' frustrated drive toward conquest is more than fulfilled, without battle, when at the end he walks into the whole kingdom of Denmark.

Thus in some sixty lines, the play's main actions reach abrupt completion. Only among themselves do the strongest characters (Hamlet, Claudius, Laertes, Fortinbras) work out the whole cadence from resolution through frustration and standstill to odd fuIfillment. Hamlet's conflict with his mother suggests certain phases of this pattern. On the way to her bedroom, he checks his impulse to use daggers, resolving to speak them instead. (Even so, however, Gertrude thinks that he intends to murder her and calls for help.) But her death when it comes, though sudden and unexpected, is her husband's doing, not her son's. Polonius and Rosencrantz and GuiIdenstern all die in bizarre ways and in an atmosphere of haste, no shriving time allowed; yet their preceding conflicts with Hamlet were no more than aseries of verbal skirmishes, in which Hamlet successfully frustrated their attempts to pluck out the heart of his mystery. Amid all these sudden deaths, Ophelia's is notably gradual; indeed, in no way does her career follow the main rhythm of arrested action.

II

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

and many of the other characters are notably articulate, in fact, loquacious. Only the most important things are held back.

Every step in transmitting the truth about King Hamlet's death is marked by delay. The ghost must appear twice to the guards, silent himself and distilling them to speechless fear, before they go to Horatio, whose ears are fortified against their story. Again, the ghost is dumb (and dumbfounding to Horatio, who has to be urged to speak) but seemingly about to speak when the cock crows. When it appears to Hamlet, speech is again arrested on both sides. Hamlet vows to speak to the ghost "though hell itself should gape / And bid me hold my peace" [I. ii. 244-45]. . . . Still the ghost does not speak until Hamlet declares: "Speak. I'll go no further" [I. v. 11.

The ghost is forbid to tell the secrets of its prison house, and thus holds back the eternal blazon "whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood, / Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres" [I. v. 15-17]. But the tale it does tell is almost as harrowing. For fifty lines after learning the name of the murderer, Hamlet says nothing. Not until after the ghost's exit does he break his silence with an extended and extravagant protestation that his father's "commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain" [I. v.1O2-03]. Yetcommunication of the ghost's message to Hamlet is still not complete. The ghost was well advised to insist that Hamlet "lend thy serious hearing" and "List, list, O,listl" [I. v. 5, 22]. For he does not finally take the ghost's word until he has grounds more relative.

The central instance of arrested speech is that of Hamlet toward Claudius. At his first appearance, after his enigmatic "I am too much in the sun" [I. ii. 67], Hamlet has nothing whatever to say to his uncle: every subsequent speech in this scene is pointedly addressed to his mother. In his first soliloquy, he expresses to himself his contempt for Claudius, calling him asatyr, "no more like my father / Than I to Hercules" [I. ii. 152-53]. After the ghost reveals that Claudius is amurderer, Hamlet denounces to himself and his tables that "smiling, damned villain!" [I. v. 106] and seems on the verge of telling Horatio and Marcellus his "news" immediately. It may

be that he is about to say it when he begins "There's never avillain dwelling in all Denmark," only then to catch himself short and add, "But he's an arrant knave" [I. v. 123-24]. (pp. 13540) Claudius meanwhile has built acourt of concealment and lies, founded on the forged process of King Hamlet's death. "Give thy thoughts no tongue" [I. iii. 59], Polonius advises Laertes, and perfectly hits off the atmosphere at Elsinore. There is aprogression in falsity, as the king's secret contaminates his own life and that of his court. At first, the one key lie having already been told, it is amatter of tacit concealment and smiling hypocrisy. As Hamlet takes malicious delight in demonstrating, Claudius has surrounded himself with yes-men. Then in his service his subjects (even Ophelia) begin to engage in small deceptions. His own out-and-out lies do not come until late in the play, when he deceives Laertes about Hamlet's guilt, misleads Gertrude about calming Laertes' rage, and at the end, with truly extraordinary presence of mind, declares that Gertrude merely "sounds to see them bleed" [Y. ii. 308] and-his last words-"I am but hurt" [Y. ii. 324]. Although he suffers keenly from the gap between his deed and his most painted word, his cry for "light" is as far as he ever goes toward the kind of public confession of his guilt which, with its consequences, would allow him to pray for forgiveness. For all his easy public address, Claudius in the speech which most concerns him remains in effect mute:

> My words fly up. My thoughts remain below.
> Words without thoughts never to heaven go.
> [III. iii. 97-8]
> (p. 141)

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

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

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

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

III

For too long. too much critical attention was given to Hamlet's delay and its causes. One of the healthiest tendencies of recent *Hamlet* criticism has been awidening of interest from Hamlet to the whole work, from Hamlet's delay to other important themes. Along with this, however, has come atendency to minimize the importance of delay. . . . For the rhythms of arrested action and speech interwork endlessly with other major elements: the play's images of hidden disease jibe with the prevailing sense of fatally suppressed deeds and words; its revelations of evil petrify not only Hamlet but Claudius and Laertes; its constant questionings result from the atmosphere of secrecy created by arrested speech. Above all, the dramaturgy of delay interpenetrates with the theme of death. Hamlet is acutely aware both of the fixity and the silence of death: dead Polonius will "stay" for the guards and that prating knave "Is now most still. most secret. and most grave" [III. iv. 214]; Yorick's smile is fixed on his grinning skull and his gibes will no longer set the table on aroar. It is at the end. where that fell sergeant is most strict in his arrest. that death is most in the rhythm of the play. ending at last the reverberations of the three original sins (the murder of King

Hamlet. the marriage, and the killing of Polonius) and fulfilling, in ironically mutual destruction. the vows of Hamlet. Claudius, and Laertes which followed in their wake.

The rhythms of delay also re-enforce one another. The moments of silence and inaction tend to be one, and the same loquaciousness that postpones what really needs saying. postpones what really needs doing. There is asense in which everything Hamlet says and does is asubstitute for the delayed act ofkil1ing the king. Above all. the dramaturgy of delay contributes to our sense of aworld in which direct action and speech are extremely difficult. almost impossible. Actions are not to be carried through without the utmost persistence. the most desperate measures. and the most extraordinary luck-and even then they may well miscarry. Communication is at best minimal and dubious. For Hamlet lives in aworld of "bad dreams." The battlements of Elsinore are haunted. its corridors are dark and circuitous, its rooms prison like, its halls filled with elaborately disguised figures. Its inhabitants are subject to attacks of paralysis at crucial moments, followed by fits of wild activity and speech. In this nightmare world, Hamlet's difficulties in acting and speaking are nothing unusual. He delays because he suffers in their most acute form from maladies endemic in human life as it is lived in Elsinore.

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

Robert Hapgood. "Hamlet Nearly Absurd: The Dramaturgy if Delay." in The Tulane DramaReview, *Vol.* 9. *No.4. Summer.* 1965. *pp.* 132-45.

Critical Essay #4

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

In view of the countless "solutions" to the paradox of Hamlet's conduct. the reader may understandably suspect me of crass boldness in adding afurther comment. I take heart. however, from my conviction that even the most thoughtful of recent criticisms have not departed completely from the nineteenth-century tradition which condones expedient evasions of one or more of the major facts. My purpose is to correlate these facts into an intelligible pattern of conduct. Neither the external problems that render close to impossible Hamlet's execution of vengeance upon Claudius nor the prince's bitter self-accusations blaming the delay wholly upon himself need be side-stepped or minimized; but the evasion or, at best, the distortion of one or the other has traditionally been the custom of the critics, since from the viewpoint of logic the two phenomenaare strikingly incompatible. Dr. Ernest Jones, employing atenet of modem psychoanalysis, goes so far as to argue that Hamlet procrastinates because of an Oedipus complex. Indeed, from the time of [Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe, the majority of critics have ascribed Hamlet's delay in avenging his murdered father to

aweakness of character. But those more familiar with Elizabethan traditions have insisted that the delay is motivated by manifest external obstacles; they have stressed two main difficulties: Hamlet's orthodox doubt as to the veracity of the Ghost and, second, the complications of executing vengeance upon aheavily guarded monarch, against whom there is no tangible evidence of his crime. With the latter critics I concur in full, except for one thingtheir custom of side-stepping or, at best, awkwardly explaining Hamlet's self-accusations of delay. The psychotic factors, I agree, are in no way responsible for Hamlet's delay in avenging his father; on the contrary, anot uncommon neurosis results from Hamlet's enforced inactivity and is the cause of his self-recriminations, which, in view of the external obstacles to vengeance, are clearly unwarranted. Yet, as I shall hope to prove, they are perfectly intelligible-in fact, so intelligible that Hamlet's conduct would appear obtuse and unnatural without them. The two traditional schools of thought concerning the character of Hamlet are both unsound for the reason that each bases its interpretation on only apart of the important facts. The school that adheres to the principle that Hamlet's delay is internally motivated may be divided into three groups: the critics led by Goethe with his theory that Hamlet is weak-willed; those led by [August Wihelm von] Schlegel and [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge, who maintained that the habit of meditation paralyzes the capacity for action; and those who have followed Hermann Ulrici's doctrine that Christian ethics, or moral scruples, are adeterrent to blood revenge. Whatever their basic differences of opinion, these critics have pursued asimilar method of argument: they have ignored or minimized the external obstacles to vengeance and, citing those passages in which Hamlet upbraids himself for pro crastinating, have concluded that the prince is by nature incapable of executing aruthless deed. The opposing critics, following the lead of the Germans J. L. Klein and Karl Werder, have correctly pointed out the external obstacles to Hamlet's motive of revenge, but are embarrassed by his self-accusations of delay, and-Werder in part excepted-explain them oddly or ignore them. A third, more modem group, including Ernest Jones and Oscar J. Campbell, has attempted to compromise these viewpoints; these men recognize Hamlet as ayouth capable of decisive action, but ascribe his failure in the particular motive of revenge to psychotic shortcomings. Professor Campbell's theory [see excerpt in section on Melancholy] has aroused the fewest objections. He regards Hamlet as

amanicdepressive, who vacillates between violent action and brooding inaction: "Adverse fate so times the rhythm of Hamlet's malady that at any given moment he is in the grip of the emotions which fit him least to deal with the situation confronting him." One objection to Campbell's theory is that, in explaining Hamlet's failure to act at the proper moment, it depends too strongly on coincidence-as Campbell suggests, on "adverse fate". More important, although it recognizes that Hamlet is at times aman of action, it fails to consider in full the external obstacles confronting the motive of vengeance, aconsideration which acomplete account of the facts cannot evade.

Ernest Jones's argument that Hamlet suffers an Oedipus complex is the most ingenious attempt to solve the Hamlet problem [see excerpt in section on Hamlet's character]. Like the arguments of his predecessors who have insisted that Hamlet's delay in exacting vengeance is internally motivated, it adequately explains those speeches, three in number, in which the prince reproaches himself for procrastination; but it also recognizes Hamlet as aman of action-afact that the adherents of the "paralysis of doubt" theory have been obliged to overlook-and concludes that only in the matter of revenge is the prince incapable of action. This is explained by the fact that Hamlet, having inadequately repressed adesire to possess his mother, identifies himself with his intended victim, now espoused to his mother, and thus cannot, in clear conscience, bring himself to act against him. To accept the principle that an Oedipus complex deters Hamlet in his motive, we are asked to give credence to two hypotheses: first, that Shakespeare (who knew nothing of Freudian psychology) suffered from amarked Oedipus complex and, thus, depicted Hamlet in his own likeness as powerless to act against aman who had done away with his father and married his mother; second, that Hamlet's delay in the motive of vengeance cannot be adequately explained by external obstacles. The first hypothesis neither can nor need be refuted; Dr. Jones has convinced himself and asizable minority of his readers that Shakespeare was the victim of an Oedipus complex in spite of the fact that Jones and his professional confreres [colleagues] are the first to emphasize the months of laborious probing and examination essential to the psychoanalysis of apatient. Shakespeare's "Oedipus complex" must, I think, remain adubious hypothesis from now until Doomsday. The second hypothesis is simply acontradiction of the truth. Along with other critics, John

Ashworth *(Atlantic Monthly,* April 1949) has emphatically pointed out that we cannot expect an avenger to strike down his royal victim in full sight of agathering of courtiers and bodyguards, by whom he is customarily attended.

Such actions may result from desperation or mania. but not from calculated vengeance. Jones argues that the prince has an excellent opportunity to kill his uncle at the close of the play-withinthe-play and points to only one reason for his failure to do so: namely, his so-called "Oedipus complex". But, one unavoidably asks, what would have been the outcome of such apublic attempt at vengeance? Whether he succeeded or failed, Hamlet would almost assuredly have lost his own life. Even more distressing to aman of cherished honor, he-and not Claudius-would have been *re* corded by history as the blackguard; the reason for this is evident, even to the blind: of the large and influential assemblage of persons who are present, only Hamlet and indirectly Horatio have knowledge that Claudius is amurderer. To the others, the King's implied confession of guilt is meaning less. One marvels at the assumption-made by so intelligent aman as Dr. Jones-that the testimony of aghost, delivered in *absentia,* is sufficient evidence to convict aking of fratricide. Moreover, unlike many of my predecessors, some of them clearly ignorant of Elizabethan traditions, I cannot dismiss Hamlet's expressed doubts as to the veracity of the Ghost as mere talk and babble. The Protestant and consequently the Elizabethan belief, in contrast to the Roman Catholic creed, was that the souls of the dead went directly to Heaven or Hell, not to Purgatory, and could not return to this world. The Swiss Protestant Ludwig Lavaterin *De Spectris* (1570) and King James I in *Daemonologie* (1597) upheld this viewpoint, maintaining that the Devil could assume either the shape or the dead body of anewly deceased person and thus give the illusion of aghost; but the *reality* of ghosts was positively denied by both men. James argued that an intelligent Christian knows that "neither can the spirite of the defunct return to his friend, or yet an Angel use such formes."

Lavater. . . wrote: "Evil spirits do use this kind of deceyt, to fayne t..qemselves to be soules of such as are deceassed," This attitude, both Protestant and Elizabethan, is expressed not only by Horatio and Marcellus but also by Hamlet as they gaze upon the apparition of the dead king. Horatio fears that it "may assume some other horrible

form" [I. iv. 72]; Marcellus, like Horatio, begs Hamlet not to follow it; and Hamlet supposes that it may be "agoblin damned" [I. iv. 40]. Nevertheless, he is undecided because of its "questionable shape" and consequently *agrees* to "call [it] Hamlet. / King, father" [I. iv. 44-5]. When alone with the Ghost, Hamlet has neither the will nor the rational power nor the courage to doubt its authenticity; for the moment, "the pales and forts of reason" [I. iv. 28] are inundated completely under emotional predilection. Later, in amood governed by reason rather than emotion, Hamlet expresses serious doubt concerning the authenticity of the Ghost: "The spirit that I have seen / May be the devil [who] . . . / Abuses me to damn me" [II. ii. 598-603]. It seems odd, of course, that he should not announce this renewed doubt as to the Ghost until after he has arranged with the itinerant actors the play-within-the-play, the intent of which is to elicit some sort of confession from Claudius and thus prove, or disprove, the reliability of the Ghost. But only one day after this doubt is expressed, Hamlet makes it apparent that he had discussed his misgivings about the Ghost with Horatio at atime precedent to the Players' coming to Elsinore; careful to inform his friend that aplay will shortly be staged "before the king", he explains:

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

How long Hamlet has entertained arenewed doubt concerning the Ghost's identity, we are not told by the text of the play. It is, however, logical to believe that as soon as the emotional stimuli of coming face to face with the Ghost had worn off, the Protestant attitude, which denied the *reality* of ghosts, began to re-assert itself in Hamlet's mind. There can, furthermore, be little doubt that Hamlet's misgivings about the veracity of the Ghost are honest ones and not a"cogent" excuse, as Jones has insisted, for his

failure to carry out promptly his motive of vengeance. Upon the very first opportunity of determining whether his informant is an honest ghost or adeceitful devil intent on his damnation, Hamlet acts with remarkable despatch and precision: only asingle day elapses between his meeting with the Players and the performance of the play scene; moreover, the speech which he has prepared to be inserted in the "Murder of Gonzago" is so deadly in its pointedness that the first six of its "dozen or sixteen"lines [II. ii. 541] are sufficient to bring; atacit confession from Claudius. Thus, having fashioned an unexpected opportunity to his own purposes, Hamlet removes the paramount obstacle to his motive of vengeance, and consequently his most cogent *reason not* to slay Claudius, without an iotaof evasion.

Once the uncertainty about the Ghost's identity has been removed-once Claudius, witnessing the satanic murder featured in the play-within-the-play, has cried, "Give me some light: away!" [III. ii. 269]-Hamlet finds the King alone at prayers. Again, we must not forget the viewpoint of the Elizabethan; to him, repentance of past sins, however heinous, was tantamount to the soul's salvation.

To do away with Claudius while he is in the act of repentance would have been, as Hamlet says, mere "hire and salary, not revenge" [III. iii. 79]. His father had been slain, to quote the Ghost, "with all my imperfections on my head: 0 horrible! 0 horrible! most horrible!" [I. v. 79-80] In Fletcher's *The Pilgrim,* revenge is put aside for the reason that the intended victim, aman who prays hourly, is too well prepared for Heaven. To the extent that the Elizabethan accepted the fact that King Hamlet (slain without benefit of repentance) was "confin'd to fast in fires" [I. v. 11], he was bound to understand that the prince could not slay Claudius "in the purging of his soul" [III. iii. 85] without, in all likelihood, securing the salvation of his victim.

It is manifest, I think, that Hamlet was thwarted in the motive of vengeance by external obstacles. But the critics who have promulgated this theory have, with unfailing regularity, weakly interpreted or side-stepped his self-accusations of delay, the very passages on which the opposing school has built its thesis that the delay was internally motivated. In consequence, even the best criticisms of Hamlet's conduct

have been unduly one-sided. Before I turn to an explanation of Hamlet's "admissions" of delay-his pseudo-procrastination-I wish to add one thought in support of the evidence that Hamlet's obstacles were external. In the sagaof Amleth, as recorded by Saxo Granunaticus. the hero awaits, as he informs his mother, the "fitting hour" to avenge his slain father against Feng. This principle of the avenger's biding his time, of awaiting the appropriate opportunity, was later to be the almost invariable technique of Elizabethan tragedy. Hamlet as an avenger was the product of this and no other tradition. He is confronted by the normal number of external problems; what distinguishes him from his fellow avengers of the stage is his hypersensitive response to the delay imposed by these obstacles.

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

Tenets of Elizabethan psychology fully support the hypothesis that Hamlet's unwarranted selfreproaches are the outgrowth of aconscience that is preoccupied with some past sin or omission; but they do not contain an adequate explanation of the psychic origins of his Jtuilt complex, atask that must depend on the help of those modem principles which explain the relation of the superego, or the conscience, to abnormal behavior. The Elizabethan physician Timothy Bright in his once-famous) *Treatise of Melancholie* (1586) recognized "amolestation [that] riseth from conscience, condemning the guilty soul of those ingraven laws of nature, which no man is voide of. . . . Neither is the guiltiness brought to us by foreine report, but the knowledge riseth from the conscience of the offender." Thirty-five years later, Robert Burton, restating the established Elizabethan causes of melancholy [in his *The*

Anatomy of Melancholy], wrote: "The last and greatest cause of this malady is our conscience. . . . Our conscience. . . grinds our souls with remembrance of some precedent sins, makes us reflect upon, accuse and con demn our own selvesThis scrupulous conscience. . . tortures so many, [who]. . . accuse themselves and aggravate every small offence." In fine, Bright and Burton have told us that adisquieting sense of guilt arises from the dictates of conscience when they are violated; second, that victims of conscience deal in self-accusations and, as Burton states, "out of adeep apprehension of their unworthiness. . . aggravate" every trivial sin or personal failure. That Shakespeare was keenly aware of the distempers that aviolated conscience could evoke is frequently evident in his plays; Richard III, after the dream in which the ghosts of his victims appear, cries:

> 0 coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!...
>
> My conscience hath athousand several tongues, And every tongue brings in aseveral tale, And every tale condemns me for avillain.
>
> *[Richard II/,* V. iii. 179, 193-95]

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

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

maintained, "riseth from conscience". (pp. 177-82)

Two facts are clear: for external reasons Hamlet is unable to carry out his motive of vengeance; on the other hand, he violently upbraids himself for not doing so. So far, in relying on Elizabethan principles of conscience, I have made only atenuous ex planation of this enigma. The psychic origin and the ultimate structure of the dictate that tyrannizes over Hamlet's mind are not yet clear, nor has it been adequately shown *why* aconsciencestricken person has need to resort to selfaccusation. Freud has argued that the superego, or conscience, takes its beginning from athreat of castration essential to suppress the infantile Oedipus complex. But this hypothesis, right or wrong, is hardly material to the actual existence of the superego, which, as psychoanalysts and many psychologists agree, is comprised of dictates acquired through moral discipline in childhood and, remaining thereafter "wholly or very largely uncon scious" [Edmund S. Conklin, in his *Principles of Abnonnal Psychology],* has the duty of censorship over the conscious mind. Freud points out that the earliest and strongest of these dictates evolve from the child's relation with his parents, both from self-identification with them and their ideals and from their precepts; he also recognizes that aprincipal dictate acquired in childhood is that of filial obedience, which is expressed in ahigh regard by the child for his parents and without which the inculcation of further discipline would be all but impossible. Furthermore, the stronger has been achild's moral discipline, the more tyrannical, according to Freud, tend to be the dictates of the superego, which, in his interpretation, "the ego [consciousness] forms. . . out of the id" *[The Ego and the Id].* That Hamlet, aprince and only child, has been subjected to the strictest kind of discipline, especially in regard for his parents, is not merely alogical hypothesis; it is atruth manifest throughout the play. His filial obedience is hinted at in his attitude toward his mother at the outset: "I shall in all my best obey you, madam" [I. ii. 120]. But far stronger are Hamlet's devotion and feeling of duty toward his dead father. This attitude, even before the Ghost has appeared to him, underscores his first soliloquy: "So excellent aking; that was, to this, /Hyperion to asatyr" [I. ii. 139-40]. Whenseconds later-having severely censured the queen's hasty remarriage-he sobs, "But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue" [I. ii. 159], he is not stifling ajealousy for his mother and her

"incestuous sheets", as the adherents of the Oedipus complex theory have insisted. On the contrary, so strong has been his moral training, so strong at present are the dictates of his offended conscience, that he is horrified at her infidelity to his father; his despair is made complete, and he is stunned into silence, by the knowledge that his words and actions are powerless to atone for his mother's immense sacrilege, which, as he describes it, "cannot come to good" [I. ii. 158]. His accustomed esteem for his mother-and With it much of his moral outlook on life-has crashed about him, in irreparable fragments.

Shortly, Hamlet learns from the Ghost that his paramount responsibility is to avenge his father's murder. In apassion of filial obedience, he vows to

"sweep to. . . revenge" on "wings as swift as meditation" [I. v. 30]; later, just after the Ghost has departed, he pledges: "Thy commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain" [I. v. 102-03]. Once his conscious mind has reasserted itself, Hamlet is fully aware that he is confronted by hazardous external obstacles, and hence plans to put on "an antic disposition" [I. v. 172] in order to conceal his motive. But his conscience, the "precipitate" of childhood years of strictest moral discipline, is not able to take account of such practical matters. Since it had been activated, while his reason was largely suppressed, during the encounter with the Ghost-amatter confirined by his unqualified expressions of filial duty at that time-it has dedicated itself to an immediate course of vengeance which, although consistent with Hamlet's deep sense ofloyalty, is independent of the commitments later resolved upon by his rational mind. That part of it, moreover, which is unconscious. . . is completely isolated from the faculty of reason and has not the power even to comprehend Hamlet's rationally developed doubt as to the veracity of the Ghost. Hamlet's self is divided by two injunctions, one resulting from the precautions of reason, the other from the unconscious and insistent dictates of the superego. Consider, for example, the soliloquy ending Act II: it is sharply contradictory in substance for the reason that Hamlet's mind is at first engaged in response to the dictates of his conscience. This response, confirming the superego's unqualified acceptance of the duty imposed by the Ghost, takes the form of violent self-accusations for his failure to have avenged his

father; then, with an obvious effort, he cries, "Fie upon 't, foh! About, my brain" [II. ii. 587-88], and turns his mind to the world of reality and the practical consideration with which he is faced: the fact that the Ghost may be the Devil, and that therefore he has arranged the playwithin-the-play, hopeful of proving to himself his *right* to slay Claudius. The phrase, "About, my brain", is clear indication of Hamlet's realization that he is confronted by two diametrically opposite criteriaof values, the one unreasonable in its demands and quite mystifying, the other realistic and understandable, and each completely isolated from the other.

Both the compelling nature of Hamlet's inner con science;md the fact that it has no information of the external obstacles that have deterred the motive of vengeance are irrefutably testified by the final appearance of Hamlet senior's ghost. Unseen and unheard by his mother, who is present, it speaks to him from the realm of the inner mind: "This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose" [III. iv. 110-11]. The embodiment of

Hamlet's conscience is ultimate proof of what has been tormenting him from the time of his first encounter with the Ghost-then aghost of revengewhen he was intrusted with its "dread command". The longer Hamlet must delay in carrying out his pledge-first, for absolute proof of Claudius's guilt, later for the "fitting hour"-the more forcible are the demands of the superego that its dictate of prompt vengeance in obedience to his father be fulfilled. "The tension", wrote Freud [in his *An Outline of Psychoanalysis],* "between the demands of the conscience and the actual attainments of the ego [whether misdeeds or 'unexecuted intentions'] is experienced as asense of guilt", which, as he stresses elsewhere, is "contributed by asuperego that has grown peculiarly severe and cruel". It is inevitable, therefore, that Hamlet, whose conscience is unable to comprehend the problems im posed on him by the real world, falls victim to a marked guilt complex. Freud and other psychoanalysts have pointed out that only through abasement and self-injury can the neurotic's sense of guilt (described by them as basically unconscious) be relieved: "Self-torments of melancholiacs. . . are without doubt pleasurable" *[Collected Pa pers].* Dr. Martin W. Peck is more explicit [in his *The Meaning of Psychoanalysis]:* The neurotic finds "relief from guilt by abasement

and selfpunishment"-and, as he later states, "by selfdepreciation". *As* Hamlet's guilt complex becomes unbearably strong, he relies instinctively on the only available remedy-abasement and selftorment. By undeservedly reproaching himself for weakness of character, in particular by transposing the causes that obstruct his vengeance from external obstacles to himself, Hamlet can temporarily assuage the painful sense of guilt and gain relief from it. He undergoes what Dr. A A Brill has termed [in *hisFreuds Contribution to Psychiatry]* an "emotional catharsis" that follows the fulfillment of the "need for punishment". His selfreproaches for not having avenged his father suggest that he becomes at times conscious of the precise nature of the superego's dictate; according to

Freud and Brill, an awareness of this sort, though not found in most neurotic disorders, is not uncommon among melancholiacs: "In melancholia, the ego humbly submits to the criticism and tyrannical oppression of the superego and admits its guilt." Hamlet's other methods of abasement-for example, his ludicrous appearance in "doublet all unbrac'd" before Ophelia[II. i. 75]-are less directly related to the demands of the conscience; but, like his self-accusations, they are means of satisfying aneed for punishment and attest to apotent sense of guilt.

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

sanity.

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

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

Critical Essay #5

[Girard maintains that Hamlet *belongs to the Revenge Tragedy genre. Revenge Tragedy is adramatic fonn made popular on the English stage by Thomas Kyd, acontemporary of Shakespeare, whose* Spanish Tragedy *is an early example of the type. Such aplay callsfor the revenge of afather by ason or vice versa, an act which is initiated by the murdered man's ghost Other devices found in Revenge Tragedies include hesitation by the hero, real or feigned madness, suicide, intrigue, and murders on stage. In the critic's opinion, Shakespeare despised the Revenge Tragedy genre as afonn whose conventions had become trite. Yet; because revenge theater was highly popular among Elizabethan audiences, the dramatist had to confonn to certain guidelines of the genre to produce afinancially succesiful tragedy. As aresult, Shakespeare innovated the theatrical type by creating a*double entendre *(double meaning) in which he subtly denounced the banality of revenge theater without denying the audience its* katharsis *(apurification of emotions stirred by tragic con flict). Shakespeare expressed his disgustfor revenge theater through Hamlet 's deploring revenge throughout the play, yet fulfilled his audience's expectations for atragic conclusion. Girard also discusses Hamlet's use of "mimet* ic *models, "by which he attempts to put himself in the necessary frame of mind to murder Claudius by mimicking other characters' actions. According to the critic, Hamlet projects his desire for revenge first through the actor who enacts the Hecubaspeech, and then through Gertrude, but it is Laertes, who acts without thinking, who seTUes as the "mimetic model" whichfinally motivates Hamlet to kill the king. Girard concludes his discussion by drawing an analogy between* Hamlet *and modem society. Hamlet's dilemmaessentially represents the modem day evolution of society to a"no man's land," the critic argues, where revenge remains aforce upon which we often dwell, but seldom act]*

Hamlet belongs to the genre of the revenge tragedy, as hackneyed and yet inescapable in Shakespeare's days as the "thriller" in ours to atelevision writer. . . . The weariness with revenge and *katharsis* [apurification of emotions stirred by tragic conflict] which

can be read, I believe, in the margins of the earlier plays must really exist because, *inHamlet,* it moves to the center of the stage and becomes fully articulated.

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

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

In order to perform revenge with conviction, you must believe in the justice of your own cause. . . .

[The] revenge seeker will not believe in his own cause unless he believes in the guilt of his intended victim. And the guilt of that intended victim entails in turn the innocence of that victim's victim. If the victim's victim is already akiller and if the revenge seeker reflects alittle too much on the circularity of revenge, his faith in vengeance must collapse.

This is exactly what we have in *Hamlet* It cannot be without apurpose that Shakespeare suggests the old Hamlet, the murdered king, was amurderer himself. In the various sources of the play there may be indications to that effect, but Shakespeare would have omitted them if he had wanted to strenR:then the case for revenge. However nasty Claudius may look, he cannot look nasty enough if he appears in acontext of previous revenge; he cannot generate, as avillain, the absolute passion and

dedication which is demanded of Hamlet. The problem with Hamlet is that he cannot forget the context. As aresult, the crime by Claudius looks to him like one more link in an already long chain, and his own revenge will look like still another link, perfectly identical to all the other links.

In aworld where every ghost, dead or alive, can only perform the same action, revenge, or clamor for more of the same from beyond the grave, all voices are interchangeable. You can never know with certainty which ghost is addressing whom. It is one and the same thing for Hamlet to question his own identity and to question the ghost's identity, and his authority.

To seek singularity in revenge is avain enterprise but to shrink from revenge, in aworld which looks upon it as a"sacred duty" is to exclude oneself from society, to become anonentity once more. There is no way out for Hamlet and he shifts endlessly from one impasse to the other, unable to make up his mind because neither choice makes sense.

If all characters are caught in acycle of revenge that extends in all directions beyond the limits of its action, *Hamlet* has no beginning and no end. The play collapses. The trouble with the hero is that he does not believe in his play half as much as the critics do. He understands revenge and the theater too well to assume willingly arole chosen for him by others. His sentiments are those, in other words, which we have surmised in Shakespeare himself. What the hero feels in regard to the act of revenge, the creator feels in regard to revenge as theater.

The public wants vicarious victims and the playwright must oblige. Tragedy is revenge. Shakespeare is tired of revenge, and yet he cannot give it up, or he gives up his audience and his identity as aplaywright. Shakespeare turns atypical revenge topic, *Hamlet,* into ameditation on his predicament as aplaywright. (pp. 173-75)

There would be no Hamlet "problem" if the hero really believed what he says. It is also himself, therefore, that he is tIying to convince. The anger in his voice and the

exaggeration of his language with its coldly contrived metaphors suggest that he labors in vain:

> Look here upon this picture, and on this The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.
> See what agrace was seated on this brow. Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself, An eye like Mars, to threaten and command...
> A combination and aform indeed Where every god did seem to set his seal To give the world assurance of aman. This was your husband. Look you now what foIlows.
> Here is your husband, like amildewed ear, Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?
> [III. iv. 53-65]

The gentleman doth protest too much. The symmetry of the whole presentation, and of Hamlet's own expressions tend to reassert the resemblance he denies: "This was your husband. . . / Here is your husband,. . ."

Hamlet begs his mother to give up her conjugal relationship with Claudius. The tons of Freud which have been poured over the passage have obscured its significance. Hamlet does not feel indignant enough to rush out and kill the villain. As aresult he feels uncomfortable about himself and he blames his mother because she obviously feels even more indifferent to the whole affair than he does. He would like his mother to initiate the revenge process for him. He tries to arouse in her the indignation he himself cannot feel, in order to catch it secondhand from her, perhaps, out of some kind of mimetic sympathy. Between Gertrude and Claudius he would like to see adramatic break that would force him to side resolutely with his mother.

It is agenerally accepted view nowadays that Gertrude must have felt atremendous attachment to Claudius. Far from confirming that view, the following lines suggest exactly the opposite:

> Nor sense to ecstasy was ever so thralled But it reserved some quantity of choice To serve in such adifference [III. iv. 74-6]

Hamlet does not say that his mother is madly in love with Claudius; he says that even if she were, she should still be able to preceive some difference between her two husbands. Hamlet assumes, therefore, that his mother like himself, perceives *no difference whatever.* This assumption is obviously correct. Gertrude remains silent during her son's tirade because she has nothing to say. The reason she could marry the two brothers in rapid succession is that they are so much alike and she feels the same indifference to the one as to the other. It is this overwhelming indifference that Hamlet perceives and he resents it because he is tIying to fight it in himself. Like so many other queens of Shakespeare, like the queens of *Richard III,* for instance, Gertrude moves in aworld where prestige and power count more than passion. (pp. 176-77) What Hamlet needs, in order to stir up his vengeful spirit, is arevenge theater more convincing than his own, something less half-hearted than the play Shakespeare is actually writing. Fortunately for the hero and for the spectators who are eagerly awaiting their final bloodbath, Hamlet has many opportunities to watch rousing spectacles during his play and he tries to generate even more, in a conscientious effort to put himself in the right mood for the murder of Claudius. Hamlet must receive from someone else, amimetic model, the impulse which he does not find in himself. This is what he tried to achieve with his mother, we found, and he dfd not succeed. He is much more successful with the actor who impersonates for him the role of Hecuba, It becomes obvious, at this point, that the only hope for Hamlet to accomplish what his society-or the spectators-require, is to become as "sincere" ashowman as the actor who can shed real tears when he pretends to be the queen of Troy!

> Is it not monstrous that this player here, But in afiction, in adream of passion, Could force his soul so to his own conceit That from her working all his visage wanned,
> Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect, A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
> With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!

> For Hecuba!
> What's Hecubato him or he to Hecuba, That he should weep for her?
> What would he do
> Had he the motive and the cue for passion That I have?
> [II. ii. 551-62]

Another catchy example for Hamlet comes from the army of Fortinbras on its way to Poland. The object of the war is aworthless speck of land. Thousands of people must risk their lives:

> Even for an eggshell. Rightly to be great Is not to stir without great argument. But greatly to find quarrel In a straw When Honor's at the stake.
> (IV. iv. 53-6]

The scene is as ridiculous as it is sinister. It would not impress Hamlet so much if the hero truly believed in the superiority and urgency of his cause. His words constantly betray him, here as in the scene with his mother. As acue for passion, his revenge motif is no morecompe1ling, really. than the cue of an actor on the stage. He too must *greatly. . . find quarrel in astraw.* he too must stake everything *evenfor an eggshell.*

The effect of the army scene obviously stems, at least in part. from the large number of people in volved, from the almost infinite multiplication of the example which cannot fall to increase Its mimetic attraction enormously. Shakespeare is too much amaster of mob effects not to remember at this point the cumulative effect of mimetic models. In order to whip up enthusiasm for the war against Claudius, the same irrational contagion Is needed as in the war against Poland The type of mimetic incitement from which Hamlet "benefits" at this point resembles very much the kind of spectacle which governments never fall to organize for their cltIzemy when they have decided it Is time to go to war: arousing military parade.

But it is not the actor, ultimately, or the army of Fortinbras; it is Laertes, I believe. who determines Hamlet to act. Laertes provides the most pefsua slve spectacle not because he provides the "best" example but because his situation parallels that of Hamlet. Being Hamlet's peer, at least up to apoint. his passionate stance constitutes the most powerful challenge imaginable. In such circumstances, even the most apathetic man's sense of emulation must rise to such apitch that the sort of disaster that the fulfillment of the revenge demands can finally be achieved.

The simple and unreflective Laertes can shout to Claudius "give me my father" (IV. v. 117] and then leap into his sister's grave in awild demonstration of grief. Like awell-adjusted gentleman or aconsummate actor, he can perform with the utmost sincerity all the actions his social milieu demands. even if they contradict each other. He can mourn the useless death of ahuman being at one minute and the next he can uselessly kill adozen more if he is told that his honor Is at stake. The death of his father and sister are almost less shocking to him than the lack of pomp and circumstance at their burial. At the rites of Ophelia. Laertes keeps asking the priest for "more ceremony." Laertes is aformalist and he reads the tragedy of which he is apart very much like the formalists of all stripes. He does not question the validity of revenge. He does not question the literary *genre.* He does not question the relationship between revenge and mourning. These are not valid critical questions to him: they never enter his mind, just as it never occurs to most critics that Shakespeare himself could question the validity of revenge.

Hamlet watches Laertes leap into Ophelia's grave and the effect on him Is electrifying. The reflective mood of the conversation with Horatio _ way to awild imltation of the rival's theatrlcaf mourning. At this point. he has obviously decided that he. too. would act according to the demands of society. that he would become another Laertes in other words. He, too. as aresult, must leap into the grave of one who has already died, even as he prepares other graves for those still alive:

> 'Swounds, show me what thou'lt do.
> Woo't weep? Woo't fight? Woo't fast?

> Woo't tear thyself?
> Woo't drink up eisel? Eat acrocodlle?
> I'll do't. Dost thou come here to whine?
> To outface me with leaping in her grave?
> Be buried quick with her, and so wIll
> I. . . .
> I'll rant as well as thou.
> [V. I. 274-79, 284]

In order to embrace the goal of revenge, Hamlet must enter the circle of mimetic desire and rivalry: this is what he has been unable to achieve so far but here he finally reaches ahysterical pitch of that "pale and bloodless emulation". . . . (pp. 177-80)

Shakespeare can place these incredible lines in the mouth of Hamlet without undermining the dra matic credibility of what follows. Following the lead of Gertrude, the spectators will ascribe the outburst to "madness."

> This is mere madness.
> And thus awhile the fit will work on him. Anon, as patient as the female dove
> When that her golden couplets are dis closed,
> His silence will sit drooping.
> [V. i. 284-88]

A little later Hamlet himself, now calmly determined to kill Claudius, will recall the recent outburst in most significant words:

> I am very sorry, good Horatio,
> That to Laertes I forgot myself,
> For by the image of my cause I see
> The portraiture of his. I'll court his favors.
> But, sure, the bravery of his grief did put me

> Into atowering passion.
> [V. ii. 75-80]

Like all victims of mimetic suggestion, Hamlet reverses the true hierarchy between the other and himself. He should say: "by the image of *his* cause I see the portraiture of *mine."* This is the correct formula, obviously, for all the spectacles that have influenced Hamlet. The actor's tears and the military display of Fortinbras were already presented as mimetic models. In order to realize that Laertes, too, functions as amodel, the last two lines are essential. The cool determination of Hamlet, at this point, is the transmutation of the "towering passion" which he had vainly tried to build up before and which Laertes has finally communicated to him through the "bravery of his grief." This transmutation is unwittingly predicted by Gertrude when she compares Hamlet to the dove who becomes quiet after she has laid her eggs. Gertrude only thinks of Hamlet's previous changes of mood, as sterile as they were sudden, but her metaphor suggests amore tangible accomplishment, the birth of something portentous:

> Anon, as patient as the female dove When that her golden couplets are dis closed,
> His silence will sit drooping.
> [V. i. 286-88]
> (pp. 180-81)

In *Hamlet,* the very absence of acase against revenge becomes apowerful intimation of what the modern world is really about. Even at those later stages in our culture when physical revenge and blood feuds completely disappeared or were limited to such marginal milieux as the underworld, it would seem that no revenge play, not even aplay of reluctant revenge, could strike areally deep chord in the modern psyche. In reality the question is never entirely settled and the strange void at the center of *Hamlet* becomes asymbolic expression of the Western and modern malaise, no less powerful than the most brilliant attempts to define the prob lem, such as Dostoevsky's underground revenge.

Our "symptoms" always resemble that unnamable paralysis of the will, that ineffable corruption of the spirit that affect not only Hamlet, but the other characters as well. The devious ways of these characters, the bizarre plots they hatch, their passion for watching without being watched, their propensity to voyeurism and spying, the general disease of human relations make agood deal of sense as adescription of an undifferentiated no man's land between revenge and no revenge in which we ourselves are still living.

Claudius resembles Hamlet in his inability to take aprompt and healthy revenge on his enemies. The king should react more explicitly and decisively to the murder ofPolonius who was, after all, his private councillor; the crime was apersonal offense to him. His reasons for hesitating, then acting only in secret, may be different from Hamlet's but the final result is the same. When Laertes asks Claudius why he failed to punish amurderer, the reply betrays embarrassment.

Even Claudius presents Hamlet-like symptoms. Not Hamlet alone but the time is out of joint. And when Hamlet describes his revenge as "sick," or "dull," he speaks for the whole community. In order to appreciate the nature and the extent of the disease, we must realize that all behavior we tend to read as strategic or conspiratorial, in that play, can also be read as symptomatic of "sick revenge:' (pp. 192-93)

Everybody must conceive the same strategic tricks at the same time and the reciprocity which everybody tries to sidestep simultaneously and through the same means must still win in the long run. Strategic thinking, as aresult, demands ever increasing subtlety; it involves less and less action, more and more calculation. In the end, it becomes difficult to distinguish strategy from procrastina tion. The very notion of strategy may be strategic in regard to the self-defeating nature of revenge which no one wants to face, not yet at least, so that the possibility of revenge is not entirely removed from the scene. Thanks to the notion of strategy, men can postpone revenge indefinitely without ever giving it up. They are equally terrified by both radical solutions and they go on living as long as possible, if not forever, in the no man's land of sick revenge.

In that no man's land it becomes impossible to define anything. All actions and motivations are their own opposites as well as QIemselves. When Hamlet does not seize the opportunity to kill Claudius dur ing his prayer, it could be afailure of the will or asupreme calculation; it could be instinctive humaneness or arefinement of cruelty. Hamlet himself does not know. The crisis of Degree has reached the most intimate recesses of the individual consciousness. Human sentiments have become as mixed up as the seasons of the year in *A Midsummer Nights Dream* Even he who experiences them can no longer say which is which. and the critic's search for neat differentiations misses the point entirely. Most interpreters cling to the illusion that differences alone must be real behind deceptive similarities, whereas the opposite is true. Similarities alone are real. We must not be misled by Ophelia's blond hair and pitiable death. Or rather, we must realize that Shakespeare consciously misleads his less attentive spectators with these gross theatrical signs of what apure heroine should be. Just like Rosenkrans and Guildenstern, Opheliaallows herself to become an instrument in the hands of her father and of the king. She, too, is affected by the disease of the time. Another sign of her contamination is her language and behavior which are both contaminated with the erotic strategy of aCressidaand the other least savory Shakespearean heroines. What Hamlet resents in Opheliais what any human being always resents in an other human being. the visible signs of his own sickness. It is the same sickness, therefore. that corrupts Ophelia's love for Hamlet and debases Hamlet's love for the theater. (pp. 193-94)

To read *Hamlet* against revenge is anachronistic. some people say, because it goes against the conventions of the revenge genre. No doubt, but could Shakespeare be playing according to the rules of the game at one level and undermine these same rules at another? Has not this ambiguous practice become acommonplace of modern criticism? Is Shakespeare too slow-witted for such adevice? Indications abound that in many other plays, he is doing precisely that. still providing the crowd with the spectacle they demand while simultaneously writing between the lines. for all those who can read, adevastating critique of that same spectacle?

If we fear that *Hamlet,* in the present perspective, becomes apretext. once more, for comments on the contemporary situation. let us look at the alternative. The traditional perspectives on *Hamlet* are far from neutral; their first consequence is that the ethics of revenge are taken for granted. The most debatable question of the play cannot be reached; we exclude it *apriori* [from prior knowledge].

Hamlet's problem thus shifts from revenge itself to hesitation in the face of revenge. Why should a well-educated young man have second thoughts when it comes to killing aclose relative who also happens to be the king of the land and the husband of his own mother? This is some enigmaindeed and the problem is not that asatisfactory an swer has never been found but that we should expect to find one after our *apriori* exclusion of the one sensible and obvious answer.

Should our enormous critical literature on *Hamlet* fall some day into the hands of people otherwise ignorant of our mores. they could not fail to conclude that our academic tribe must have been asavage breed, indeed. After four centuries of controversies, Hamlet's temporary reluctance to commit murder still looks so outlandish to us that more and more books are being written in an unsuccessful effort to solve that mystery. The only way to account for this curious body of literature is to suppose that, back in the twentieth century no more was needed than some ghost to ask for it. and the average professor of literature would massacre his entire household without batting an eyelash.

Contrary to the official doctrine among us, the insertion of Hamlet into our contemporary situation, and in particular the reference to something as apparently alien to literature as our nuclear predicament, cannot lead the critic further astray than he already is; it cannot distract him from his proper function which is to read the text. Amazingly enough. the effect is just the opposite. The nuclear reference can shock us back into asense of reality. It is symptomatic of our condition. no doubt. that we avoid more and more the real issues, and we empty great literary texts of all affective and even intellectual content as we really intend to do the opposite, as we try to concentrate exclusively upon these same texts by excluding only what is extraneous to

them.

Let us imagine acontemporary Hamlet with his finger on anuclear button. After forty years of procrastination he has not yet found the courage to push that button. The critics around him are becoming impatient. The psychiatrists have volunteered their services and come up with their usual answer. Hamletis asick man. (pp. 196-97)

Almost all critics today stick to the ethics of revenge. The psychiatrist sees the very thought of its abandonment as an illness he must cure, and the traditional critic sees revenge as aliterary rule he must respect. Others still try to read *Hamlet* through one of the popular ideologies of our time, like political rebellion. the absurd, the individual's right to an aggressive personality. etc. It is no accident if the sanctity of revenge provides aperfect vehicle for all the masks of modern *ressentiment* [resentment]. The remarkable consensus in favor of revenge verifies. I believe. the conception of the playas that no man's land between total revenge and no revenge at all, that specifically modern space where everything becomes suffused with sick revenge.

It is fashionable nowadays to claim that we inhabit an entirely new world in which even our greatest masterpieces have become irrelevant. I would be the last one to deny that there is something unique about our world, but there is something unique also about *Hamlet,* and we may well be deceiving ourselves in order not to face atype of relevance we do not want to welcome.

We must declare irrelevant not *Hamlet* but the wall of conventions and ritualism with which we surround the play, in the name of innovation almost as often as in the name of tradition. As more events, objects, and attitudes around us proclaim the same message ever more loudly, in order not to hear that message, we must condemn more of our experience to insignificance and absurdity. With our most fashionable critics today we have reached the point when history must make no sense, art must make no sense, language and sense itself must make no sense. (p. 198)

Hamlet is no mere word game. We can make sense out of *Hamlet* jusfas we can make sense out of our world, by reading both against revenge. This is the way Shakespeare wanted *Hamlet* to be read and the way it should have been read lon_ ago. If now, at such atime in our history, we stilf cannot read *Hamlet* against revenge, who ever will? (p. 200)

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

Critical Essay #6

[Campbell contends that the nature of Hamlet's melancholy, or state of depression, was more easily perceived by an Elizabethan audience than by amodem one. Further, the critic asserts that while Hamlet is *indeed emotionalry unstable, he* is *not insane. Shakespeare dramatizes the prince's changeability by altering the mood ofthe play's structurefromperiods of meditative pauses to bursts of action. Since Hamlet* is *usually at the center of these pauses and surges, his character conveys amanic-depressive quality. In essence, his depressed phase* is *marked by brooding inaction, whereas his manic phase includes abrupt lunges toward action. Campbell asserts that Hamlet* is *more than a"creature of psychotic impulse," however,for Shakespeare generates sympathy for him by "enabling his melancholy to express itself in some of the most pro found philosophical lyrics ever written in the English language." Because of his emotional state, the critic continues, Hamlet in some ways represents an Elizabethan stock character known as a"malcontent." A malcontent* is *afigure whose perspective of life* is *so pessimistic that he holds nothing but contemptfor the world and humanity. In Act V; Hamlet reaches his highest point of excitement through his "hysterical" struggle with Laertes during the sword fight, and this emotion enables him to take revenge in the final catastrophe. Thus, Campbell concludes, Hamlet* 's *revenge "ironically appears, not as an act of solemn retribution, but as an uncalculated result of thefrantic brandishing of amurderous sword."]*

Something very serious is the matter with Hamlet. And the full meaning of the great tragedy will never be clear until critics discover in the dramaaconscious artistic design pertinent both to Hamlet the tortured man and to the events in the play.

We must, then, make an honest effort to discover just what ails Hamlet. Everyone knows that he is melancholy, but few realize that to Shakespeare's audiences the precise nature of his emotional disturbance was much more easily recognizable than to an audience today. Melancholy was amalady described at length in all their household medical handbooks. Elizabethan doctors, like the practitioners of our own day, were

making careful attempts to analyze its symptoms. The fact that their analyses completed three centuries ago were naive and inexact need not concern us. In any case, Shakespeare, abusy dramatist, was perhaps only imperfectly acquainted with their diagnoses. But he was certainly far from ignorant of them. Moreover, in everyday conversation in Shakespeare's time, "melancholy" was probably as often referred to as the "inferiority complex" is today-and there can be no doubt that any dramatic character who described himself as suffering from an inferiority complex would explain himself to amodern audience immediately.

Besides, Shakespeare may well have had many chances to observe victims of the disease that his contemporaries referred to as "melancholy." In Elizabeth's day, persons with nervous affiictions were confined only for actual dementia. And Hamlet is in no sense irrational. His mind is unimpaired. Circumstances which have put an irresistible strain upon his self-control have rendered him emotionally unstable, but certainly not mad.

Persons in such amental state as his were not imprisoned or even given systematic medical treatment in Elizabethan times. Hence many cases of "melancholy" were at large in society and easily recognizable. Anyone who has an opportunity to watch avictim of this sort of emotional disturbance cannot fail to identify its symptoms. And Shakespeare, the keenest of observers, would see at once that in many men whom he called "melancholy" the moods of uncontrolled excitement alternated with periods of deep depression. He would also notice that these two pathological states succeeded each other with akind of mechanical regularity.

It is here, I think, that the key to Hamlet's character must be sought. That alternation of mood Shakespeare seized upon to form the inner struc ture of his play. One of Shakespeare's favorite dramatic practices was to force the current of his play to fluctuate between meditative pauses and bursts of action. All of his tragic heroes in the vexy fever of the dramatic action stand aside from the rush of events long enough to soliloquize reflectively upon themselves and the plots in which they are involved. The rhythmic vacillation in Hamlet's emotions is thus but asubtle variant of one of the

favorite devices of Shakespeare's stagecraft. Moreover, adverse fate so times the rhythm of Hamlet's maladythat at any given moment he is in the grip of the emotions which fit him least to deal with the situation confronting him. When the circumstances demand action, he finds himself so deeply depressed that he can do nothing but brood. When he needs his finest poise to wield the weapon of his reason, he is beaten by gusts of uncontrollable excitement. With each new revelation of this irrepressible conflict Hamlet's inner tension mounts until at the final catastrophe his tortured will explodes in awild frenry of unconsidered action.

A brief review of the dramatic movement of the tragedy will show how regular is the beat of its pulse. When Hamlet first appears, he is already profoundly depressed. He has been overwhelmed by grief at his father's death and his mother's "o'erhasty marriage" [II. ii. 57] to his uncle. Life has lost its meaning. It is vile and empty. He longs for death-for the moral right to kill himself. Such is the depth of his dejection even before the ghost of his father lays upon him the supremely difficult task.

From this depression Hamlet is briefly rescued by the appearance of his old friend Horatio. Shakespeare takes advantage of the moment to show his audience what Hamlet was like before grief had overwhelmed him. Here and on various other occasions in the play, the hero's natural charm and graciousness shine forth, Those short intervals of emotional equilibrium occur, as in the present case, during his transition from depression to mad elation. They come with the reappearance of friends out of his untroubled past-of Horatio or of

._-tQ_ actors in whom he had always taken delight. Such brief glimpses of the normal Hamlet add poignancy to the abnormal seizures that follow as the night the day.

After the ghost has described the circumstances of his murder and has laid upon his son the duty of revenge, Hamlet for the first time becomes frenzied. Then he wildly beseeches aid from the spirits of earth, of heaven, even of hell. He shouts to the skies his execrations of Claudius, "0 villain, villain, smiling, damned villain" [I. v. 106]. He answers Horatio's solicitous questions with "wild and whirling words" [I. v, 133]. His

uncontrolled tumult is presently intensified by the strange actions of the ghost, who gives Hamlet orders from the cellarage, as though he were one of the demons who dwelt underground, afamiliar of the Devil. In order to shut Marcellus's mouth, Hamlet cooperates in the deception. He rushes from one part of the stage to another as the ghost moves under him. Consequently, the spirit's effort to protect asecret which only the avenger must know, ironically compels Hamlet to dance about in what seems to be awild paroxysm of excitement.

It is during this seizure that Hamlet decides to feign madness. Evexy critic knows that, as an aid to his revenge, the pretense is amistake. Hamlet's reason for donning emotional motley may well have been subjective, an instinctive impulse towards self-protection. He realizes that his emotions are often going to rush beyond his control. The fiction that he is mad will not only cloak his designs against the King, but will also free him from any necessity to control the uncontrollable. During the rest of the play, Hamlet's feigned madness is merely his acquiescence in the two-fold intensities of his melancholy.

By the end of the first act, the audience has been given afull view of both phases of Hamlet's emotional disturbance. But only the most discerning would catch so soon its inner rhythm. His malady must continue to fall to its ebb and mount to its crest before its regular configuration becomes unmistakable. The next time that Hamlet appears to any characters in the play, he is obviously under the spell of his depression. He visits Opheliain the complete disarray that literary tradition had made the inevitable symptom of the melancholy of arejected lover. An irresistible impulse had driven him for sympathy to the woman he still loved even though she seemed no longer to return his affection. Hamlet's carefully prepared deshabille shows that he had given his impulse full rein. Yet his inability to utter aword in Ophelia's presence is proof of the tragic depth of his depression.

When Hamlet next appears on the stage, his clothes should be in the disorder which Opheliahas described. His mind, too, is pervaded by the same gloom. His ridicule of Polonius is not lighthearted. The figures of speech in which he clothes his abhorrence

are all drawn from the low and physically disgusting-maggots, carrion, wrinkled faces, weak hams, and thick discharge oozing from the eyes, Through such symbols as these Shakespeare translates intellectual pessimism into poetic feeling.

From this new "low" in his depression Hamlet is rescued by the actors who come to play at Elsinore.

They carxy him out of the dreary present into the happy days when the theatre moved and delighted him as it did many cultivated gentlemen of the Renaissance. Once his emotions are swept clean by the breath from his healthful past, he is able to plan and to act. But just as soon as the players leave him alone, he again becomes the slave of his malady, and his mood mounts quickly to emotion al tumult. He unpacks his heart again with wild and whirling words, which he shouts to the unresponsive air. He has again swept from gloom to uncontrolled excitement.

At this point in the play, the intelligent members of Shakespeare's audience should sense the rhythm of Hamlet's melancholy. They should also realize what are to be the characteristic dramatic expressions of each of its phases. The depressed phase is to be marked by brooding inaction, by the utterance of pessimistic ideas clothed in poetic images borrowed from physical dissolution and from low and disgusting forms of life. The heightened phase will tie characterized by violent lunges towards action, by expressions in which excitement exaggerates and obscures the sense, and even by exclamations that resemble the inarticulate cries of awounded animal. But most important for the comprehension of the play, the audience will now understand that Hamlet's mood of sluggish depression is to be followed by aseizure ofTeverish excitement; and that, though the length of the intervals between the two states may vary, they will succeed each other with clock-like regularity. When these characteristics of the play are clearly understood, clarity takes the place of perplexity. Hamlet's actions no longer form apuzzle. By understanding the cause or even his wildest emotional seizures, we can look forward, not with bewilderment, but with tense expectancy, to the forms which his tragic melancholy must inevitably assume.

This clue to the aesthetic movement of the action makes Hamlet's conduct clear at many crises in the play. It explains, for example, why he could not kill the King when he came upon him at prayer. At that moment, amood of depression darkened Hamlet's mind-the inevitable reaction to the excitement he had just felt at the success of his play in catching the conscience of the King. His will is paralyzed. Resolute action of any sort is beyond his power. So he cannot make use of the heaven-sent opportunity to revenge his father's murder. No other scene in the play is so fully charged with tragic irony.

When we next see Hamlet, he is in his mother's chamber beseeching her to break off all sexual relations with King Claudius. Only thus can she save her soul. Now if ever Hamlet should be undisputed master of all his faculties. Only calm severity can make the solemn impression upon his mother which the situation demands. Yet we see at once that he has again become aslave to his recurrent excitement, and we anticipate only the wildest goings-on. Our worst fears are realized; for he kills Polonius in afrantic lunge through the arras, he scolds his mother in afrenry of excitement, he talks to the vacant air, and finally, he rushes off the stage, dragging Polonius's body by the heels. None of these acts really surprises us. They fill us with pity and terror, for we realize that Hamlet's emotional tumult has rendered worse than futile his visit to the Queen. Its sole result has been to convince his mother that he is mad indeed. This conflict between the clock of Hamlet's malady and the situations which face him persists to the end of the drama. It defeats all his impulses towards action and increasingly paralyzes his will.

But Hamlet is more than this creature of psychotic impulse dancing between gloom and febrile agitation. Otherwise he would never have been universally acclaimed as the greatest character in dramatic fiction. His mind seems to have areach and adepth greater in both degree and kind than any other tragic hero in all literature. Shakespeare establishes this transcendence of Hamlet largely by enabling his melancholy to express itself in some of the most profound philosophical lyrics ever written in the English language. When Hamlet falls into the depressed phase of his malady, his mind is corroded by skepticism and pessimism. Then he feels that human life is meaningless

and that the universe is afoul and pestilent congregation of vapors. In expressing his despair he is not giving voice to Shakespeare's personal dejection. He is rather invoking amood congenial to many men of his age. For even while Elizabethan audiences were charmed by the verbal harmonies which rang through Hamlet's melancholy utterances, they must frequently have detected in them commonplaces oflate Renaissance pessimism. (pp. 311-17)

On occasions Hamlet also conforms to another current dramatic conception of the melancholy man. He allows his disgust with life to turn to derision of the world and of all human life. That is, he takes on the color of aconventional stage character called "the malcontent." Jaques in *As You Like It* is cast for this role. His greatest delight is to sit at his ease and "rail against our mistress the world, and all our misery" *[As You Like It,* Ill. ii. 278-79]. The humorously bleak view of life which he expresses in the soliloquy beginning "All the world's astage" *[As You Like It,* II. vii. 139ff.] is evidence not of Shakespeare's descent into the depths but of the malcontent's habit of mind.

When Hamlet betrays the satiric impulses of amalcontent, his remarks give edge both to his depression and to his burst of hysterical playfulness. When he strikes out against women's use of cosmetics, he is at once atortured lover and asatirist practising his art on one of the timeworn subjects of the craft. He cries to Ophelia, "I have heard of your paintings, too, well enough. God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another; you jog, you amble, you lisp, and nickname God's creatures." [Ill. i. 142-45]. When he is making afool ofPolonius, he flings at him the remarks about old men which had been stock ridicule since the dawn of satire. "The satirical rogue," begins Hamlet, referring to the author of the book he has been reading, "says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have aplentiful lack of wit together with most weak hams" [IT. ii. 196-200].

Once having understood the nature of Hamlet's pessimistic ideas, the spectator feels the melancholy to be enriched and deepened by the philosophical terms in which it is expressed. And once having sensed the rhythmic beat of Hamlet's inner life, an

audience is borne through the exciting events of the plot on the irresistible tide of the character's fluctuating emotion to the final catastrophe. It thus becomes the supreme dramatic utterance of Hamlet's psychological essence.

Critics who think of Hamlet as apurely contemplative man have assumed that Shakespeare made him too introspective aperson to do the final deeds demanded by the plot. In the last act, so they say, Shakespeare's Hamlet disappears to make way for an automaton better able to bring to aclimax the old tale of revenge. But there is no such artistic hiatus in the drama. The pendulum of Hamlet's melancholy continues to swing during the fifth act just as it has done throughout the play. Only now, as we near the catastrophe, its beat becomes more and more agitated.

The last act carries Hamlet from his despairing and macabre mood in the churchyard through his hysterical struggle with Laertes at the edge of Ophelia's grave and on to the final catastrophe. There the hot excitement of the duel, intensified by his discovery of Laertes's treachery, drives Hamlet to the highest point of his excitement. Now at last, instead of abandoning himself to extravagant speech, he plunges into extravagant action. So his revenge ironically appears, not as an act of solemn retribution, but as an uncalculated result of the frantic brandishing of amurderous sword. In acting thus Hamlet has not become apuppet of the plot. He is merely giving us aculminating exhibition of his melancholy and lending final emphasis to the tragic irony of his career.

The fatal wound in Hamlet's breast re-establishes his emotional equilibrium, as physical shocks often do in cases of this kind. With his mental res toration reappears the sweetness and the charm of his uncontaminated personality. Then he finds words to capture and retain for all time the qualities of the man who, in his happy youth, was the ideal prince and gentleman of the Renaissance.

It may be objected that this analysis destroys all the richness of Hamlet's personality, that it re duces him to amere automaton, driven willy-nilly from one emotional extravagance to another. But the discovery of asimple aesthetic pattern in the tragedy

need have no such result. It makes Hamlet's inner nature an integral part of his tragic story. It also banishes much perplexity from the spectators' minds. Hamlet ceases to be an utterly incalculable creature. Holding the clue to the precise nature of his melancholy, we come to afull and sympathetic understanding of his fate. (pp. 31922)

To the Elizabethan audience familiar with the multifarious ways of melancholy, Hamlet's uncontrollable grief was acomplete explanation of his emotional disaster. To us his anguish represents the destructive emotion which lies at the root of every disintegration of the will. For Hamlet is not insane. His reason functions normally, his mind is subtle and acute. His tragedy is inevitable because his emotions become an intricate tangle whenever life confronts him with ademand for action. Every normal man has on occasion been similarly at the mercy of tyrannical feelings. Understanding the life cycle of Hamlet's melancholy, we are able to focus our attention upon the universal meanings implicit in his situation. With emancipated imagination, we are free to feel all the irony, the pathos, and the terror in the most famous of tragedies. (p. 322)

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

Critical Essay #7

[Kirsch considers Hamlet *aplay which generates great intellectual energy, but perhaps more importantly rf!jlects an experience of pro*

found pain and suffering for the protagonist According to the critic, grif!! is Hamlet s predominant emotion and thus acts as acontrollingforce in the play: the prince needs sympathyfor his grif!!, but he does not receive itfrom the court, his uncle, or, most significantly, his mother. Kirsch then examines how Hamlet's intense anger at his mother has come to be interpreted by some scholars as indicating that he suffers from an Oedipus Complex, arepressed desire to kill hisfather and many his mother. Followers of this theory maintain that this psychological disorder is the source of Hamlet's hesitation,for Claudius has carried out the deed which the prince himself had unconsciously wanted to perform. (See the excerpt by Ernest Jones in the section on Hamlet's character.) Questioning the validity of this interpretation, the critic asserts that Shakespeares purpose in raising the Oedipal question was not "to call Hamlet s character into judgment, but to expand our understanding of the nature and intensity of his suffering." In addition to Gertrude s actions, the Ghost also intensifies Hamlet s grif!! by repeatedly demanding that he remember him, thus arresting the natural process of mourning and recovery. Another emotional catalystfor the prince is a mounting sense of loss-not only does Hamlet lose his father to death, but he also feels betrayed by his mother, loses the affections of Ophelia, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two schoolfriends, serve the king as spies. The critic contends that Act V represents aturning point in Hamlet :so *character,for, paradoxically, the termination of his griif comes at the same time as his realization that hefaces his own death.]*

Hamlet is atragedy perhaps most often, andjustly, admired for its intellectual energy. Hamlet's mind comprehends auniverse of ideas, and he astonishes us with the copiousness and eloquence and luminousness of his thoughts. But I think we should remember, as Hamlet is compelled to remember, that behind these thoughts, and usually their occasion, is acontinuous and tremendous experience of pain and

suffertng. We are accustomed to think ing of the other major tragedies, *Lear* and *Othello* especially, as plays whose greatest genius lies in the depiction of the deepest movements of human feeling. I think we should attend to such movements in *Hamlet* as well. As Hamlet himself tells us, it is his heart which he unpacks with words, it is against what he calls the "heart-ache" [III. i. 61] of human existence that he protests in his most famous soliloquy (and this is the first use ofthe term in that sense the *OED [Oxford English Dictionary]* records), and there are few plays in the canon in which the word "heart" itself is more prominent. (p.17)

In Shakespeare's play. . . [Hamlet] talks explicitly of sorrow and blood, relating them directly to the ghost as well as each other in the scene in his mother's bedchamber in which the ghost appears for the last time. "Look you," he tells his mother, who characteristically cannot see the ghost, how pale he glares.

> His form and cause conjoin'd, preaching to stones,
> Would make them capable.-Do not look
> upon me
> Lest with this piteous action you convert My stern effects; then what I
> have to do Will want true colour-tears perchance for blood.'
> [III. iv. 125-30]

These lines suggest synapses between grief and vengeance which help make the whole relation between the plot and emotional content of *Hamlet* in telligible, but of more immediate importance to an understanding of the play is Hamlet's own emphasis in this speech, his focus on his grief and the profound impact which the ghost has upon it.

The note of grief is sounded by Hamlet in his first words in the play, before he ever sees the ghost, in his opening dialogue with the King and his mother. The Queen says to him:

Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off.
And let thine eye look like afriend on Den mark.
Do not for ever with thy vailed lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.
Thou know'st 'tis common-all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.
[I. ii. 68-73]

Hamlet answers, "Ay, madam, it is common." "If it be, / Why seems it so particular with thee?" [I. ii. 74-5] she says; and he responds,

Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not seems.
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration offorc'd breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage, Together with all fonns, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These, indeed, seem;
Fbr they are actions that aman might play;
But I have that within which passes show
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.
[I. ii. 76-86]

Thou,gh Hamlet's use of the conventional Elizabe than forms of mourning expresses his hostility to an unfeeling court, he is at the same time speaking deeply of an experience wmch everyone who haslost someone close to him must recognize. He is speaking of the early stages of grief, of its shock, of its inner and still hidden sense of loss, and tIYing to describe what is not fully describable-the literally inexpressible wound whose immediate consequence is the dislocation, if not transvaluation, of our customary perceptions and feelings and attachments to life. It is no accident that this speech sets in motion Hamlet's preoccupation with seeming and being, including the

whole train of images of acting which is crystallized in the play within the play. The peculiar centripetal pull of anger and sorrow which the speech depicts remains as the central undercurrent of that preoccupation, most notably in Hamlet's later soliloquy about the player's imitation of Hecuba's grief:

> Is it not monstrous that this player here, But in afiction, in adream of passion, Could force his soul so to his own conceit That from her working all his visage wann'd;
> Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect, A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
> With fonns to his conceit? And all for nothing
> For Hecuba!
> What's Hecubato him or he to Hecuba, That he should weep for her?
> What would he do,
> Had he the motive and the cue for passion
> That I have?
> [II. ii. 551-62]

Hamlet then goes on to rebuke himself for his own inaction, but the player's imitation of grief nonetheless moves him internally, as nothing else can, in fact to take action, as he conceives *of* the ideaof staging aplay to test both the ghost ahd the con science of the King.

After Hamlet finishes answering his mother in the earlier court scene, the King offers his own consolation for Hamlet's grief:

> 'Tis sweet and commendable in your na ture, Hamlet,
> To give these mourning duties to your fa ther;
> But you must know your father lost afa ther;
> That father lost lost his: and the survivor bound,
> In filial obligation, for some term
> To do obsequious sorrow. But to persever In obstinate condolement is

> acourse
> Of impious stubbornness: 'tis unmanly grief;
> It shows a will most incorrect to heaven, A heart unfortified, amind impatient, An understanding simple and unschool'd; For what we know must be, and is as com mon
> As any the most vulgar thing to sense,
> Why should we in our peevish opposition Take it to heart? Fie! 'tis afault to heaven, A fault against the dead, afault to nature, To reason most absurd; whose common theme
> Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried,
> From the first corse till he that died to-day, 'This must be so'.
> [I. ii. 87-106]

There is much in this consolation of philosophy which is spiritually and psychologically sound, and to which every human being must eventually accommodate himself, but it comes at the wrong time, from the wrong person, and in its essential belittlement of the heartache of grief, it comes with the wrong inflection. It is adispiriting irony of scholarship on this play that so many psychoanalytic and theological critics should essentially take such words, from such aKing, as atext for their own indictments of Hamlet's behavior. What aperson who is grieving needs, of course, is not the consolation of words, even words which are true, but sympathy-and this Hamlet does not receive, not from the court, not from his uncle, and more im portant, not from his own mother, to whom his grief over his father's death is alien and unwelcome.

After the King and Queen leave the stage, it is to his mother's lack *of* sympathy not only for him but for her dead husband that Hamlet turns in particular pain [in I. ii. 129ff.]. . . . This is an exceptionally suggestive speech and the first *of* many which seem to invite Oedipal interpretations of the play. About these I do not propose to speak directly, *ex* cept to remark that the source *of* Hamlet's so-called Oedipal anxiety is real and present, it is not an archaic and repressed fantasy. Hamlet does perhaps protest too much, in this soliloquy and elsewhere, about his father's superiority to his

uncle (and to himself), and throughout the play he is clearly preoccupied with his mother's sexual appetite; but these ambivalences and preoccupations, whatever their unconscious roots, are elicited by asituation, palpable and external to him, in which they are acted out. The Oedipal configurations *of* Hamlet's predicament, in other words, inhabit the whole world *of* the play, they are not simply afunction *of* his characterization, even though they resonate with it profoundly. There is every reason, in reality, for ason to be troubled and decomposed by the appetite *of* amother who betrays his father's memory by her incestuous marriage, within amonth, to his brother, and murderer, and there is surely more than reason for ason to be obsessed for a..time with afather who literally returns from the grave to haunt him. But in any case, I think that at least early in the play, if not also later, such Oedipal echoes cannot be disentangled from Hamlet's grief, and Shakespeare's purpose in arousing them is not to call Hamlet's character to judgment, but to expand our understanding of the nature and intensity *of* his suffering. For all *of* these resonant events come upon Hamlet while he has still not even begun to assimilate the loss of aliving father, while he is still freshly mourning, seemingly alone in Denmark, for the death of aKing, and their major psychic impact and importance, I think, is that they protract and vastly dilate the process *of* his grief. (pp. 18-22)

As I have already suggested, in his first speech to his mother, "Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not seems" [I. ii. 76], Hamlet speaks from the very heart *of* grief *of* the supervening reality *of* his loss and of its inward wound, and I think the accent *of* normal, if intense, grief remains dominant in his subsequent soliloquy as well. It is true that in that soliloquy his mind turns to thoughts *of* "selfslaughter," but those thoughts notwithstanding, the emphasis *of* the speech is not one *of* selfreproach. It is not himself, but the uses *of* the world which Hamlet finds "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" [I. ii. 133], and his mother's frailty suggests arankness and grossness in nature itself.

The "plaints" against his mother which occupy the majority *of* this speech are conscious and both his anger and ambivalence towards her fully justified. Even on the face of it, her hasty remarriage makes amockery *of* his father's memory that intensifies

the real pain and loneliness of his loss; and if he also feels his own ego threatened, and if there is adeeper cadence *of* grief in his words, it is because he is already beginning to sense that the shadow *of* acrime "with the primal eldest curse upon't" [III. ill. 37] has fallen upon him, acrime which is not delusional and not his, and which eventually inflicts apunishment upon him which tries his spirit and destroys his life. The last lines of Hamlet's soliloquy are:

> It is not, nor it cannot come to good. But break, my heart, for I must hold
> my tongue.
> [I. ii. 158-59]

These lines show Hamlet's prescience, not his disease, and the instant he completes them, Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo enter to tell him of the apparition of his dead father, the ghost which is haunting the kingdom and which has been apart of our own consciousness from the very outset of the play.

Hamlet's subsequent meeting with the ghost of his father is, it seems to me, both the structural and psychic nexus of the play. The scene is so familiar to us that the extraordinary nature of its impact on Hamlet can be overlooked, even in the theater. The whole scene deserves quotation, but I will concentrate upon only the last part of it. The scene begins with Hamlet expressing pity for the ghost and the ghost insisting that he attend to amore "serious" purpose:

> *Ghost* List,list,0,list!
> If thou didst ever thy dear fatherlove
> *Ham.* 0 God!
> *Ghost.* Revenge his foul and most unnat
> ural murder.
> [I. v. 22-5]

The ghost then confirms to Hamlet's prophetic soul that "The serpent that did sting thy father's life *I* Now wears his crown" [I. v. 39], and he proceeds to describe both

Gertrude's remarriage and his own murder in his orchard in terms that seem deliberately to evoke echoes of the serpent in the garden of Eden. The ghost ends his recital saying:

> 0, horrible! 0, horrible! most horrible!
> Ifthou hast nature in thee, bear it not;
> Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
> A couch for luxury and damned incest. But, howsomever thou pursuest this act, Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul con trive
> Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven,
> And to those thorns that in her bosomlodge
> To prick and sting her. Fare thee well at once.
> The glow worm shows the matin to be near, And gins to pale his uneffectual fire. Adieu, adieu, adieu! Remember *me. [&it]*
> [I. v. 80-91]

Hamlet's answering speech, as the ghost exits, is profound, and it predicates the state of his mind and feeling until the beginning of the last act of the play:

> 0 all you host of heaven! 0 earth! What else?
> And shall I couple hell? 0, fie! Hold, hold, my heart:
> And you, my sinews, grow not instant old, But bear me stiffly up.
> Remember thee! Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
> In this distracted globe. Remember thee! Yea, from the table of my memory
> I'll wipe away all trivial fond records, All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
> That youth and observation copied there, And thy commandment all alone shall live Within the book and volume of my brain, Unmix'd with baser matter. Yes, by heav en!
> 0 most pernicious woman!
> 0 villain, villain, smiling, damned villain! My tables-meet it is I set it

> down
> That one may smile, and smile, and be a
> villain:
> At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.
> *[Writing.]*
> So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word: It is 'Adieu, adieu! Remember
> *me'.*
> I have sworn't.
> [I. v. 92-112]

This is acrucial and dreadful vow for many reasons, but 'the most important. . . is that the ghost's injunction to remember him, an injunction which Shakespeare's commitment to the whole force of the revenge genre never really permits either us or Hamlet to question, brutally intensifies Hamlet's mourning and makes him incorporate in its work what we would normally regard as the pathology of depression. For. . . the essence of the work of mourning is the internal process by which the ego [the organized conscious self] heals its wound, differentiates itself from the object, and slowly, bit by bit, cuts its libidinal [emotional energy tied to primitive biological urges] ties with the one who has died. Yet this is precisely what the ghost forbids, and forbids, moreover, with alack of sympathy for Hamlet's grief which is even more pronounced than the Queen's. He instead tells Hamlet that if ever he loved his father, he should remember him; he tells Hamlet of Gertrude's incestuous remarriage in away which makes her desire, if not the libido itself, seem inseparable from murder and death; and finally he tells Hamlet to kill. Drawing upon and crystallizing the deepest energies of the revenge play genre, the ghost thus enjoins Hamlet to identifY with him in his sorrow and to give murderous purpose to his anger. He consciously compels in Hamlet, in other words, the regressive movement towards identification and sadism which together usually constitute the unconscious dynamics of depression. It is only after this scene that Hamlet feels punished with what helater calls "asore distraction" [V. ii. 230] and that he begins to reproach himself for his own nature and to meditate on suicide. The ghost, moreover. not only compels this process in Hamlet, like much of the world of the play, he incarnates it. The effect of his appearance and behest to

Hamlet is to literalize Hamlet's subsequent movement toward the realm of death which he inhabits, and away from all of the libidinal ties which nourish life and make it desirable, away from "all trivial fond records, / All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past" [1. v. 99-100] As C. S. Lewis insisted long ago [in his "Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem," *Proceedings of*

the British Academy, 28 (1942)], the ghost leads Hamlet into aspiritual and psychic region which seems poised between the living and the dead. It is significant that Hamlet is subsequently described in images that suggest the ghost's countenance and sigilificant too, as we shall see later, that Hamlet's own appearance and state of mind change, at the beginning of Act V, at the moment when it is possible to say that he has finally come to terms with the ghost and with his father's death and has completed the work of mourning.

I think Shakespeare intends us always to retain asense of intensified mourning rather than of disease in Hamlet, partly because Hamlet is always conscious of the manic roles he plays and is always lucid with Horatio, but also because his thoughts and feelings turn outward as well as inward and his behavior is finally asymbiotic response to the actually diseased world of the play. And though that diseased world, poisoned at the root by atruly guilty King, eventually represents an overwhelming tangle of guilt, its main emphasis, both for Hamlet and for us, is the experience of grief. The essential focus of the action as well as the source of its consistent pulsations of feeling, the pulsations which continuously charge both Hamlet's sorrow and his anger (and in which the whole issue of delay is subsumed) is the actuality of conscious, not unconscious loss. For in addition to the death of his father in this play, Hamlet suffers the loss amounting to death of all those persons, except Horatio, whom he has most loved and who have most animated and given meaning to his life. He loses his mother, he loses Ophelia, and he loses his friends; and we can have no question that these losses are real and inescapable.

The loss of his mother is the most intense and the hardest to discuss. One should perhaps leave her to heaven as the ghost says, but even he cannot follow that advice.

As I have already suggested, Hamlet is genuinely betrayed by her. She betrays him most directly, I think, by her lack of sympathy for him. She is clearly sexually drawn and loyal to her new husband, and she is said to live almost by

Hamlet's looks, but she is essentially inert, oblivious to the whole realm of human experience through which her son travels. She seems not to care, and seems particularly not to care about his grief. Early in the play, when Claudius and others are in hectic search of the reason for Hamlet's melancholy, she says with bovine imperturbability, "I doubt it is no other but the main, / His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage" [II. ii. 56-7]. That o'erhasty and incestuous marriage, of course, creates areservoir of literally grievous anger in Hamlet. It suggests to him the impermanence upon which the Player King later insists, the impermanence of human affection as well as of life, and it also, less obviously, compels him to think of the violation of the union which gave him his own life and being. It is very difficult, in any circumstance, to think precisely upon our parents and their relationship without causing deep tremors in our selves, and for Hamlet the circumstances are extraordinary. In addition marriage itself has asacramental meaning to him which has been largely lost to modern sensibility. Like the ghost, Hamlet always speaks reverently of the sanctity of marital vows, and the one occasion on which he mocks marriage is in fact an attack upon Claudius's presumption to have replaced his father. As he is leaving for England, Hamlet addresses Claudius and says, "Farewell, dear Mother." Claudius says, "Thy loving father, Hamlet," and Hamlet answers, "My mother: father and mother is man and wife; man and wife is one flesh; and so, my mother" [N. ill. 51-2]. Behind the Scriptural image in this ferocious attack upon Claudius, it seems to me, is both Hamlet's memory of his father's true marriage with his mother, amemory which has an almost pre-lapsarian resonance, and avisualization of the concupiscence through which his mother has de filed that sacrament and made Claudius's guilt apart of her own being. This same adulterated image of matrimony, I think, lies behind his intense reproaches both against himself and Opheliain the speech in which he urges Opheliato go to anunnery:

> Get thee to anunnery. Why wouldst thou be abreeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, re vengeful, ambitious: with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fel lows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?
> [III. i. 120-28]

Some of Hamlet's anger against Opheliaspills over, as it does in this speech, from his rage against his mother, but Opheliaherself gives him cause. I don't think there is any reason to doubt her own word, at the beginning of the play, that Hamlet has importuned her "with love / In honourable fashion. . . And hath given countenance to his speech. . . With almost all the holy vows of heaven" [I. ill. 110-14]; and there is certainly no reason to question his own passionate declaration at the end of the play, over her grave, that he loved her deeply.

> I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers
> Could not, with all their quantity oflove,
> Make up my sum.
> [V. i. 269-71]

Both Hamlet's grief and his task constrain him from realizing this love, but Ophelia's own behavior clearly intensifies his frustration and anguish. By keeping the worldly and disbelieving advice of her brother and father as "watchman" to her "heart" [I. iii. 46J, she denies the heart's affection not only iI;1 Hamlet but in herself; and both denials add immeasurably to Hamlet's sense of loneliness and loss-and anger. Her rejection of him echoes his mother's inconstancy and denies him the pos sibility even of imagining the experience of loving and being loved by awoman at atime when he obviously needs such love most profoundly; and her rejection of her own heart reminds him of the evil court whose shadow, he accurately senses, has fallen upon her and directly threatens him. Most of Hamlet's speeches to Opheliacondense all of these feelings. They are spoken from asense of sup pressed as well as rejected love, for the

ligaments between him and Opheliaare very deep in the play.

It is she who first reports on his melancholy trans formation, "with alook so piteous in purport / As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of hor rors" [II. i. 79-81]; it is she who remains most acutely conscious of the nobility of mind and form which has, she says, been "blasted with ecstasy"

[III. 1. 160]; and it is she, after Hamlet has gone to

England, who most painfully takes up his role and absorbs his grief to the point of real madness and suicide.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstem are less close to Hamlet's heart, and because they are such unequivocal sponges of the King, he can release his anger against them without any ambivalence, but at least initially they too amplify both his and our sense of the increasing emptiness of his world. We are so accustomed to treating Rosencrantz and Guildenstem as vaguely comic twins that we can forget the great warmth with which Hamlet first welcomes them to Denmark and the urgency and openness of his plea for the continuation of their friendship. "I will not sort you with the rest of my servants," he tells them, for, to speak to you like an honest man, I am most dreadfully attended. But. in the beaten way offrlendship, what make you at Elsinore?

> *Ros.* To visit you, my lord; no other occa sion.
> *Ham.* Beggar that I am, I am even poor in thanks; but I thank you; and sure, dear friends, my thanks are too dear ahalf-penny. Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it afree visitation? Come, come, deal justly with me. Come, come; nay, speak.
> *Guil.* What should we say, my lord?
> *Ham.* Why any thing. But to th' purpose:
> you were sent for; and there is akind of confession in your looks, which your modesties have not craft enough to colour; I know the good King and Queen have sent for you.

Ros. To what end, my lord?
Ham. That you must teach me. But let me conjure you by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our everpreserved love, and by what more dear abetter proposer can charge you withal, be even and dIrect with me, whether you were sent for or no?
[II. ii. 267-88]

Rosencrantz and Guildenstem, of course, cannot be direct with him, and Hamlet cuts his losses with them quite quickly and eventually quite savagely. But it is perhaps no accident that immediately following this exchange, when he must be fully realizing the extent to which, except for Horatio, he is now utterly alone in Denmark with his grief and his task, he gives that grief avoice which includes in its deep sadness and its sympathetic imaj:!;ination aconspectus of Renaissance thought aoout the human condition. (pp. 24-31)

At the beginning of Act V, when Hamlet returns from England, that world seems to change, and

Hamlet with it. Neither the countenance of the ghost nor his tormented and tormenting spirit seem any longer to be present in the play, and Hamlet begins to alter in state of mind as he already has in his dress. He stands in the graveyard which visually epitomizes the play's preoccupation with death, ascene whiclJ the clowns insistently associate with Adam's sin and Hamlet himself with Cain's, and he contemplates the "chap-fall'n" skull of the man who carried him on his back when he was asmall child. His mood, like the scene, is essentially sombre, but though there is asuggestion by Horatio that he is still considering death "too curiously" [V. 1. 205], there is no longer the sense that he and his world are conflated in the convulsive activity of grief. That activity seems to be drawing to aclose, and his own sense of differentiation is decisively crystallized when, in ascene reminiscent of the one in which he reacts to the imitation of Hecuba's grief, he responds to Laertes's enactment of agrief which seems aparody of his own:

> What is he whose grief
> Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow
> Conjures the wand'ring stars, and makes them stand Like
> wonder-wounded hearers. This is I, Hamlet the Dane.
> [V. i. 254-58]

It is an especially painful but inescapable paradox of Hamlet's tragedy that the final ending of his grief and the liberation of his self would be co-extensive with the apprehension of his own death. After agreeing to the duel with Laertes that he is confident of winning, he nevertheless tells Horatio, "But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart; butitis no matter" [V. ii. 212-13]; and when Horatio urges him to postpone the duel, he says, in the famous speech which signifies, if it does not explain, the decisive change of his spirit:

> Not awhit, we defy augury: there is aspecial providence in the fall of asparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come-the readiness is all. Since no man owes of aught he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.
> [V. ii. 219-24]

The theological import of these lines, with their luminous reference to Matthew, has long been recognized, but the particular emphasis upon death also suggests apsychological coordinate. For it seems to me that what makes Hamlet's acceptance of Providence finally intelligible and credible to us emotionally, what confirms the truth of it to our own experience, is our sense, as well as his, that the great anguish and struggle of his grief is over, and that he has completed the work of mournin_. He speaks to Horatio quietly, almost serenely, with the unexultant calm which characterizes the end of the long, inner struggle of grief. He has looked at the face of death in his father's ghost, he has endured death and loss in all the human beings he has loved, and he now accepts those losses as an inevitable part of his own condition. He recognizes and accepts his own death. "The readiness is all" suggests the crystallization of his awareness of the larger dimension of time which has enveloped

his tragedy from the start, including the revenge dramaofFortinbras's grievances on the outskirts of the action and that of the appalling griefs of Polonius's family deep inside it, but the line also most specifically states what is perhaps the last and most difficult task of mourning, his own readiness to die. (pp. 31-3)

Hamlet is an immensely complicated tragedy, and anything one says about it leaves one haunted by what has not been said. But precisely in aplay whose suggestiveness has no end, it seems to me especially important to remember what actually happens. Hamlet himself is sometimes most preoccupied with delay, and with the whole attendant metaphysical issue of the relation between thought and action, but as his own experience shows, there is finally no action that can be commensurate with his grief, not even the killing of aguilty King, and it is Hamlet's experience of grief, and his recovery from it, to which we ourselves respond most deeply. He is ayoung man who comes home from his university to find his father dead and his mother remarried to his father's murderer. Subsequently the woman he loves rejects him, he is betrayed by his friends, and finally and most painfully, he is betrayed by amother whose mutability seems to strike at the heart of human affection. In the midst of these waves of losses, which seem themselves to correspond to the spasms of grief, he is visited by the ghost of his father, who places upon him aproof of love and atask of vengeance which he cannot refuse without denying his own being. The ghost draws upon the emotional taproot of the revenge play genre and dilates the natural sorrow and anger of Hamlet's multiple griefs until they include all human frailty in their protest and sympathy and touch upon the deepest synapses of grief in our own lives, not only for those who have died, but for those, like ourselves, who are still alive. (p. 35)

Arthur Kirsch, "Hamlet's Gri£if," in ELH, *Vol.* 48, *No.1, Spring,* 1981, *pp.* 17-36.

Critical Essay #8

[Altick argues that Shakespeare not only emphasized the theme of bodily corruption in Hamlet, but also the "revolting odors that accompany the process." The critic then provides an analysis of various elements of the play Jo cusing on such images of decay as the sun as an agent of corruption, cancerous infection, and the stench which accompanies rotting. This stench, Altick observes, represents the cunning and lecherousness of Claudius's evil which has corrupted the whole kingdom of Denmark According to the critic, these and other image patterns demonstrate that "the text reeks with tenns symbolic of the loathsomeness of moral disintegration. " Altick also discusses the olfactory (relating to the sense of smell) connotations of such key words as "foul," "ranic," and "offence," and examines instances of punning (akind of wordplay which manipulates the use of two words with different meanings based on their similarity of sound) between the tenns "offence" and "offend. ']

In writing *Hamlet,* Shakespeare was preoccupied with the corruption of mortal flesh. From the famous first statement of the ideain Marcellus' "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" [1. iv. 90] to Hamlet's discourse with the Gravediggers on the lamentable condition of the bodies they disinter, the reader of the play may never long forget that after death the human body putrifies. To Shakespeare's contemporaries, of course, the ideawas the most familiar of commonplaces, the center of acluster oftime-wom platitudes which. bymaking pious capital of auniversal biological process, reminded man that flesh was foul and that even aking could go aprogress through the guts of abeggar. It was acommonplace, but much more. Evel}' Elizabethan citizen knew from personal observation the reek of agangrenous wound or acancerous sore. Thus the fact that human flesh may well begin to rot even before death, and that the process is accelerated and even more loathsome afterwards-witness the stench of unburied "pocky corses" in plague time and of bones being transferred to the charnel house after their sojourn in hallowed ground-was removed from the abstract realm offolk-sayandsermon, and made immediate and unforgettable by the nauseating testimony of the nostrils.

The ancient moral therefore was constantlyandrepellently illustrated in the evel}'day life of Shakespeare's time. In his plays generally. Shakespeare habitually uses allusions to the rotting of flesh as avivid way of symbolizing repugnant ideas. In *Hamlet,* however, he not only lays heavier emphasis than in any other play upon bodily corruption, but stresses, to adegree found nowhere else, the revolting odors that accompany the process. The play indeed may justly be said to be enveloped in an atmosphere of stench. The stink that rises from dead flesh emblematizes the sheer loathsomeness of the sort of evil, cunning and lecherous, with which Claudius has corrupted the whole kingdom; the fact that once begun, the process of rotting gains inexorable headway and the odor it generates spreads far and wide, suggests the dynamic and infectious quality of sin; and the further fact that the process transforms the beautiful human body into ahorrid, malodorous mass of corruption is symbolic of the dread effect of sin upon the human soul. It is not only to Hamlet that, as G. Wilson Knight has remarked, "the universe smells of mortality"; all the leading characters manifest, through their choice of language. their awareness of the odor. originating in the foul soul of Claudius, that permeates the kingdom.

Since the detailed work of Caroline Spurgeon and Wolfgang Clemen especially. no student of *Hamlet* has been unaware of the way in which images of corrupting dIsease dominate the poetic fabric of the play. But the importance of the accompanying suggestion of nauseating smell has not, I think, been generally appreciated. It is not amatter of images alone-images represent simply the points at which the hovering theme is made explicit by embodiment in ametaphor-but also of the many single related words scattered through the text whose sensol}' suggestion, dormant now as it was not in Shakespeare's time, is overlooked unless the chief image-motif is constantly recalled

The opening scene has long been admired as amasterpiece of atmospheric writing. Francisco'sline in the first minute of the play, " 'Tis bitter cold / And I am sick at heart" [I. i 8-91. not only defines the foreboding. uneasy atmosphere of the setting. but, by associating the ideaof sickness with an as yet unknown evil, initiates the use of aword which from time to time will reinforce the play's dominant image. Before the

end of the scene *sick* appears in anew context: the moist star

> Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands
> Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse
> [I. i. 118-20)

-and by the recurrence of the word in such an image we are led to feel that the disturbance in the common soldier's heart is simply areflection, in microcosm. of the vast upset which is visiting Elsinore now as it did the state of Rome alittle ere the millhtiest Julius fell. (Brutus. it will be recalled, hail "some sick offence" *[Julius Caesar.* II. i. 2681 within his mind the vel}' night that the ominous portents visited Rome.) The association between sickness and night, thus formed is further defined when Marcellus. in one of the few lyrical passages of the play, speaks of the happy Christmas season when "the nights are wholesome" [I. i. 162], and thus makes clear that in Elsinore. at the present moment, the nights are *not* wholesome. The Elizabethans, of course, feared the night air as the carrier of contagion, especially from the putrescent matter in marshes and churchyards. Thus this early allusion to the unwholesomeness of the Elsinore nights begins the process, to be continued throughout the play, of appealing to the medical, the epidemiological lore of the contemporal}' playgoer.

This heretofore general sense of sickness is localized and given specific connection with physical decay in the second line Hamlet utters. In response to the King's question, "How is it that the clouds still hang on you?" Hamlet says, "Not so. my lord. I am too much i' tho sun" [I. ii. 66-7). The usual interpretation of the line (aquibble on *son* and *sun-I* am too conscious of my character as son, and I am uncomfortable in the presence of the King. the sun) does not convey the entire meaning. Claudius *is* the sun, of course; but what is often overlooked is that the sun is apowerful agent of corruption. Since Hamlet does not yet recognize the King's vast influence for evil, the line is ironical; only looking back. especially from the point where Hamlet envisions the sun breeding maggots in adead dog. do we realize that he is characterizing the King more truly than he can. at this point, know. like the sun, particularly in time

ofpIague, the King can spread corruption wherever his irifluence falls, and Hamlet is exposed to the full glare of that malign power. The ideacontained in the line is resumed in "0 that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into adewl" [I. ii. 129-301. Hamlet wishes that the physical dis integration which the sun promotes would be his own immediate fortune. (A simpler, and equally plausible, explanation which still connects the two separate passages would be in terms of the sun as the melter, not of flesh, but of snow. But the "god kissing carrion" image later on In. ii. 182], which picks up the "too much i' th' sun" notion again, inclines me to the former interpretation.) The rest of Hamlet's speech, contrasting with the high sentences of the King's address to him, is flecked with base images of decay (the world is overgrown by

"things rank andgross in nature" II.ii.136]-ranlc in two senses) and of parasitism, which is often linked with decay (the Queen had clung to the elder Hamlet "As if increase of appetite had grown *I* By what it fed on" [I. ii. 144-45]). There may even be adouble pun in "How weary, stale, flat; and unprofitable *I* Seem to me all the uses of this worldl" [I. ii. 133-34]. To an Elizabethan auditor, the obvious meaning of the word *stale* in context, "musty," would have chimed with asecond meaning, "prostitute"-appropriate enough in the light of what Hamlet proceeds to say about his mother-and even with athird, "horse's urine," which would add acertain measure to the malodorousness of the whole text and detract nothing ITom the auditor's appreciation of the hopelessness of Hamlet's outlook.

The concluding lines of the scene,

> I doubt some foul play. Would the night were comel
> Till then sit still. my soul. Foul deeds will rise,
> Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes
> [I. ii. 255-571

carry on the association begun in the first scene between night and apparitions, and relate it to the image-pattern. The allusion is to the way in which decaying animal (or

vegetable) matter, though deeply buried, seems to rise again at night in miasmatic mists or phosphorescent glows, or in phantasmic shapes which old superstition identified as ghosts. Evil, Hamlet's image says. may be put out of sight. but it will return. in some new manifestation which will affront not only the eyes but-the force *offoul* is clear-the nose. It may be no accldent that in the first minute of the next scene, which followed without pause on the Elizabethan stage, Shakespeare has Laertes speak of violets and pe1fume; an effective contrast to the repeated *foul* of Hamlet's last lines.

At this point. there enters asecond corruption image, which shift;s attention from the putrescence of adead organism to that in astill living one. Laertes' image, "The canker galls the infants of the spring *I* Too oft before their buttons be disclos'd" [I. iii. 39-40], is usually, and ri.1!htly, read as referring to the action of acaterpillar, in young buds. But the other, equally common, meaning of *can* ker-cancer-is likely to have occurred as well to the hearers of the lines. In the next scene the ideaof cancerous decay in aliving organism recurs. although still only by implication. In his rambling, time-filling discourse to Horatio and Marcellus as they await the Ghost. Hamlet dwells upon the "vicious mole of nature" (some particular shortcoming) in certain men which leads them "in the gen eral censure [to] take corruption" [I. iv. 24-35]-. i.e., to be condemned for that single fault. The image, although interrupted and blurred by Hamlet's nervous loquacity, is plainly suggestive of aspreading cancer (the "vicious" makes it plain that he is not thinking of an ordinary mole or skin blemish), which leads to total infection. The cancerous nature of evil is about to be illustrated by the Ghost's narrative. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" [I. iv. 90], sa;ys Marcellus as he watches the Ghost lead Hamlet off.

The Ghost tells his story to Hamlet in language dominated by asense of rottenness, disease, and stench. He is "confin'd to fast in fires," he says, "Til *thefoul* crimes done in my days of nature *I* Are burnt and purg'd away" [I. v. 11-13]. The word

foul, given no less prominence than the key-word *murther,* reverberates in his solemn lines, which are among the most dramatic in all the play:

Ghost Revenge his *foul* and most un natural murther. *Hamlet* Murther?
Ghost Murther most *foul,* as in the best it is:
But this *mostfoul,* strange, and unnatural.
[I. v. 25-8)

"The fat weed *I* That rots itself in ease on Lethe wharf," spoken of in the lines just following [I. v. 32-3], continue the ideaof foulness; as [George Lyman) Kittredge notes, "the very existence 01 aslimy water-weed seems to be decay; it thrives in corruption and 'rots itself' through its lary, stagnantllfe." The ear of Denmark is *"rankly* abused." Lust, says the Ghost, now for the first time apply ing the ideaof repulsive odor to the sexual sin of Claudius and Gertrude, though to a radiant ange1 link'd,

Will sate itself in acelestial bed
And prey on *garbage*
[I. v. 55-7)

-the olfactory suggestion of which is made explicit by the contrast provided by the very next line: "But soft! Methinks I scent the morning air" [I. v. 58]. Rather ironically, considering the state of his own mind, as manifested in his language, the Ghost commands Hamlet, *"Taint* not thy mind" II. v. 85]. But by this time evil has as vile asmell to Hamlet as it does to his father; and, being Hamlet, he reveals it by the wild and whirling play on *offend/Q/feme,* to which we shall return presently.

Even in the succeeding scene, involving Polonius, Reynaldo, and Ophelia, though the subject-matter has no relation to what has just preceded, the suggestion of vile smell is not entirely absent. Polonlus directs Reynaldo to take care not to set afloat any rumors about Laertes that are "so *rank* / As may dishonour him" but rather to "breathe his faults so quaintly / That they may seem the *taints* of liberty" [II. i. 20-1, 31-2]. But it is only when Hamlet is seen again that the evil-smell theme is signally resumed. Hamlet identifies Polonlus as afishmonger, aterm which, in addition to other appropriate aspects that have been pointed out by the commentators, has its own odorous value.

And then he reads in his book: "For If the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being agod kissing carrion-Have you a daughter?" he suddenly askS. "Let her not walk l' th' sun. Conception is ablessing, but not as your daughter may conceive" [II. ii. 181-85]. And here we have arecurrence of the image already noted in the second scene of the play: Claudius as the sun, and the sun as an agent of noisome corruption, which, according to the pseudo-science of the time, resulted in turn in the breeding of new life. Hamlet is now fully conscious of the evil influence of the King, and he warns that Opheliatoo is endangered by the same corruptive force which he had. albeit unconsciously, identified in his "I am too much i' th' sun"-though Ophelia. as awoman, is imperilled in adifferent way. Hamlet, his father, Gertrude, and now (Hamlet fears) Ophelia: the roll of the KIng's victims is increasing; the evil generated by Claudius' sick soul is spreading insidiously through the court. No wonder, then, that to Hamlet the air "appeareth no other thing. . . than afoul and pestilent congregation ofvapours" [II. ii. 30203]: vapors spreading the evil of adead crime far and wide. "What apiece of work is aman" [n. ii. 303] indeed-aman whose sin has the power so to infect awhole kingdom. A far cry, this Hamlet whose "imaginations are as foul / As Vulcan's stithy" [III. ii. 83-4]-any Elizabethan's nostrils would have quivered, as ours may not, to the suggestion of thick smoke and the reek of seared horses' hoofs-from the young man who once was accustomed to utter to Ophelia"words of so sweet breath compos'd" [m. 1. 97]. Where now is the perfume of his former discourse?

The hovering suggestions of physical contagion in the nlght air, which had been lost since the Ghost scene, are brought to anew focus in Lucianus' concluding incantation in the play-within-a-play:

> Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
> With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice in fected, Thy natural magic and dire property On wholesome life usurp immediately.
> [III. ii. 257-60]

Rank, midnight, blasted, infected have powerful connotations of physical evil, especially as contrasted with *wholesome.* And the connection of these midnight

hOrrors with the stench of putrify ing flesh is made specific in Hamlet's speech at the close of the scene:

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

The following scenes (III. iii-iv) have the highest incidence of corruption-smell images and puns in the play, which is but natural when we recall that these scenes are the direct, if delayed, sequel to the odor-laden interview with the Ghost. The King's speech beginning "0, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven" [III. iii. 36], with its repeated use of words like *offence, strong, foul,* and *corrupted,* sets the tone of all that follows. Hamlet refers to Claudius as "amildew'd ear / Blasting his wholesome brother" [III. iv. 64-5], *mildew'd* providing aclear image of bad-smelling fungi communicating infec tion to ahitherto healthy organism. The Queen envisions her soul as full of "such black and grained spots / *As* will not leave their tinct" [III. iv. 90-1]. a phrase suggestive of cancerous or other corruptive growth. And, resuming the very imagery which the Ghost had used to describe the incest, Hamlet bursts out:

> Nay, but to live
> In the *rank* sweat of an enseamed bed,
> Stew'd in *corruption,* honeying and mak ing love
> Over the nasty sty!
> [III. iv. 91-4]

"Mother, for love of grace,"_ he continues after the reappearance of the Ghost,

> Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
> That not your trespass but my madness speaks.
> It will but skin and film the ulcerous place, Whiles *rank corruption,*
> mining all with in,

Infects unseen
[III. iv. 144-49]

-adeservedly admired image of the insidious ac tion of acancer in or near the skin, the stench of which is made unmistakably vivid by "rank corruption:' Finally, Hamlet begs the Queen henceforth to avoid the "reechy kisses" of her lecherous husband. In Hamlet's mind the evil of the Queen's incest is firmly symbolized by anoisome smell; the marriage bed is associated with garbage and the nasty sty; and her sense of guilt is acancerous sore whose spread cannot be arrested by any rationalization.

In the following scene (IV.i), by anice stroke of irony, Claudius picks up the same image of cancer and applies it, in the presence of the Queen, to Hamlet's affliction:

so much was our love
We would not understand what was most fit,
But, like the owner of *afoul* disease,
To keep it from divulging, let it feed Even on the pith of life.
[IV. i. 19-23]

"Diseases desperate grown,"' he decides after an interval-anticipating Hamlet's own conclusion following his return from England-"By desperate appliance are reliev'd, / Or not at all" [IV. iii. 9-11].

Hamlet does nothing to alleviate the morbidity of Claudius' mind when he proceeds to lecture him on the manner in which we mortal men "fat ourselves for maggots,"' and to assure him that, if Polonius' corpse is not meanwhile discovered, "you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby" [IV. iii. 22-3, 36-7].

Except for small reminders in the scene between Claudius and Laertes (allusions to *plague, sickness, pleurisy* [excess], *the quick 0' the ulcer,* and a gangrenous sore arising from the scratch of apoisoned sword), the corruption-smell theme lapses until the graveyard scene, when, in asense, it reaches its climax. The significance of this

scene in terms of the motif we have been tracing lies not so much in the actual lines-although the Grave digger's instructive remarks on the number of years required for acorpse to rot after the laying-in, and Hamlet's subsequent exclamation of disgust upon smelling Yorick's skull are parts of the pattern-as in the abundant suggestions which the very setting would have for the Elizabethan playgo er. Here *is* the yawning churchyard, the symbol of man's mortality, the place where flesh, whose corruption may have begun in life, was laid in earthand where flesh continued to rot after death, its fetid exhalations assaulting men's noses and not merely making their gorges rise but warning them of the danger of fatal contagion. All the preceding imagery and word-play dealing with the odor of mortality have pointed toward this scene; and after the scene is ended, the motif is heard but once more, in Hamlet's simple query to Horatio:

> And is't not to be damn'd
> To let this canker of our nature come In further evil?
> [V. ii. 68-70]

In this tracing of the various forms which imagery suggestive of corruption and evil odor takes in *Hamlet,* we have not noticed the occurrence of doz ens of detached words which support the domi nant motif. Read in their immediate context, they usually seem colorless, with little metaphorical force; but read against the whole atmospheric pattern as we have just outlined it, they are revealed to have an indiSpensable relation to it. The text reeks with terms symbolic of the loathsomeness of moral disintegration.

The pervasiveness of the ideaof the odor of disease in the play is due no more to the formal metaphors which incorporate it than to the simple recurrence of the words *sick (sickly, sicklied)* and *disease,* even when these do not in their context refer to physical illness. (Indeed, there is no actual bodily sickness in the play, unless it is the rather ambi$lous malady of the Player King.) To the EIizaDethans, in days long before asepsis had robbed illness of some of its malodorousness, *sick* and *diseased* probably had aspecific sensory association which is now largely lost. The often-noted emphasis

on these woras in the play is not Ifesigned to convey the ideaof an unhealthy state of mind, of moral degeneration, alone; the words contribute their shaie to the general effect of physical smell which in the images is so strongly associated with disease.

In *our time foul* has lost most of its power of sensory suggestion. It had begun to do so in Shakespeare's time, and we may doubt whether, on most of the scores of occasions upon which the word is used in his plays, it evoked any sensory reaction in his audience. Normally it was arather neutral adjective of censure. But at the same time the word did continue to designate the odor generated by decaying flesh, and in appropriate contexts it did retain an unmistakable connotative power, roughly equivalent perhaps to our epithet *stinking.* In *Hamlet* this specific connotation is predominant, as it is nowhere else in the canon, because the word *foul* occurs frequently in conjunction with other words which serve to develop its definite, but normally latent, olfactory reference. Because of this, and because of the presence in the text of so many other passages suggestive of smell, the word, no matter how casually used, has aspecial significance. It is noteworthy that in two separate passages, both of them quoted above, Shakespeare *usesfoul* in rhetorical repetition, as if to make sure that its full connotative value is not lost upon the audience.

The repulsive sensory connotation of *rank* ("corrupt, foul, festering") in some contexts is obscured by another meaning. But by neglecting the possibility of apun, we fail to realize how this word too supports the prevailing theme. Actually, in several instances, in which the primary meaning is "luxuriant, overgrown," the pun is double: *rank* in the sense of "stinking" and also in the more specialized sense of "in lecherous heat" as in Hamlet's description of Denmark as an unweeded garden

> That grows to seed; things *rank* and gross in nature
> Possess it merely
> (I. ii. 135-37)

and his admonition to his mother, "

Do not spread the compost on the weeds *I* To make them *ranker'* [III. iv. 151-52).

Possibly we are on less certain ground when we include *offence withfoul* and *rank* as aword which recurrently supports the sickness-foul odor theme in *Hamlet* yet there is evidence that in Elizabethan times the word was frequently related to olfactory affront; for example, apassage cited in the *New English Dictionary* from Sir John Harington's *Metamorphosis of Ajax* (1596) runs: "They quickly found not only offence but infection to grow out of great concourss of people" *-offence* referring most explicitly to the effect upon the nostrils of the sweaty, unwashed, and disease-ridden populace. In Shakespeare's mind there was an unmistakable, though of course not constant, association between *qJJence/offend* and bad odors. In the plays one can find some fifteen or twenty passages in which one or the other of these words occurs in intimate proximity to words or images of smell or disease *(irifected, sick, taint, foul, strong, rank, nose, breathe, corruption, rotten).* I am persuaded that the repeated occurrence of *offend* and *offence* in *Hamlet* is part of the pattern of submerged punning. That the words embodied for ShaKespeare not only the abstract concept (sin, crime) but also the symbolic sensory manifestation (something disagreeable, disgusting: specifically, afoul odor) seems clear, above all in Claudius' speech in the prayer scene, in the first line of which the connection is made between *offence* and smell, and in the remainder of which *offence,* despite the shift in image, is interlaced with other terms suggestive of smell:

0, my *offence* is *rank,* it *smells* to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon.t.
A brother's murther! Pray can I not.
Though inclination be as sharp as will.
My *stronger guilt* defeats my *strongintent,* And, like aman to double business bound, I stand in pause where I shall first begin, And both neglect. What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood.
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heav ens

> To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy But to confront the visal:!e of *qifence?* And what's in prayer but this twofold force. To be forestalled ere we come to fall, Or pardon'd being down? Then I'll look up;
> My fault is past. But, 0, what form of
> Prayer
> Can serve my turn? "Forgive me my *foul* murther"? That cannot be: since I am still possess'd Of those effects for which I did the mur ther
> My crown, mine own ambition, and my
> queen.
> May one be pardon'd and retain th' *of*
> *fence?* In the *corrupted* currents of this world *Offence's* gilded hand may shove by jus tice, And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself Buys out the law: but 'tis not so above.
> [Ill, iii. 36-59]

It is remarkable that this speech, as printed in the first quarto, does not contain asingle one of the recurrent quibbling allusions to foul smell: such odorless words as *trespass, fault,* and *sin* are used instead. Although most scholarly opinion today holds that the firSt quarto text is adebased and garbled version of that of the second quarto, and that Shakespeare did not, as was formerly thought, write two separate versions of *Hamlet,* it is tempting to think that Shakespeare rewrote the speech with the conscious purpose of intensifying the prevalent auraof corruption in the play. (Why, if the text known to the abridger who made the first quarto was substantially that which is printed above, did he systematically omit every *qifence* and every other word suggestive of smell?) Noteworthy too is the fact that, as is twice the case *without.* Shakespeare employs *offence* recurrently within other brief passages, as if to emphasize its specific connotative significance. As early as the first act, when Marcellus' remark that something is rotten in Denmark and the Ghost's bitter reference to lust preying on garbage are still fresh in our ears, we hear Hamlet apologizing to Horatio for his wild words:

Hamlet I am sorry they *offend* you, heartily...
Horatio. There's no *offence.* my lord. *Hamlet* Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio,
And much *offence* too
[I. v. 134-37]

-apassage which amounts to athree-way, or progressive, pun, *qifence* having not only the obvious meanings of "irritation" or "affront" (which alone is what Hamlet first intended) and "crime" (which is what he includes in the meaning after Horatio has converted the verb into anoun), but, thirdly, that of "foul odor," the physical emblem of evil. Hamlet gives the same double twist to the word in the mousetrap scene:

King. Have you heard the argument?
Is there no *offence* in't?
Hamlet ,No, nol They do but jest, poison in jest: no *offence* i' th' world.
[III. ii. 232-35]

And two scenes later (the prayer scene, with its own quadruple use of the word, has intervened) Shakespeare gives fresh rhetorical emphasis to the verb:

Queen. Hamlet, thou hast thy father much *offended.*
Hamlet Mother, you have my father much *offended.*
[III. iv. 9-10]

-an exchange which sets the tone of the ensuing interview with the Queen, in which Hamlet's utterance abounds with allusions to smell. In no other play does Shakespeare dwell so insistently upon *qifend/qifence* by having the characters thrust the words back and forth within the compass of afew lines. To me this unusual, conspicuous dwelling upon the words suggests that Shakespeare must have found asignificance in them over and above their abstract suggestion of "sin" or "crime." They act as hovering puns, which, once we have recognized them as such, remind us repeatedly of the play's preoccupation with foul smell. Interestingly enou_h, *qifend* appears last of all in the

play by virtue of aslip of the Gravedigger'ston$e [V. i. 9]. "It must be *se dfifendendo,"* he should say, referring to the coroner's verdict on Ophelia's drowning; but, by having him blunder into *"se qifendendo,* " Shakespeare ekes out one more occasion for the pun.

The degree to which Shakespeare was conscious (if he was conscious at all) of his making repulsive odors as asymbol of moral corruption permeate the text of *Hamlet* can never, of course, be determined. Whatever ,his mental processes may have been, the fact remains that, in addition to the series of metaphors in which fleshly corruption so often is associated with stench, the play contains dozens of occurrences of words which intensify the dominant scent of foulness-which make the moral evil of Elsinore astink in our nostrils. To miss them, as Dover Wilson says of Shakespeare's punning habit in general, a"often to miss the interwoven thread which connects together awhole train of im_es; for imagery and double meaning are generalfy inseparatile."

The sense of evil which permeates the play, therefore, is not created merely, as critics have generally assumed, by the iterated allusions to corruption. It is deepened and made more repulsive by being constantly associated with one of the most unpleasant of man's sensory experiences. Above all. the suggestion of noisome odors reminds us of that aspect of evil which Shakespeare seems most concerned to emphasize in *Hamlet:* the evil residing in the soul of one man cannot be contained there, nor can asingle sin be without far-reaching consequences. Insidiously, irresistibly, it spreads into awhole society, just as the reek generated by amass of putrid flesh bears infection to many who breathe it. In an age when everyday experience made men nauseatingly conscious of the way in which the odor arising from bodily decay cannot be localized, Shakespeare's use of the language of smell must have provided an extraordinarilyvivid lesson in the continuous, contagious quality of sin. (pp. 167-76)

Richard D. Altick, "'Hamlet' and the Odor of Mortality," in Shakespeare Quarterly, *Vol. V; No.2, Spring,* 1954, *pp.167-76.*

Critical Essay #9

[Muir discusses imagery and symbolism in Hamlet, *beginning with an examination of what he considers the most apparent image pattern in the play-disease. The critic suggests that images of disease are not associated with Hamlet himself, but asense of infection surrounds both Claudius's crime and guilt and Gertrude's sin. Muir attributes Hamlet's disorder to his melancholic grief over his father's death and his mother'sfrailty. In addition, the critic includes images of decaY,flowers, and prostitution, with those of disease in the larger patterns of corruption and appearance versus reality. Finally, Muir explores war imagery in* Hamlet, *noting that it frequently recurs in the text and that its dramatic function is to underscore the fact that Hamlet and Claudius are engaged in aduel to the death.]*

A good many of the sickness images are merely designed to lend atmosphere [in *Hamlet],* as when Francisco on the battlements remarks that he is "sick at heart" [I. i. 9] or when Hamlet speaks of the way the courtier's chilblain is galled by the peasant's. Other images. . . are connected with the murder of Hamlet's father or with the corresponding murder of Gonzago. Several of the images refer to the sickness of the state, which some think to be due to the threat of war, but which the audience soon comes to realize is caused by Claudius' unpunished crime. Horatio believes that the appearance of the Ghost "bodes some strange eruption to our state" [I. i. 69] and Marcellus concludes that

> Something is rotten'in the state of Den mark.
> [I. iv, 90]

Hamlet himself uses disease imagery again and again in reference to the King's guilt. He thinks of himself as asurgeon probing awound: "I'll tent him to the quick" [II. ii. 597]. He tells Guildenstern that Claudius should have sent for aphysician rather than himself, and when he refrains from assassinating him he remarks:

This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.
[III. iii. 96]

He compares Claudius to "amildewed ear Blasting his wholesome brother" [III. iv. 64-5] and in the last scene of the play he compares him to a cancer:

Is't not to be damn'd
To let this canker of our nature come In further evil.
[V, ii, 68-70]

It is true that Claudius reciprocates by using disease images in reference to Hamlet. He compares his leniency to his nephew to the behaviour of one suffering from afoul disease who conceals it and lets it feed "Even on the pith of life" *[N.* i. 23]. He supports his stratagem of sending Hamlet to England with the proverbial maxim:

Diseases desperate grown
By desperate appliance are reliev'd,
Or not at all.
[IV. iii. 9-11]

In hatching his plot with Laertes, he calls Hamlet's return "the quick of th'ulcer" *[N.* vii. 123]. It is surely obvious that these images cannot be used to reflect on Hamlet's character: they exhibit rather the King's guilty fear of his nephew.

Some of the disease images are used by Hamlet in reference to the Queen's adultery at which, he tells her, "Heaven's face. . . Is thought-sick" [III. iv. 4851]. He urges her not to lay to her soul the "flattering unction" that he is mad:

It will but skin and film the ulcerous place, Whiles rank corruption.
mining all with in,
Infects unseen.
[III. iv. 147-49]

Gertrude herself, suffering from pangs of remorse, speaks of her "sick soul".

Laertes uses three disease images, two in his warnings to Ophelianot to allow herself to be seduced by Hamlet since in youth

> Contagious blastments are most immi nent.
> [I. iii. 42]

In the third he tells Claudius that the prospect of avenging himself "warms the very sickness" *[N.* vii. 55] in his heart.

Hamlet uses one image to describe the cause of the war between Norway and Poland the imposthume of much wealth and peace

> That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
> Why the man dies.
> [IV. iv. 27-9]

We have now examined nearly all the disease imagery without finding any evidence to support the view that Hamlet himself is diseased-the thing that is rotten in the state of Denmark. It is rather Claudius' crime and his guilty fears of Hamlet, and Gertrude's sin to which the imagery mainly refers; and in so far as it relates to the state of Denmark it emphasizes that what is wrong with the country is the unpunished fratricide committed by its ruler. But four disease images remain to be considered.

While Hamlet is waiting for his interview with his father's ghost he meditates on the drunkenness of the Court and of the way asingle small defect in aman's character destroys his reputation and nullifies his virtues in the eyes of the world-"the general censure" [I. iv. 35]. The dram of evil,-some bad habit, an inherited characteristic, or "some vicious mole ofnature"

Doth all the noble substance of adoubt.
[I. iv. 24-5]

The line is textually corrupt, but the general meaning of the passage is plain. Some critics, and Sir Laurence Olivier in his film of the play [see Sources for Further Study], have assumed that Hamlet, consciously or unconsciously, was thinking of the tragic flaw in his own character. But there is no reason to think that at this point in the play Hamlet suffers from some vicious mole of nature-he has not yet been tested. In any case he is not arguingthat asingle defect outweighs infinite virtues, but merely that it spoils aman's reputation. The lines cannot properly be applied to Hamlet himself.

Two more disease images occur in the speech in which Claudius is trying to persuade Laertes to murder Hamlet. He tells him that love is apt to fade,

For goodness, growing to aplurisy
Dies in his own too much: that we would do
We should do when we would.
[IV. vii. 117-19]
If we put it off, this 'should' is like aspendthrift's sigh
That hurts by easing.
[IV. vii. 122-23]

The speech is designed to persuade Laertes to avenge his father's death without delay. But as Hamlet and Laertes are characters placed in asimilar position, and as by this time Hamlet's vengeance has suffered abatements and delays, many critics have suggested that Shakespeare is commenting through the mouth of Claudius on Hamlet's failure to carry out his duty. It is not inherently impossible; but we should surely apply these lines to Hamlet's case only if we find by the use of more direct evidence that Shakespeare so conceived Hamlet's failure to carry out his duty.

Only one sickness image remains to be discussed, but this is the most famous one. In his soliloquy in Act m scene 1 (which begins "To be or not to be"

[III. i. 55ff.]) Hamlet shows that thinking about the possible results of action is apt to inhibit it. People refrain from committing suicide (in spite of the miseries of this life) because they fear that death will be worse than life. They may, for example, be punished in hell for violating the canon against self-slaughter. Hamlet continues:

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, And thus the native hue of resolution Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pitch and mo ment With this regard their currents turn awry And lose the name of action.
> [III. i. 82-7]

Obviously these lines are an important clue to the interpretation of the play. I used to think that conscience meant both "thinking too precisely on the event" and also the "craven scruple" of which Hamlet speaks in his last *soliloquy-conscience* as well as conscience, in fact. I now think the word is used (as in the words "the conscience of the King" [II. ii. 605]) only in its modem sense. Since Hamlet foresees that in takin_ vengeance on Claudius he may himself be killed; he hesitates-not because he is afraid of dying, but because he is afraid of being punished for his sins in hell or purgatory. But, as G. R. Elliott has pointed out [in his *Scourge and Minister],* Hamlet is speaking not merely of himself but of every man:

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.
> [III. i. 82]

It is apparent from this analysis of the sickness imagery in the play that it throws light on Elsinore rather than on Hamlet himself. He is not the diseased figure depicted by along line of critics-or, at least, the imagery cannot justifiably be used in support of such an interpretation. On the other hand, the parallels which have been pointed out with Timothy Bright's *Treatise of Melancholy* do suggest that Shakespeare conceived his hero as suffering from melancholy. As depicted in the course of the play, he is not the paragon described by Ophelia, the observer of all observers, the glass of fashion,

The expectancy and rose of the fair state.
[III. i. 152]

But it is necessary to emphasize that his melancholy has objective causes in the frailty of his mother and the death of his father.

Closely connected with the sickness imagery is what may loosely be called symbolism concerned with the odour of corruption. . . . Hamlet, like Webster in Eliot's poem, is much possessed by death. He speaks of the way the sun breeds mag gots in adead dog, he refers to the corpse ofPolonius as "the guts"; he tells Claudius that the dead man is at supper at the diet of worms and he proceeds to show how aking may go aprogress through the guts of abeggar. The Graveyard scene is designed not merely to provide alast expression of Hamlet's love for Ophelia, and an opportunity for screwing up Laertes' hatred of Hamlet to the sticking-point. This could have been done without the conversation between the gravediggers, and that between the ,gravediAAer and Hamlet. The scene is clearly used to umfer-line the death-theme. Hamlet's meditation on the various skulls serves as a*memento marl* [areminder of mortality]. We are reminded of Cain, who did the first murder, of Lady Worms, "chapless and knocked about the mazard with asexton's spade" [V. i. 89-90], ofYorick's stinking skull, and of the noble dust of Alexander which may be stopping abung-hole. Hamlet is thinking of the base uses to which we may return; but his meditations in the graveyard, though somewhat morbid, are calmer and less bitter than his thoughts earlier in the play.

All through the play there are words and images which reinforce the ideaof corruption. Hamlet, feeling himself to be contaminated by the frailty of his mother wishes that his sullied flesh would melt. He suspects "foul play" when he hears of the appearance of the ghost. The intemperance of the Danes makes foreigners *soil* their addition with swinish phrase. Denmark's ear is "rankly abused" by the false account of the death of Hamlet's father; and later Claudius, at his prayers confesses that his "offence is rank" [III. iii. 36]. The Ghost tells Hamlet that Lust

> Will sate itself in acelestial bed
> And prey on garbage.
> [I. v. 56-7]

Polonius speaks of his son's youthful vices as "the taints of liberty" [II. i. 32]. The air seems to Hamlet "afoul and pestilent congregation ofvapours" [II. ii. 302-03] and he declares that if his uncle's guilt is not revealed, his imaginations are as foul

> As Vulcan's stithy.
> [III. ii. 83-4]

In the scene with his mother, Hamlet speaks of "the rank sweat of an enseamed bed"; he urges her not to "spread the compost on the weeds To make them ranker"; and he speaks of "rank corruption mining all within". The smell of sin blends with the odour of corruption. [III. iv. 92, 151-52, 148]

The only alleviation to this atmosphere is provided by the flowers associated with the "rose of May" [IV. v. 158], Ophelia. Laertes compares Hamlet's love for her to aviolet; Opheliawarns her brother not to tread "the primrose path of dalliance" [I. ii. 50], and later she laments that the perfume of Hamlet's love is lost. In her madness she distributes flowers and the last picture we have of her alive is wearing "fantastic garlands". Laertes prays that violets may spring from her unpolluted flesh and the Queen scatters flowers in the grave with the words "Sweets to the sweet" [V. i. 243]. Hamlet, probably referring to his love for Ophelia, tells Ger trude that her adultery takes off the rose

> From the fair forehead of an innocent love And sets ablister there.
> [III. iv. 42-4]

The rose colour again reminds us of the flower. But the flowers and perfumes associated with Opheliado not seriously counterbalance the odour of corruption.

A smaller group of images concerned with the harlot has several ramifications. In its simplest form, the harlot's cheek, "beautied with plastering art" [III. i. 50], is asymbol of hypocrisy, of the contrast between appearance and reality-the contrast between the King's deed and his "most painted word" [III. i. 52]. In the same scene Hamlet takes up the theme. He implies that, since harlots paint, women who paint, including the "beautified" Ophelia, are harlots. "God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another" [III. i. 143]. Beauty is it self asnare because the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to abawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness.

[III. i. 110-13]

Hamlet tells his mother that "reason panders will" [III. iv. 88]; and he instructs Yorick's skull to get him "to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come" [V. i. 193-94]. Earlier in the play he treats Polonius as apander, and Polonius speaks of "loosing" Opheliato Hamlet, as though she were an animal to be mated. Both Laertes and his father assume that Hamlet will try to seduce Ophelia.

Hamlet himselfis troubled by the contrast between appearance and reality, between seeming and sincerity and these harlot images reinforce the point. But the same imagery is used for adifferent purpose: awitty exchange between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ends with the statement that Fortune is astrumpet. Later in the same scene, in the extract from the Dido play [II. ii. 493],

Aeneas cries: "Out, out, thou strumpet, Fortune!" Hamlet tells Horatio that he admires him as one who is not passion's slave, one who has accepted "Fortune's buffets and rewards" [III. ii. 67], one who is not apipe for Fortune's finger

> To sound what stop she please.
> [III. ii. 70-1]

In the same scene Hamlet asks Guildenstern:

> Do you think I am easier to be play'd on than apipe?
> [III. ii. 369-70]

The Fortune theme is brought out in other ways the Player King declares that it is not strange "That even our Loves should with our fortunes change" [III. ii. 201] and he gives as an example the deser tion of afallen great man by his favourites; Hamlet comments on the way courtiers who used to mock Claudius now wear his portrait round their necks and on the way the adult actors have lost their popularity; and Rosencrantz, in describing how the lives of subjects depend on the life of the *King,* uses the image of the wheel of Fortune.

I tried to show in my book on *Hamlet [Shakespeare: "Hamlet'1* that before the end of the play the fortune theme is modified. Instead of the strumpet fortune, the blind fate which directs our lives, we have the ideaof aprovidence which directs our lives. Hamlet declares:

> There's a divinity that shapes our ends Rough-hew them how we will.
> [V. ii. 10-11]

This newly-found conviction enables him to face what he thinks may be his death, with the confidence that an opportunity will be provided for him to execute justice on his father's murderer: "We defy augury: there is aspecial providence in the fall of asparrow" [V. ii. 219-20]. (pp. 353-58)

I have left to the end what by my reckoning is the largest group of images. This is derived not from sickness, but from war. Many of these war images may have been suggested by the elder Hamlet's campaigns and by the activities of Fortinbras; but we should remember that Prince Hamlet himself is not without martial qualities, and this fact is underlined by the rites of war ordered for his obsequites and by Fortinbras' final tribute. But the dramatic function of the imagery is no doubt to emphasise that

Claudius and Hamlet are engaged in aduel to the death, aduel which does ultimately lead to both their deaths.

Hamlet speaks of himself and his uncle as mighty opposites, between whose "pass and fell incensed points" [V. ii. 61] Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had come. All through the play the war imagery reminds us of the struggle. Bernardo proposes to "assail" Horatio's ears which are "fortified against" his story. Claudius in his first speech tells of discretion fighting with nature and of the defeated joy of his wedding. Later in the scene he complains that Hamlet has aheart unfortified. Laertes urges his sister to "keep in the rear" of her affection, out of the shot and danger of desire [I. iii. 34-5] and he speaks of the "calumnious strokes" sustained by virtue and of the danger of youth's rebellion. Opheliapromises to take Laertes' advice as a "watchman" to her heart. Polonius in the same scene carries on the same imagery: he urges her to set her "entreatments at ahigher rate Than acommand to parley" [I. iii. 122-23]. In the next scene Hamlet speaks of the way "the o'ergrowth of some complexion" breaks down "the pales and forts of reason" [I. iv. 27-8]. Polonius compares the temptations of the flesh to a"general assault". The noise of llium's fall "takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear" [II. iiA 77], and Pyrrhus' sword is "rebellious to his arm" [II. ii. 470]. Hamlet thinks the actor would "cleave the general ear with horrid speech", and says that "the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are tickle o'th'sere" *(i.e.* easily set off) [II. ii. 563,323-24]. He speaks of "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" and derides the King for being "frighted with false fire" [III. 1. 57; III. ii. 266]. Rosencrantz talks of the "armour of the mind" [III. iii. 12] and Claudius admits that his "guilt defeats" his "strong intent" [III. iii. 40].

Hamlet fears that Gertrude's heart is so brazed by custom that it is "proof and bulwark against sense", and he speaks of the way "compulsive ardour" (sexual appetite) "gives the charge" [III. iv. 86]. He tells his mother that he will outwit Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

> For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
> Hoist with his own petar; and it shall go hard

But I will delve one yard below their mines
And blow them at the moon.
[III. iv. 206-09]
The Ghost speaks of Gertrude's 'fighting soul'. Claudius says that slander's whisper
As level as the cannon to his blank
Transports his pois'ned shot.
[IV. 1. 42-3]

He tells Gertrude that when sorrows come,

They come not single spies
But in battalions!
[IV. v. 78-91 and that Laertes' rebellion,
Like to amurd'ring piece, in many places Gives me superfluous death.
[IV. v. 95-6]

In explaining to Laertes why he could not openly proceed against Hamlet because of his popularity with the people, he says that his arrows,

Too slightly timber'd for so loud awind, Would have reverted to my bow again,
But not where I have aim'd them.
[IV. vii. 22-41
Hamlet, in apologising to Laertes. says that his killing of Polonius was accidental:
I have shot my arrow o'er the house
And hurt my brother.
[V. ii. 243-44]

(These last two images are presumably taken from archery rather than from battle.) Gertrude compares Hamlet's hairs to "sleeping soldiers in the alarm" .

Six of the images are taken from naval warfare. Polonius tells Opheliahe thought Hamlet meant to *wreck* her [II. i. 110] and he advises Laertes to *grappe* his friends to his 'heart with hoops of steel' [I. iii. 63] and, in alater scene, he proposes to *board* the Prince [II. ii. 170]. Hamlet, quibbling on "crafts", tells his mother:

> 0, 'tis most sweet
> When in one line two crafts directly meet.
> [III. iv. 209-1O]

In the same scene he speaks of hell that *mutines* in amatron's bones: and, in describing his voyage to England, he tells Horatio:

> Methought I lay
> Worse than the mutines in the bilboes.
> [V. ii. 5-6]

In addition to the war images there are alarge number of others that suggest violence. There are four images about knives, as when the Ghost tells Hamlet that his visitation is "to whet" his "almost blunted purpose" [III. iv. Ill].

The images of war and violence should have the effect of counteracting some interpretations of the play, in which the psychology of the hero is regarded as the centre of interest. Equally important is the struggle between Hamlet and'his uncle. Hamlet has to prove that the Ghost is not adevil in disguise, luring him to damnation, by obtaining objective evidence of Claudius' guilt. Claudius, for his part, is trying to pierce the secret of Hamlet's madness, using Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Ophelia, and finally Gertrude as his instruments. Hamlet succeeds in his purpose, but in the veIY moment of success he enables Claudius to pierce the secret of his madness. Realising that his own secret murder has come to light, Claudius is bound to arrange for Hamlet's murder: and Hamlet, knowing that the truth of his antic disposition is now revealed to his enemy, realises that if he does not kill Claudius, Claudius will certainly kill him.

We have considered most of the patterns of imagery in the play--there are a few others which do not seem to throw much light on the meaning of the play-and I think: it will be agreed that. . . the various image-patterns we have traced in *Hamlet* show that to concentrate on the sickness imageIY, especially if it is divorced from its context, unduly simplifies the play. I do not pretend that astudy of' all the imageIY will necessarily provide us with one-and only one-interpretation: but it will at least prevent us from assuming that the play is wholly concerned with the psychology of the hero. And that, I hope you will agree, is astep in the right direction. It may also prevent us from adopting the view of several modern critics-Wilson Knight, RebeccaWest, Madariaga, L. C. Knights-who all seem to me to debase Hamlet's character to the extent of depriving him of the status of atragic hero. It may also prevent us from assuming that the complexities of the play are due to Shakespeare's failure to transform the melodramahe inherited, and to the survival of primitive traits in his otherwise sophisticated hero. (pp. 361-63)

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

Critical Essay #10

[Detmold addresses the question ofwhy Hamlet delays taking revenge on Claudius by assessing his status as atragic hero. According to the critic, atragic hero has three prominent characteristics: (1) *a will-power which surpasses that of average people,* (2) *an exceptionally intense power offeeling, and* (3) *an unusually high level of intelligence. From this dt:ifinition of atragic hero, Detmold especially focuses on Hamlet's unorthodox demonstration of will-power in the play, arguing that the protagonist's preoccupation with moral integrity is what ultimately delays himfrom killing Claudius. Further, the critic asserts that* Hamlet is *distinctfrom other tragedies in that its action commences in the soliloquy of Act I scene ii where most other tragedies end: "with the discovery by the tragic hero that his supreme good isforever lost to him. "Perhaps the most significant reason why Hamlet hesitates, the critic concludes,* is *that although he is tempted by love, kingship, and even revenge, he is long past the point where he desires to do anything about them. None of these objectives gives him anew incentivefor living. For further commentary on Hamlet's character, see the excerpts by David Bevington, Maynard Mack, Robert Hapgood, Robert R. Reed, Jr., Rene Girard, Oscar James Campbell, Arthur Kirsch, Kenneth Muir, Edgar Johnson, Ernest Jones, Theodore Lidz and J. Dover Wilson.]*

Hamlet is surely the most perplexing character in English drama. Who has not sympathized with the Court of Denmark in their bewilderment at his mercurial conduct? Theatre-goers, to be sure, are seldom baffled by him: perhaps the spectacle and melodramaof his undoing are powerful enough to stifle any mere doubts about his motives. But the more dispassionate audience of scholars and critics-if one may judge from the quantity of their published remarks-are often baffled. Seeking an intellectual satisfaction which will correspond to the pleasant purging of pity and terror in the spectator, they are only perplexed by Hamlet's behavior. They fail to understand his motives. How can aman so dilatory, who misses every opportunity to achieve what apparently he desires, who requires nearly three months to accomplish asimple and well-justified killing-how can such aman be classed atragic hero? Is he not merely

weak and contemptible? How can he be ranked with such forceful men as Lear. Macbeth. Othello. or even Romeo? And yet he is agreat tragic hero. as the playgoers will testify. The spectacle of his doings and undoing is profoundly stirring; it rouses the most intense emotions of awe and admiration; it never moves us to scorn or contempt.

In order to understand Hamlet, we must be able to answer the old question about him: "Why does he delay?" Grantin!1:-as he does-that he has sufficient "cause. anawill. and strength. and means" [IV. iv. 45] to avenge his father. why should he require approximately three months to do so. and then succeed almost purely by accident or afterthought? There is only one possible reason why astrong. vigorous. intelligent man does not kill another when he feels no revulsion against the deed. when his duty requires that he do it. when he is not afraid. when the man to be killed is not invulnerable. and when the consequences of the act are either inconsiderable or are not considered at all.

Hamlet delays to kill his uncle only because he has little interest in doing so. His thoughts are elsewhere. Most of the time he forgets about it. as we forget about aletter that should be answered-and only occasionally does he remember it and ponder his reluctance to perform this simple duty. Rightly or wrongly. he is preoccupied with other things.

Yet revenge. especially when it entails murder. is atremendously important affair; how can any man overlook it? What kind of man can consider what kind of thing more important? Is Hamlet in any way unique. beyond or above or apart from our experience of human nature? Let us examine him as a man and-more important-as atragic hero.

We must realize that there is nothing curious or abnormal about him. He is recognizably human; he is not diseased or insane. If this were not so he would rouse no admiration in an audience. for it will never accord to asick or crary man the allegiance it usually gives to the tragic hero. The normal attitude toward abnormality

is one of aversion. We worship strength and health and power. and will identify ourselves with the hero who displays these qualities. We may even identify ourselves with aLear during his temporary insanity. but only because we have known him sane and can appreciate the magnitude of his disaster. For the Fool who is his companion we can feel only adetached and tender compassion. Hamlet rouses stronger emotions than these. and only because we can recognize ourselves in him. because he is in the finest sense auniversal man: Homo sapiens. man thinking-and man feeling. man acting. The proper habitat of the freak is the side-show or museum. not the stage.

But within this humanity and universality we may distinguish three characteristics which are usually found in the tragic hero. The first of these is awillpower surpassing in its intensity anything displayed by average men; the hero admits of no obstacle and accepts no compromise; he drives forward with all his strength to his desired goal. The second is apower of feeling likewise more intense than that possessed by average men; he rises to heights of happiness forever unattainable to the majority of us. and correspondingly sinks to depths of misexy. The third is an unusually high intelligence. displayed in his actions and in his power oflanguage. Aristotle sums up these characteristics in the term *hamartia:* the tragic flaw. the failure of judgment. the refusal to compromise. Passionately pursuing the thing he desires. the hero is incapable of compromise. of the calm exercise of judgment.

It will be seen that Hamlet possesses these three characteristics. His power of feeling surpasses that of all other characters in the play. expresses itself in the impassioned poetic diction peculiar to great tragedy. His intelligence is subtle and allembracing. displaying itself not only in his behavior but also in word-plays beyond the comprehension of the others in the drama, and in metaphors beyond their attainment. But what can be said of his will-power. the one pre-eminently heroic characteristic? He is apparently amodel of hesitation. indecision. procrastination; we seem to be witnessing an examination of the failure of his will. And yet demonstrably it has not failed. and does at odd moments stir itself violently. In no other way can we account for the timidity of his enemies. the respect of his friends. and his own frank acknowledgement that he has "cause. and will. and strength. and means" to avenge his

father. And though he is along time in killing Claudius. he does kill him at last. and he is capable of other actions which argue the rash and impulsive nature of aman with strong will. He will "make aghost"

[1. iv. 85] of any man who tries to prevent him from following his father's spirit. He murders Polonius. He engineers the murder ofRosencrantz and Guildenstern. He boards the pirate ship single-handed. He takes so long to kill Claudius only because he has little interest in revenge-not because he lacks will. but because it is inactive. Will-power does not spread itself in acircle around the possessor. but lies in astraight line toward the thing he desires.

Hamlet. then. has the heroic traits of Lear. Othello. Tamburlaine. Macbeth. and Oedipus: high intelligence. deep sensitivity. and strong will. There is another characteristic of the tragic hero without which the former ones would never be perceived: his delusion that there is some one thing in the world supremely good or desirable. the possession of which will make him supremely happy. And to the acquisition of the thing he desires he devotes all his will. all his intelligence. all his power of feeling. Thus Romeo dedicates himself to the pursuit of love, Macbeth to power, Lear to filial gratitudeand Hamlet to moral beauty.

Hamlet's dedication to moral beauty is not difficult to perceive; and once understood, it explains his every action in the play. It is probably an unusual subject for devotion: love, honor, power, wealth, intellectual supremacy are the more customary idols of the tragic hero. Yet Hamlet seems amore normal character than Coriolanus or Barabas [in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta],* and amore sympathetic one than Macbeth or Othello. There should be nothing unusual in apreoccupation with morality, since man is amoral animal as well as agreedy, apassionate, or an intelligent one. And there is nothing harsh or unlovely in Hamlet's conception of the good. He is no Puritan. What he seeks among men is not mere compliance with religious and ethical standards, but amoral loveliness in their thoughts and actions. Men, in his conception, are godlike; they should not conduct themselves like beasts. "What apiece of work is aman! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving how express

and admirable! in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like agod!" [II. ii. 303-07]-whether the words are spoken in seriousness or in irony they argue adeepseated idealism in their author.

It is clear that, at some point before the opening of the play, Hamlet has been completely disillusioned. He has failed to discover moral beauty in the world; indeed, by the intensity of his search he has roused instead his supreme evil: moral ugliness. The majority of us, the non-heroes, might disapprove of the sudden remarriap;e of amother after the death of her husband-out we would probably not be nauseated. Hamlet, supremely sensitive to the godliness and beastliness in men, was overwhelmed by what he could interpret as nothing but lust. To be sure, the marriage of his mother and uncle was technically incestuous. But his objection to it lies much deeper than surface technicalities. He has worshipped his father, adored his mother (his love for her is everywhere apparent beneath his bitterness). Gertrude has mourned at the funeral "like Niobe, all tears" [I. ii. 149]. And then within amonth she has married his uncle-avulgar, contemptible, scheming drunkard-exposing without shame her essentially shallow, thoughtless, amoral, animal nature.

> The blow has been too much for Hamlet, sensitive as he is to moral beauty.
> 0, most wicked speed, to post
> With such dexterity to incestuous sheetsl
> It is not, nor it cannot come to good.
> [I. ii. 1,56-58]

That is, it cannot come to his conception of the good, whatever may be said for Gertrude's. He is unable to offer her understanding or sympathy, since to do so would mean compromising with his ideal of her. He fails to realize that no amount of scolding will ever improve her. Instead of accepting her conduct as inevitable or even endurable, he fights it, exaggerates it into adisgusting and an intolerable sin against everything he holds dear. And because the sin may not be undone, and since it has destroyed his pleasure and purpose in living, he wishes to die. The only thing that

restrains him from suicide is the moral injunction against it:

> 0 that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
> Thaw and resolve itself into adew,
> Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter.
> [I. ii. 129-32]

The longing for death, once the supreme good has been destroyed, is entirely normal and usual in the tragic hero. Romeo, hearing that Juliet is dead, goes immediately to her tomb in order to kill himself:

> 0, here
> Will I set up my everlasting rest
> And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars From this world-wearied flesh. .
> . .
> Thou desperate pilot, now at once run on
> The dashing rocks thy sea-sick weary bark.
> *[Romeo and Juliet,* V. iii. 110-14]

Othello, when he realizes that in seeking to preserve his honor he has ruined it, prepares to die in much the same state of mind:

> Here is my journey's end, here is my butt
> And very sea-mark of my utmost sail.
> *[Othello,* V. ii. 267-68]

Macbeth, discovering at last that his frantic efforts to maintain and increase his power have only destroyed it, finds life atale told by an idiot-and he too longs for death:

> I 'gin to be a-weary of the sun,
> And wish the estate of the world were now

undone.
Ring the alarum bell. Blow wind, come wrack,
At least we'll die with harness on our back.
[Macbeth, V. v. 48-51]

Lear, instead of dying, is driven mad. His counterpart, Gloucester, who also has lived for the love of his children, tries to throw himself from the cliff at Dover. Oedipus [in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex],* too, when he discovers that he has ruined the city he tried to save, finds life worthless-blinds himself, and begs to be cast out of Thebes. As ageneral rule, whenever the tragic hero discovers that in his efforts to attain his supreme good he has only aroused his supreme evil, he kills himself, or goes mad, or otherwise sinks into astate that is death compared to his former state. Once he has lost all hope of gaining what he desires, he quite naturally finds no reason for continuing to live. Life in itself is always meaningless to him; he lives only for the good that he can find in it.

The curious thing about *Hamlet* is that it begins at the point where most other tragedies end: with the discovery by the tragic hero that his supreme good is forever lost to him. The play is surely unique among great tragedies. Elizabethan dramausually presents adouble reversal of fortune-the rise and fall in the hero's prosperity and happiness-or sometimes, as in *King Lear,* the fall and rise. Greek tragedy, limited to asingle curtainless stage and thus to alate point of attack in the plot, could show only asingle reversal-usually the fall in fortune from prosperity to misery, as is observed by Aristotle, But certainly nowhere else is there atragedy like *Hamlet,* with no reversal at all, which begins after the rise and fall of the hero have taken place, in which the action does not coincide with his pursuit of the good, and which presents him throughout in despair and in bad fortune. We never see Hamlet striving for or possessing his good. Rather, he knows only the evil which is its counterpart; and in this unhappy condition he finds nothing further desirable except death. The kingship does not interest him; love does not interest him; revenge never interests him for long. He can think only about the foulness of mankind, of the beastly conduct of those people from whom he has expected the most godly-and in his despair he is intensely

unhappy. Death, he knows, will be his only release. We find him longing for death at the outset of the play, in his first speech to us. Death is continually on his mind until he finally attains it at the end, the only "felicity" of which life is capable.

We are now in aposition to understand why Hamlet takes so long to effect his revenge. Everyone in the play, including himself, recognizes that he is potentially dangerous, that he has the necessary courage and will to accomplish anything he de sires. But the demand upon these qualities has come at atime when he has forever lost interest in exercising them. Upholding the divinity of man, he is betrayed by the one he thought most divine, exposed to her rank shameless adultery, bitterly disillusioned in all mankind, and desperate of any further good in existence. The revelation by the Ghost that murder has cleared away for the new husband shocks Hamlet to the base of his nature, but it gives him no new incentive for living; it merely adds to his misfortune and confirms him in his de spair. The further information that his mother has committed adultery provides afinal shock. All evidence establishes him immovably in his disillusion. The Ghost's appeal to him. for revenge is, remotely, an appeal to his good: if he may not re establish the moral beauty of the world he may at least punish those who have violated it. But it is adistant appeal. The damage already done is irreparable. After giving passionate promises to "remember" his father, he regrets them:

> The time is out of joint; 0 cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right.
> [I. v. 188-89]

Within ten minutes after his first meeting with the Ghost he has succumbed again to his anguish, which is now so intense after the discovery of his mother's adultery and the murder of his father that his mind threatens to crack under the strain. His conversation with his friends is so strange that Horatio comments upon it:

> These are but wild and whirling words, my lord.
> [I. v. 133]

A few minutes later Hamlet announces his inten tion to feign madness, to assume an "antic disposi tion" -presumably as ameans of relieving his sur charged feelings and possibly forestalling true madness, but certainly not as ameans of deceiving Claudius and thus accomplishing his revenge. At the moment there is no point in deceiving Cfaudius, who knows of no witnesses to the murder and who is more vulnerable to attack now than he will be at any point later in the play.

Two months later the antic disposition has succeeded only in arousing the King's suspicions. Hamlet has not effected his revenge; there is no sign that he has even thought about it. All we know is that he is badly upset-as Opheliareports to her father:

> My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
> Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all Ull brac'd,
> No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd, Ungartered and down-gyved
> to his ancle,
> Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
> And with alook so piteous in purport
> As if he had been loosed out of hell
> To speak of horrors, he comes before me,
> [II. i. 74-81]

It is doubtful that he wishes to deceive the court into thinking that he is mad with unrequited love-only the fool Polonius is so deceived. Most probably he goes to Opheliabecause he loves her as he loves his mother, and fears to discover in her the same corruption that has poisoned his mind towards Gertrude. He suspects that her love for him is insincere; his suspicions are later reinforced when he catches her acting as the decoy of Claudius and Polonius. But the one significant thing here is that his mind is still upon his old sorrow and not upon his father.

He does not recall his father until the First Player, in reciting the woes of Troy, speaks of the "mobled queen" who saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport

In mincing with his sword her husband'slimbs.
[II. ii. 513-14]

Shortly afterwards Hamlet asks him to "play the Murder of Gonzago" and to "study aspeech of some dozen lines, which I would set down and insertin't" [II. ii. 541-42]. This, as we learnin thefollowing soliloquy, is to be atrap for the conscience of Claudius. And why is atrap necessary? Because perhaps the Ghost was not atrue ghost, but adevil trying to lure him to damnation. Most likely Hamlet is here rationalizing, trying to find an excuse for his dilatoriness, for forgetting the injunction of his father-yet the excuse is apoor one, for never before has he questioned the authenticity of the Ghost. Furthermore, he does not wait for the trap to be sprung; throughout the performance of "The Mousetrap" he seems convinced of the guilt of Claudius, he taunts him with it. But for awhile he has stilled his own conscience and found arefuge from the flood of self-incrimination.

Before "The Murder of Gonzago" is enacted we see Hamlet alone once more. What is on his mind? His uncle? His father? Revenge? Not at all. "To be, or not to be, that is the question" [III. i. 55ff.]. He is back where he started, and where he has been all along, with

The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to.
[III. i. 61-2]

He is still preoccupied with death.

"The Mousetrap" convicts Claudius beyond any doubt; he bolts from the room, unable to endure for asecond time the poisoning of asleeping king. And yet Hamlet, fifteen minutes later, with an admirable opportunity to kill his uncle, fails to do so-for reasons that are evidently obscure even to himself. He wishes, he says, not only to kill the man, but to damn his soul as well, and thus will wait to kill him unconfessed. At this, apparently, the Ghost itself loses patience, for it returns once more to Hamlet in the

next scene and exhorts him:

> Do not forget: this visitation
> Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.
> [III. iv. 110-11]

The exhortation is wasted. On the same night, Hamlet allows the King to send him to England. Possibly he has no recourse but obedience; probably he knows what is in store for him; quite likely he does not care, may even welcome alegitimate form of dying; certainly he cannot, in England, arrange to kill his uncle. The next day, on his way to exile and death, he meets the army of Fortinbras, whose courage and purposefulness stimulate him to reflect upon his own conduct:

> How all occasions do inform against me, And spur my dull revenge!
> [IV. iv. 32-3]

He considers how low he has sunk in his despair:

> What is aman,
> If his chief good and market of his time
> Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
> [IV. iv. 33-4]

Lamenting nothing in men so much as their beastliness, he has become little better than abeast himself. Why has he not performed the simple act of vengeance required by his dead father? He does not know:

> Now, whether it be
> Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple Of thinking too precisely on the event,A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom
> And ever three parts coward,-I do not
> know Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do: Sith I have cause, and will.

> and strength, and means
> To do 't.
> [IV. iv. 39-46]

He is ashamed to have forgotten his duty:

> How stand I then,
> That have afather kill'd, amother stain'd, Excitements of my reason and my blood, And let all sleep. . . ?
> [IV. iv. 56-9]

And with the resolve:

> 0, from this time forth,
> My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!
> [IV. iv. 65-6]

he is off for England, where even the bloodiest thoughts will be utterly of no avail.

When he returns he is unchanged, still preoccupied with death. He haunts the graveyard with Horatio, reflects upon the democratizing influence of corruption. Overcome with disgust at the "rant" at Ophelia's funeral (he has seen too much insincerity at funerals), he wrestles with Laertes. He acquaints Horatio with the crimes of Claudius and resolves to revenge himself-and then accepts the invitation to the fencing match, aware that it is probably a trap, but resigned to whatever fate is in store for him. And with the discovery of his uncle's final perfidy, he stabs him with the envenomed foil and forces the poisoned wine down his throat. But there is still no thought of his father or of the accomplishment of an old purpose. He is stirred to action principally by anger at his mother's death:

> Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane, Drink off this potion: is thy union here? Follow my mother.

[V. ii. 325-27]

The murder of Claudius is simply accomplished. We see how easily it could have been managed at any time in the past by aman like Hamlet, with whatever tools might have come to his hand. Even though the King is fully awake to his peril he is powerless to avert it. The only thing necessary is that Hamlet should at some time choose to kill him.

That Hamlet finally does so choose is the result of accident and afterthought. The envenomed foil. the poisoned wine. Laertes and Gertrude and himself betrayed to their deaths-these things finally arouse him and he strikes out at the King. But he has no sense of achievement at the end. no final triumph over unimagtnable obstacles. His uncle. alive or dead. is aside-issue. His dytng thoughts are of the blessedness of death and of the sanctity of his reputation-he would clear it of any suggestion of moral evil but realizes that he has no time left to do so himself. Accordtngly he charges Horatio to stay alive alittle while longer:

Absent thee from felicity awhile.
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain.
To tell my story.
[V. ii. 347-49]

Then. after willing the kingdom to Forttribras. he sinks tnto the oblivion which he has courted so long. and which now comes to him honorably and gives him rest. (pp. 23-34)

George Detmold. "Hamlets _ll but Blunted Purpose', " in The Shakespeare Association Bulletin. *Vol. XXIV; No.1, January,* 1949, *pp.* 23-36.

Critical Essay #11

[Jones applies Sigmund Freud's techniques of psychoanalysis to Hamlet's character, asserting that the prince is ajlicted with an Oedipus Complex. This psychological disorder involves the unconscious desire of a son to kill his father and take his place as the object of the mothers love. According to the critic, Hamlet delays taking revenge on Claudius because he identifies with his uncle and shares his guilt Thus Hamlets inaction stemsfrom a"tortured conscience, " and his ajJliction is caused by "repressed"feelings. Furthermore, this theory accountsfor Hamlet's speaking to Gertrude like ajealous lover, dwelling on his mothers sexual relations with Claudius, and treating his uncle like arival. Significantly, the critic also claims that while his fathers murder evokes "indignation" in Hamlet, Gertrude's perceived "incest" awakes his "intensest horror." In addition, Jones maintains that the prince suffers from "psychoneurosis," or "astate of mind where the person is unduly, often painfully, driven or thwarted by the 'unconscious' part of his mind. " This internal mental conflict r£jLects Hamlet's condition throughout much of the play. For further commentary on Hamlets character, see the excerpts by David Bevington, Maynard Mack, Robert Hapgood, Robert R. Reed, Jr., Rene Girard, Oscar James Campbell, Arthur Kirsch, Kenneth Muir. George Detmold, Edgar Johnson, Theodore Lidz and J. Dover Wilson.]

[The] whole picture presented by Hamlet. his deep depression, the hopeless note tn his attitude towards the world and towards the value of life, his dread of death. his repeated reference to bad dreams. his self-accusations. his desperate efforts to get away from the thoughts of his duty. and his vatn attempts to find an excuse for his procrastination; all this unequivocally potnts to a*tortured conscience,* to some hidden ground for shirking his task. aground which he dare not or cannot avow to himself. We have. therefore. . . . to seek for some evidence that may serve to brtng to light the hidden counter-motive.

The extensive experience of the psycho-analytic researches carried out by Freud and his school durtng the past half-centUIy has amply demonstrated that certatn kinds of mental process show agreater tendency to be tnaccessible to consciousness (put technically. to be "repressed") than others. In other words. it is harder for aperson to realize the existence tn his mtnd of some mental trends than it is of others. In order therefore to gatn aproper perspective it is necessary briefly to tnquire tnto the relative frequency with which various sets of mental processes are "repressed." Experience shows that this can be correlated with the degree of compatibility of these various sets with the ideals and standards accepted by the conscious ego; the less compatible they are with these the more likely are they to be "repressed." As the standards acceptable to consciousness are tn considerable measure derived from the immediate environment. one may formulate the following generalization: those processes are most likely to be "repressed" by the tndividual which are most disapproved of by the particular circle of society to whose influence he has chiefly been subjected durtng the period when his character was being formed. Biologically stated. this law would run:

"That which is unacceptable to the herd becomes unacceptable to the individual member," it being understood that the term herd is intended here in the sense of the particular circle defined above. which is by no means necessarily the community at large. It is for this reason that moral. social. ethical. or religious tendencies are seldom "repressed." for instance the individual originally received them from his herd. they can hardly ever come into conflict with the dicta of the latter. This merely says that aman cannot be ashamed of that which he respects; the apparent exceptions to this rule need not be here explatned.

The language used in the previous paragraph will have indicated that by the term "repression" we denote an active dynamic process. Thoughts that are "repressed" are actively kept from consciousness by adefinite force and with the expenditure of more or less mental effort. though the person concerned is rarely aware of this. Further. what is thus kept from consciousness typically possesses an energy of its own: hence our frequent use of such expressions as "trend." "tendency." etc. A littie consideration of the genetic aspects of the matter will make it comprehensible that the trends most

likely to be "repressed" are those belonging to what are called the innate impulses. as contrasted with secondarily acquired ones. . . . It only remains to add the obvious corollmy that. as the herd unquestionably selects from the "natural" instincts the sexual one on which to lay its heaviest ban. so it is the various psycho-sexual trends that are most often "repressed" by the individual. We have here the explanation of the clinical experience that the more intense and the more obscure is a_iven case of deep mental conflict the more certainTy will it be found on adequate analysis to centre about asexual problem. On the surface. of course, this does not appear so, for. by means of various psychological defensive mechanisms. the depression. doubt, despair. and other manifestations of the conflict are transferred on to more tolerable and permissible topics, such as anxiety about worldly success or failure. about immortality and the salvation of the soul. philosophical considerations about the value of life. the future of the world. and so on.

Bearing these considerations in mind. let us return to Hamlet. . . . We . . . realize-as his words so often indicate-that the positive striving for vengeance. the pious task laid on him by his father, was to him the moral and social one. the one approved of by his consciousness. and that the "repressed" inhibiting striving against the act of vengeance arose in some hidden source connected with his more personal. natural instincts. The former striving. . . indeed is manifest in every speech in which Hamlet debates the matter: the second is, from its nature. more obscure and has next to be investigated.

This is perhaps most easily done by inquiring more intently into Hamlet's precise attitude towards the object of his vengeance. Claudius, and towards the crimes that have to be avenged. These are two: Claudius' incest with the Queen, and his murder of his brother. Now it is of great importance to note the profound difference in Hamlet's attitude towards these two crimes. intellectually of course he abhors both, but there can be no question as to which arouses in him the deeper loath ing. Whereas the murder of his father evokes in him indignation and aplain recognition of his obvious duty to avenge it, his mother's guilty conduct awakes in him the intensest horror. (pp. 64-8)

Now, in trying to define Hamlet's attitude towards his uncle we have to guard against assuming offhand that this is asimple one of mere execration, for there is apossibility of complexity arising in the following way: The uncle has not merely commit ted *each* crime, he has committed *both* crimes, adistinction of considerable importance, since the *combination* of crimes allows the admittance of anew factor, produced by the possible inter-relation of the two, which may prevent the result from being simply one of summation. In addition, it has to be borne in mind that the perpetrator of the crimes is arelative, and an exceedingly near relative. The possible inter-relationship of the crimes, and the fact that the author of them is an actual member of the family, give scope for aconfusion in their influence on Hanuet's mind which may be the cause of the very obscurity we are seeking to clarify.

Let us first pursue further the effect on Hamlet of his mother's misconduct. Before he even knows with any certitude, however much he may suspect it, that his father has been murdered he is in the deepest depression, and evidently on account of this misconduct. (p. 69)

According to [A C.] Bradley, [in his *Shakespearean Tragedy],* Hamlet's melancholic disgust at life was the cause of his aversion from "any kind of de cided action." His explanation of the whole problem of Hamlet is "the moral shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother's true nature," and he regards the effect of this shock, as depicted in the play, as fully comprehensible. He says:

> Is it possible to conceive an experience more desolating to aman such as we have seen Hamlet to be; and is its result anything but perfectly natural? It brings bewildered horror, then loathing, then despair of human nature. His whole mind is poisoned. . . A nature morally blunter would have felt even so dreadful arevela tion less keenly. A slower and more limited and positive mind might not have extend ed so widely through the world the disgust and disbelief that have entered it.

But we can rest satisfied with this seemingly adequate explanation of Hamlet's weariness of life only if we accept unquestioningly the conventional standards of the causes of deep emotion. Many years ago [John] Connolly, awell-known psychiatrist, pointed out [in his *A Study of Hamlet]* the disproportion here existing between cause and effect, and gave as his opinion that Hamlet's reaction to his mother's marriage indicated in itself amental instability, "apredisposition to actual unsoundness"; he writes: "The circumstances are not such as would at once turn ahealthy mind to the contemplation of suicide, the last resource of those whose reason has been overwhelmed by calamity and despair." In T. S. Eliot's opinion, also, Hamlet's emotion is in excess of the facts as they appear, and he specially contrasts it with Gertrude's negative and insignificant personality [in his *The Sacred Wood]* . . . We have unveiled only the exciting cause, not the predisposing cause. The very fact that Hamlet is apparently content with the explanation arouses our misgiving, for, as will presently be expounded, from the very nature of the emotion he cannot be aware of the true cause of it. Ifwe ask, not what ought to produce such soul-paralysing grief and distaste for life, but what in actual fact does produce it, we are compelled to go beyond this explanation and seek for some deeper cause. In real life speedy second marriages occur commonly enough without leading to any such result as is here depicted, and when we see them followed by this result we invariably find, if the opportunity for an analysis of the subject's mind presents itself, that there is some other and more hidden reason why the event is followed by this inordinately great effect. The reason always is that the event has awakened to increased activity mental processes that have been "repressed" from the subject's consciousness. His mind has been specially prepared for the catastrophe by previous mental processes with which those directly resulting from the event have entered into association. . . . In short, the special nature of the reaction presupposes some special feature in the mental predisposition. Bradley himself has to qualify his hypothesis by inserting the words "to aman such as we have seen Hamlet to be."

We come at this point to the vexed question of Hamlet's sanity, about which so many controversies have raged, Dover Wilson authoritatively writes [in his *What Happens in Hamlet]:* "I agree with Loening, Bradley and others that Shakespeare meant us to

imagine Hamlet as suffering from some kind of mental disorder throughout the play." The question is what kind of mental disorder and what is its significance dramatically and psychologically. The matter is complicated by

Hamlet's frequently displaying simulation (the Antic Disposition), and it has been asked whether this is to conceal his real mental disturbance or cunningly to conceal his purposes in coping with the practical problems of this task? (pp. 70-3)

What we are essentially concerned with is the psychological understanding of the dramatic effect produced by Hamlet's personality and behaviour. That effect would be quite other were the central figure in the play to represent merely a"case of in sanity." When that happens, as with Ophelia. such aperson passes beyond our ken, is in asense no ' more human, whereas Hamlet successfully claims our interest and sympathy to the very end. Shakespeare certainly never intended us to regard Hamlet as insane, so that the "mind o'erthrown" must have some other meaning than its literal one. Robert Bridges has described the matter with exquisite delicacy [in his *The Testament of Beauty,* II:

> Hamlet himself would never have been aught to us, or we
> To Hamlet, wer't not for the artful balance whereby
> Shakespeare so gingerly put his sanity in doubt
> Without the while confounding his Rea son.

I would suggest that in this Shakespeare's extraordinary powers of observation and penetration granted him adegree of insight that it has taken the world three subsequent centuries to reach. Until our generation (and even now in the juristic sphere) aAividing line separated the sane and responsible from the irresponsible insane. It is now becoming more and more widely recognized that much of mankind lives in an intermediate and unhappy state charged with what Dover Wilson well calls "that sense of frustration, futility and human inadequacy which is the burden of the whole symphony" and of which Hamlet is the supreme example in literature. This intermediate plight, in the toils of which perhaps the greater part of mankind struggles

and suffers, is given the name of psychoneurosis, and long ago the genius of Shakespeare depicted it for us with faultless insight.

Extensive studies of the past half century, inspired by Freud, have taught us that apsychoneurosis means astate of mind where the person is unduly, and often painfully, driven or thwarted by the "unconscious" part of his mind, that buried part that was once the infant's mind and still lives on side by side With the adult mentality that has developed out of it and should have taken its place. It signifies *internal* mental conflict. We have here the reason why it is impossible to discuss intelligently the state of mind of anyone suffering from apsychoneurosis, whether the description is of aliving person or an imagined one, without correlating the manifestations with what must have operated in his infancy and is *still operating*. That is what I propose to attempt here.

For some deep-seated reason, which is to him unacceptable, Hamlet is plunged into anguish at the thought of his father being replaced in his moth er's affections by someone else. It is as if his devotion to his mother had made him so jealous for her affection that he had found it hard enough to share this even with his father and could not endure to share it with still another man. Against this thought, however, suggestive as it is, may be urged three oBjections. First, if it were in itself afull statement of the matter, Hamlet would have been aware of the jealousy, whereas we have concluded that the mental process we are seeking is hidden from him. Secondly, we see in it no evidence of the arousing of an old and forgotten memory. And, thirdly, Hamlet is being deprived by Claudius of no greater share in the Queen's affection than he had been by his own father, for the two brothers made exactly similar claims in this respect-namely, those of a-1Oved husband. The last-named objec tion, however, leads us to the heart of the situation.

How if, in fact, Hamlet had in years gone by, as achild, bitterly resented having had to share his mother:s affection even with his own father, had regarded him as arival, and had secretly wished him out of the way so that he might enjoy undisputed and undisturbed the monopoly of that affection? If such thoughts had been present in his

mind in childhood days they evidently would have been "repressed," and all traces of them obliterated, by filial piety and other educative influences. The actual realization of his early wish in the death of his father at the hands of ajealous rival would then have stimulated into activity these "repressed" memories, which would have produced, in the form of depression and other suffering, an obscure aftermath of his childhood's conflict. This is at all events the mechanism that is actually found in the real Hamlets who are investigated psychologically.

The explanation, therefore, of the delay and selffrustration exhibited in the endeavour to fulfil his father's demand for vengeance is that to Hamlet the thought of incest and parricide combined is too intolerable to be borne. One part of him tries to carry out the task, the other flinches inexorably from the thought of it. How fain would he blot it out iI1, that "bestial oblivion" which unfortunately for him his conscience contenms. He is torn and tortured in an insoluble inner conflict. (pp. 76-9)

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

Critical Essay #12

[Johnson discusses the major interpretations of Hamlet's character that have evolved over the past two centuries, concluding with Ernest Jones's Freudian reading of the role (see ex- cerpt above). The critic takes particular ex-ception to Jones's view of Hamlet, asserting that if such aperspective were true, there would be no moral dilemmain the tragedy. Johnson then details his own interpretation of the protagonist as ahero whose complex- dilemmais "to disentangle himself from the temptation to wreakjusticefor the wrong reasons and in an evil passion. and to do what he must do at last for the pure sake of justice, for the welfare of the State, to weed the unweeded garden of Denmark and set right the time that is out of joint" The critic also focuses on the concept of appearance versus reality in Hamlet, applying this issue to the characters of Hamlet, Claudius, Polonius, and Laertes. For further commentary on Hamlet's character, see the excerpts by David Bevington, Maynard Mack, Robert Hapgood, Robert R Reed, Jr., Rene Girard, Oscar James Campbell, Arthur Kirsch, Kenneth Muir, George Detmold, Theodore Lidz and J. Dover Wilson.]

I

Hamlet is aplay and Hamlet is acharacter in that play. **In** exploring our topic, "The Dilemmaof Hamlet," although the problem of the play and the problem of the man are tightly interknit, it is important for us to keep clearly in mind when we are talking about the one and when about the other.

My thesis about the play is that its leading theme is the relationship of appearance and reality-that its dilemma, or the series of dilemmas it poses for us, so to speak, is the difficulty of distinguishing between the actuality and the plausible appearance of wisdom or virtue or right action. This note is struck almost at the beginning, with Hamlet's acid, "I know not 'seems' " [I. ii. 76], and his hatred of hypocrisyand deception, coming hard upon his own distrustful and evasive answers to Horatius and Marcellus after speaking with his father's ghost, and followed immediately by his

assumption of an "antic disposition" apparently designed to deceive Claudius and the Court into believing him insane, but leaving the spectator as well sometimes uncertain whether Hamlet's madness is assumed or whether his reason is breaking down under inward emotional strain. Madness and sanity, true wisdom and corruptly shrewd worldliness, real kingly leadership and tricky opportunism, genuine heroism and its showy counterfeit; these are some of the distinctions the play challenges us to make. But they lead us to Hamlet the man, about whom my thesis-partly paralleling that of G. R.

Elliott [in his *Scourge and Minister: A Study of "Hamlet"As Tragedy of Revengtifulness and Justice]-is* that his dilemmais not only to bring about justice but to do so in aright frame of mind and feeling, acting as the scourge and minister of heavenly justice, not poisoned in soul by vengefulness and hatred.

In order to test these two theses and explore the dilemmas they deal with, we must glance at what Hamlet himself is like and what happens in the dramathat bears his name. It might seem at first that this is simply done, merely by reading the play or seeing it performed. But history shows an extraordinary chaos of voices offering confused and contradictory explanations of both.

First, there is what may almost be called the orthodox version of the past one hundred and fifty years, the romantic interpretation that sees the young Prince Hamlet as an introvert entangled in hesitating thought to the point where he is frustrated to follow any course of action. This is the view of Hamlet's character most early and most eloquently voiced by [Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe and

[Samuel Taylor] Coleridge. "A lonely, pure, noble and most moral character, without the strength of nerve that forms the hero," Goethe says of Hamlet, "sinks beneath the burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away. Impossibilities are required of him; not in themselves impossibilities, but such for him. He winds, and turns, and torments himself; he advances and recoils; is ever put in mind, ever puts himself in mind; at last does all but lose his purpose from his thoughts; yet still without

recovering his peace of mind."

This description seems to imply that Shakespeare's hero was afusion of Goethe's own Wer ther and Wilhehn Meister [in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *Wilhelm Meister's Travels];* Coleridge paid Hamlet the compliment of assuming that Shakespeare had been painting asixteenth century version of the nineteenth century Coleridge. "He intended," wrote Coleridge, "to portray aperson in whose view the external world and all its incidents and objects, were comparatively dim and of no interest in themselves, and which began to interest only when they were reflected in the mirror of his mind. . . . [Hamlet indulges in] endless reasoning and hesitating-constant urgency and solicitation of the mind to act, and as constant an escape from action; ceaseless reproaches of himself for sloth and negligence, while the whole energy of his resolution evaporates in these reproaches. This, too, not from cowardice, for he is drawn as one of the bravest of his time-not from want offorethought or slowness of apprehen sion, for he sees through the very souls of those who surround him; but merely from that aversion to action which prevails among such as have aworld in themselves."

Such aview of Hamlet is on the whole accepted by [A. C.] Bradley and E. K. Chambers, and is essentially that of Laurence Olivier's film version of the play [see Sources for Further Study], where, in the beginning, while ghostly mists swirl around the battlements and cold vaulted interiors of Elsinore, adisembodied voice intones, "This is the tragedy of aman who could not make up his mind."

Opposed to this judgment is the approach of those like [George Lyman] Kittredge, who see Hamlet as aman of action moving to avenge his father's death with no essential hesitation and all practicable dispatch, his self-reproaches caused only by chafing at the slowness imposed upon him by circumstances. This Hamlet demands, in conscience, to be sure, reasonable certitude that he has not been deceived by alying phantom. When he has that assurance, in the King's guilty reaction to the playwithin-the-play, he is still delayed by the difficulty of producing objective proof, convincing to the world, that he has not simply invented an accusa tion to justify

regicide and amerely ambitious desire to seize the throne. This view argues, furthermore, that as aKing, Claudius-except on the one accidental occasion when Hamlet comes on him at his prayers-is constantly surrounded by armed courtiers and attendants and even acorps of Swiss mercenaries; and after Hamlet has put him on his guard by showing that his crime is known, he not only takes steps for his own safety by sending Hamlet off to what he hopes will be the nephew's death in England, but would not be likely to let Hamlet approach him thenceforth without being surrounded by protection. In the culminating duel scene, it is only the conspiracy between Claudius and Laertes to kill Hamlet that allows him to be in the King's presence armed-and even then only in consequence of seizing Laertes's foil, the single one with an unbated point.

J. Dover Wilson, in turn, takes issue with apart of this argument by insisting that Hamlet never wanted to prove to the *world* that Claudius was his father's murderer. Such aview would always leave at least astain of suspicion that Queen Gertrude was implicated, and, indeed, until after the play scene, in the interview in his mother's closet, Hamlet himself is by no means certain that she has not been privy to his father's death. But the ghost has bade Hamlet leave her to heaven, and therefore Hamlet has with great ingenuity, Wilson argues, devised the play to show *Claudius* that his guilt is known. but at the same time to make it appear to the scandalized court that it embodies his own threat to murder the present King. (Hamlet himself, you will recall, identifies the murderer in the playas *nephew* to the King.)

W. W. Greg has devised astill more radical overturn of previous themes. For him, the reason Claudius fails to be alarmed by the dumbshow of the murder. but breaks up the performance of the play, is that he is in fact innocent. He has not recognized the dumbshow as directed against himself, but does, with the court, take the subsequent actlon of the playas prefiguring an attempt on his own life. The ghost's accusations, heard by no one but Hamlet, are simply ahallucinating projection of his own deluded suspicions and have no basis in fact. Hamlet is in truth even madder than he has been pretending to be.

T. S. Eliot concludes that none of these explanations will really do. More, Hamlet's self-disgust and his revulsion at his mother's adultery and what Hamlet calls her incest, the nauseated loathing with which his imagination dwells in revolted detail upon "The bloat King" "honeying and making love" to his mother "in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed" "over the nasty stye" [Ill. iv. 182, 92-4], seem to Eliot emotions so excessive for the facts that he regards them as insufficiently motivated in the drama. and drawn from some hidden source in Shakespeare himself. *"Hamlet,* "he says, " . . . is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art."

Consequently, "So far from being Shakespeare's masterpiece, the play is certainly afailure:'

At this point, generations of theatergoers who have regarded Hamlet with absorbed sympathy and no conscious puzzlement whatever might well feel tempted to exclaim in the witty words of one Shakespearean commentator, "Are the critics of

Hamlet mad or only pretending to be?" We seem to be in [Edmund] Spenser's wandering wood in which the thousands of paths lead only to Error's Den [in *The Faerie Queene].* But there is one more, with which I shall bring this survey of the critics to aconclusion, the psychoanalytic theory originally propounded by Freud and elaborated by Ernest Jones.

Accordingto this, Hamlet is suffering from what he cannot possibly recognize himself, the Oedipal desire of ason to kill his father and supplant him in his mother's love. Only so, Jones claims, can we explain Hamlet speaking to her like ajealous lover, torturing himself with hideous images of her lovemaking, and hating the King with all the hysterical loathing of arival. But because Claudius has done only what Hamlet himself desired to do, killed the father and mated with the mother, Hamlet partly identifies himself with his uncle, shares his guilt, and cannot bring himself to execute vengeance on one who has put into action what he himself dreamed in childhood fantasy. He consequently 0scillates, between his conscious and acquired adult devotion to his

father and his infantile hatred and aggression, and is inhibited from acting upon either. He would never be able to act effectively on either of his divided motives, and only accident brings the play to acatastrophic ending as fatal to himself as to Claudius. n

The refutation of the argument is essential in my position, for if Jones is ri$t, there *is* no moral dilemmain the drama. By definition Hamlet *cannot* understand his difficulty; only if-what is impossible-we could bring atwentieth centurypsychoanalyst to the imaginarytwe1fth century court ofElsinore as described by the sixteenth century dramatist, could Hamlet be taught to resolve his own confusions and solve his problems. Such an objection, of course, does not dispose of Jones's theory, nor does any mere skepticism about Shakespeare having thus foreshadowed aFreudian case history. Only if there are within the play itself and its effect upon afit audience elements that do not square with this explanation, may we set aside it or the

Goethe-Coleridge interpretation of which it is amore scientific sounding variant. And in the same way, to deal with any of the interpretations we have surveyed, we must look to the play and the impression it must produce on an audience that responds to it in the way molded by the dramatist.

But there are such elements to negate many of these interpretations. It is aminor caveat, no doubt, to object that the interview between mother and son in the Queen's closet, with Polonius hiding behind the arras, does not take place in her bedroom, as Freud and Jones say, with Hamlet violently flinging her upon the bed in the way Olivier does in the film. In Shakespeare's day, acloset was asmall private room or study; Queen Gertrude would no more receive Polonius in her bedroom than Queen Elizabeth II would Winston Churchill. But (what is more fatal for the entire Jones-FreudColeridge-Goethe theory) Hamlet has not, before the opening of the play, been at all afrustrated introvert entangled in morbid thought and incapable of action, nor, as I shall show, does he reallyexcept in certain very limited respects-show himself inactive in the course of the play.

It is true that with his father's death he has been plunged into the deepest grief and melancholy and that his mother's hasty marriage has filled him with horror and revulsion. Hamlet does indeed bear within him amisery "that passes show" [I. ii.

85], and feels that the earth is "asterile promontory" [II. ii. 299], the heavens "apestilent congrega tion of vapors" [II. ii. 303], man a"quintessence of the dust" [II. ii. 308]. But it is important to note that the world *had not* been so for him; it had been a"goodly frame," the heavens a"majestical roof fretted with golden fire" [II. ii. 301], and man "the beauty of the world" [II. ii. 307], "the paragon of animals" [II. ii. 307]. In saying he has lost his mirth and foregone all customary exercise, he reveals that melancholy and inactivity had not been his habits when his father lived (of whom, according to Jones, he was no less secretly jealous than he now is of his uncle). But even now, throughout his present distresses, he *does* exercise, and has even moments of highspirited jesting. Before he becomes suspicious that Rosencrantz and Guildenstem are spying emissaries of the King, his greeting of them is gay rather than gloomy; and we learn later that he has been practising fencing daily all the while Laertes has been in France, and see Hamlet easily outmatch that skilled swordsman.

Others in the play testify not only to his multitudinous and shining accomplishments, but to his ease, grace, and charm. "The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword; The expectancy and rose of the fair state; The glass of fashion and the mold of form, the observed of all observers," Opheliasays of him [ill. i. 151-54]. These are not the words in which one would describe amelancholy moper, who could not take the place of brilliant leadership at court to which his rank entitled him. When he is dead, Fortinbras, decreeing him asoldier's burial, summarizes general report in the valediction that "he was likely to have proved most royally" [V. ii. 397-98]. Are these the things others would say of an ineffectual dreamer?

Hamlet's behavior during the course of the play, furthermore, reveals none of the inwardtumed embarrassment in social relations that characterize the introvert. He talks readily and cordially with soldiers, actors, gravediggers, gets along well with pirates, and is so beloved by the common people that Claudius dares not openly harm him, the

last apopularity that introverts have seldom enjoyed with the populace. He easily takes command of any conversation in which he participates, usually with unassuming courtesy; and in the play scene he dominates the whole court. He is *not* hesitant or inhibited in action, even against Claudius; he plans the play to test the King's conscience in aflash, and carries it out flawlessly; he stabs Polonius through the arras more than half suspecting it to be the King (what of the notion that he *cannot* act against Claudius?); he sends the traitorous Rosencrantz and Guildenstem to their deaths instantly and without aqualm; he leaps on board the pirate ship before any can follow him; he accepts Laertes's challenge without amoment's pause; he sends Claudius aletter announcing himself landed naked in his Kingdom, as it were warning Claudius of his intentions; and he calmly plans to use the period before news can arrive from England to finish his task.

Jones argues that Hamlet's "mother fixation" stands between him and his courtship of Ophelia, but it does nothing of the kind. He has written her letters so ardent that Laertes warns her not to be moved by them, and won her with "words of so sweet breath composed," she herself says, "as made [his p;ifts] more rich" [ill. i. 97-8]. He has not drawn bacK from her; it is she, obedient to her father's command, not of her own will, who has repulsed him. Where in all this is the self-frustrated lover?

Given Hamlet's intense but not at all abnormal devotion to his father, is there anything excessive in his disgust at his mother's conduct? In any society except that of second century Rome, Hollywood, or the fast set of amodem cosmopolitan city, ason might well be shocked at his mother's adultery. Anafor an Elizabethan audience there was no question that her marriage to Claudius was incest as well. When Henry VIII married his elder broth er's widow, Catherine of Aragon, in 1509, it was necessary to support adispensation permitting it by bringing forward testimony that her previous marriage had never been consummated, and the feeling of horror that such awedding violated biblical law endured long past Shakespeare's day. Hamlet only gives eloquent voice to an emotion all sixteenth century audiences understood.

Finally, there is the allegation that Hamlet delays unconscionably, unintelligibly, and fatally in executing justice upon Claudius. One might ask why it is no sign of Claudius's having some Freudian complex that he delays, no less fatally for himself. to kill Hamlet, long after he has realized that his nephew is dangerous. But the truth is that neither is dilatory except for quite intelligible reasons. It was entirely clear to an Elizabethan audience that aghost might be alying spirit and that aPrince intent on acting justly must prove its accusations, however strongly he felt impelled to believe them. The events of Acts II and III. and the first half of Act IV, all take place in asingle day and night, and that day is so short atime after Polonius has forbidden Opheliato see Hamlet, that only then has Hamlet become aware that her avoidance ofhim is deliberate and made his way into her chamber. The very next day the players come to Elsinore, Hamlet forms his plan, and puts it into effect. After he has lost his one chance to kill the King at prayer, he is packed off to England under guaid. The intervening time is only long enough to bring Laertes back from Paris and permit Hamlet to land from the pirate ship. Hamlet can hardly slay Claudius during Ophelia's burial, on sacred ground, but he knows he has until messages arrive from England, coolly plans to use that interim, and, when he finds himself poisoned, kills the King an instant later. What an indecisive, will-less jack-o'-dreams!

In thus analyzing the Freudian interpretation, I have also dealt implicitly with most of the others I outlined in the first third of this paper, but I should still say afew words about Greg's theory that Claudius is innocent and Hamlet suffering from delusions. Dover *WIlson's* suggestion that during the dumbshow Claudius is discussing with Polonius the renewed display Hamlet has just given them oflove-madness, and consequently has not observed the pantomime, in my opinion, partly answers Greg, but he is fully refuted by Claudius's own soliloquy in the prayer scene where the King explicitly admits "the primal curse" of "abrother's murder" [III. iii. 37-8J. This is unanswerable and we need say no more of it.

III

There remains only to sketch in such aspects of my own position as have not been anticipated in the previous part of the discussion. The theme of the play, I have said, is the relationship of appearance and reality, the gradual classification of moral identities deliberately portrayed ambiguously in the beginning. "Something is rotten in the State of Denmark" [I. iv. 90], says Marcellus, and Hamlet cries out that it is "an unweeded garden" [I. ii. 135J, lamenting "the time is out of joint: Oh cursed sprite, that ever I was born to set it right" [I. v. 18889J. But we do not know at this point lest perhaps it is Hamlet himself who is the canker in the State, proud revengeful, consumed with frustrated ambition to ascend the throne himself and rationalizing his fury at having been passed over in the election. (We might note that, like Hamlet, Fortinbras has failed to secure *his* father's throne, which is likewise now occupied by an uncle, but that unlike Hamlet he seems to feel no sense of injustice in this; he is more concerned to win back the half of Norway his father lost to the elder Hamlet.)

During the opening scenes of the play, I must reemphasize the point, we do not *lazow* whether Hamlet or Claudius is in the right. Let us try to imagine seeing or reading it for the first time, without having heard anything about it. Can we tell with certainty that Hamlet's jealousies and suspicions are true in fact? The original Hamlet story in *Saxo Grammaticus* was apure revenge drama, with small moral cause to prefer the murdered King to his fratricide brother; and Hamlet's motives are entirely those of filial partisanship demanding an eye for an eye, atooth for atooth, not those of horror at anoble and virtuous King done to death by an evil one. Not, of course, that the Elizabethan audience before whom Shakespeare's play was first acted was likely to have known anything about *Saxo Grammaticus,* but the earlier Hamlet play of the 1590's, from which Shakespeare probably derived his own, also seems in turn to have been derived *fromSaxo Grammaticus* and possibly Belleforest, and to have been straight melodrama. with aghost crying "Hamlet, revenge!" Elizabethan playgoers may well have been surprised by the turn Shakespeare gave the old materials. From neither the opening of *Hamlet* nor its title have we any more assurance that Hamlet will be justified in its sequel than we have of Julius Caesar being the hero or Macbeth the villain of the Shakespearean plays that bear their names.

In the same way, we have in the pseudo-kingly Claudius, at first, adeceptively persuasive imitation of genuine kingliness: dignity, courtesy, affability, vigorous and effective diplomatic and military action against external danger, an eloquent and seeminp;ly sincere statement of sound principles, both of feeling and of conduct. It is possible, for all we know at the moment, that Hamlet may indeed be giving way to atoo protracted unmanly, and self-indulgent grief in which he evades his duty to himself and to others. There is even areal regard for Hamlet in Claudius at first, agenuine kindness and good fee1ing, and there is no question of his affection for his Queen. Even when by degrees we pierce beneath his smiling mask, we find that he still struggles with conscience, that his slowness to act against his dangerous nephew is not all policy, and that only after his situation has grown desperate is conscience strangled.

With the old councillor Polonius, we have an impressive appearance of wise understanding and justice of judgment gradually yielding to vanity, worldliness, and senility. When he bids Laertes be faithful in friendship, and tells him "To thine own selfbe true" [I. iii. 78], his morality sounds like that of Socrates, but the rest of his maxims are all prudential and concerned with the figure aman cuts in the world rather than with essence-like his advice on money and on dress, amere cautiousness of conduct or of taste. As the action proceeds, he sinks lower, and we see him willing to dispatch spies and informers upon his own son, eavesdropping and spying himself, flattering and hypocritical, obstinately determined to prove his own theories, aconceited busybody foolishly self-deceived.

Laertes is pseudo-heroic as Claudius is the pseudo-kingly. How gallant afigure he seems at first, how earnest is his concern for his sister, how admirable his promptness of action in demanding an explanation of his father's death (sbikingly contrasted with Hamlet's seeming-though only seeming-slowness). But then, in more significant contrast to Hamlet's insistence on having proof and acting in right conscience, see Laertes storming into the King's presence, shouting before he knows the facts, "Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit" [IV. v. 133], "To hell allegiance" [IV. v. 132], and follow how easily the smooth King not merely deludes him but works him

to aweak participation in villainy. Laertes, like his father, is concerned with appearance, not reality: he wants "formal ostentation" of funeral rites for Polonius and is concerned lest the world think he has not done enough. "What ceremony else?" (V. i. 223], he demands at Ophelia's grave, and his showy sorrow revolts Hamlet's inward grief "which passes show"

[I. ii. 85].

But Hamlet, the hero, too, is not all heroic, or only gradually becomes so. His wit is fiercely intolerant of stupidity and sycophancy: he is mockingly contemptuous of the affected Osric. He is consistently and publicly rude to Claudius, even before he knows the ghost's accusations; he is indecently discourteous, almost invariably, in deriding Polonius, whose daughter he loves; he is brutally harsh to his mother. Until well on in his plans, he is mistrustful of the sane and truehearted Horatio, refusing to confide in him, seeking neither the comfort nor the good counsel of afaithful friend, but bottling all his feelings and his purposes up within his breast, in aproud and suspicious secrecy. He is insultingly suspicious of Ophelia, leaping from the realization that her pathetic attempt to return his gifts means that their encounter is no accident, as it was meant to seem, to the raging conviction that she is her father's willing tool conniving to betray him. With furious bitterness he all but calls her awhore, and, despite the likelihood that spies are listening, recklessly shouts, "We'll have no more marriages. Those that are married already, all but one, shall live" [III. i. 147-48]. Worst of all, for more than half the play, his determination to avenge his father's murder is aferocious, hysteri cal, vindictive, bloody hatred that he can hardly keep within bounds. It is revenge with hardly atrace of concern for any nobler concept of justice.

This is the dilemmaof Hamlet the Prince and Man-to disentangle himself from the temptation to wreak justice for the wrong reasons and in evil passion, and to do what he must do at last for the pure sake of justice, for the welfare of the State, to weed the unweeded garden of Denmark and set right the time that is out of joint. From that dilemmaof wrong feelings and right actions he ultimately emerges, solving the problem by attaining aproper state of mind. At the end of the play scene, it is true, he

refuses to kill Claudius at prayer, and excuses that evasion to himself by arguing that he wants to damn his uncle's soul more deep in hell by taking him at some time that has no relish of grace or salvation in it. But there is no improbability in suggesting that Hamlet is trying here to ex cuse areluctance he does not yet understand but that springs from arevolt of his own conscience against acting with such poisonous feeling. He is acting-or rather refraining-on right motives, but giving himself mistaken reasons. (It is adramatic irony of course, that Claudius has been unable to pray with sincerity, and is *not* in astate of grace.)

Slowly, however, in the course of the last two acts, Hamlet subdues his violence of feeling. Even by the end of the interview in his mother's closet, he sorrows for his impetuous murder of Polonius: "For this same Lord," he says, "I do repent" [III. iv. 173]: and he gently bids his mother good night, telling her, "When you are desirous to be blest, I'll blessing beg of you" [III. iv. 171-72]. He prays Laertes's pardon for the wrong he has done him, and throughout all the ending moderates even those wild and whirling words of hatred he has previously spoken against Claudius. Instead he asks, calmly, "Is't not perfect conscience to quit him with this arm?" and prevent "This canker of our nature" from proliferating "further evil" (V. ii. 67-70]. He has resolved the moral dilemmaof vengeance *ver*

sus justice. (Although it is true that when he has transfixed the King with Laertes's "envenomed point" he has alast spasm of hatred for the "incestuous, murderous, damned Dane" (V. ii. 325].) At the end, Hamlet is even able to think of providing for apeaceful succession to the crown by giving his dying voice to Fortinbras. He expires with noble se renity, "The rest is silence" (V. ii. 358]. He has purged his nature of its fierce passions and become the great and heroic figure we always felt struggling in him to be born. As restoring peace descends over troubled Denmark, we can echo Horatio:

> Good night, sweet prince,
> And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!
> [V. ii. 359-60]

(pp. 99-111)

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

Critical Essay #13

[Muir analyzes the Ghost in Hamlet *in several ways, first by proposing several attitudes an Elizabethan audience may have held regarding its nature. The apparition may have been viewed as an illusion, undone, a spirit come from purgatory with divine permission, or adevil who assumes the form of adead person to lure mortals to their doom. According to the critic,* Hamlet *tests each of these perspectives during the plays course of events, most notably in his production of "The Mousetrap." Muir also discusses the Ghost's two warnings to Hamlet, namely not to taint his mind and to leave Gertrude "to heaven." In addition, the critic explores Hamlet's reaction to his meeting with the Ghost by studying the nature of the prince's depression and his assumption of an "antic disposition. " For further commentary on the Ghost's charcter see the excerpts by Maynard Mack, Robert R. Reed, Jr., and Arthur Kirsch.]*

The first act of *Hamlet,* except for the third scene, is concerned with the revelation by the Ghost that Claudius is amurderer and Gertrude an adultress. This revelation is carefully prepared. The Ghost appears twice in the first scene without speaking; and before his appearance, Shakespeare, without the aid of scenery or artificial lighting, creates in the course of the dialogue avivid impression of time, place, coldness, and expectancy, and after the Ghost has vanished an equally vivid impression of dawn, four or five hours having passed in ten minutes of playing-time. We also hear in the first scene of preparations for war, and Bernardo thinks that the Ghost has come to warn them of the threat to the state. The scholar, Horatio, at first believes that the Ghost will not appear, and later addresses it as 'illusion'. According to the various beliefs current in Shakespeare's day, aghost could be either an illusion, 'aphantom seen as aportent of danger to the state', aspirit come from the grave because of something left undone, aspirit come from purgatory by divine permission, or adevil disguised as adead person in order to lure the living into mortal sin. AIl these theories are tested in the course of the play. Horatio, abandoning the ideathat the Ghost is an illusion, assumes first that it has come as aportent and then that it can be laid if they carry out its wishes. When the Ghost appears to Hamlet himself in the fourth scene, both

Marcellus and Horatio are afraid that it is agoblin damned rather than aspirit of health, and that it will drive the Prince into madness and suicide; and, although Hamlet, after he has listened to the Ghost's message, is fully convinced that it is indeed his father's spirit, later on he has moments of doubt when he thinks it may be the devil. He has, in any case, to obtain confirmation of the truth of the Ghost's story.

Hamlet appears for the first time in the second scene of the play, dressed in black, which is an implied criticism of the royal marriage which has just been celebrated. Claudius, although Hamlet dislikes him and regards him as ausurper, appears to be acompetent and even an amiable ruler. After referring diplomatically to his marriage, dispatching ambassadors to Norway, and giving Laertes permission to return to France, he urges Hamlet to stop his excessive mourning, and not to return to Wittenberg. The audience, having already seen the Ghost, is aware that something is rotten in the state of Denmark, and will sympathise with Hamlet's feelings about his mother's hasty re-marriage, especially as marriage with adeceased husband's brother was not permitted without aspecial dispensation.

Hamlet's first soliloquy is designed to show his state of mind before his interview with the Ghost. He is profoundly shocked by Gertrude's marriage to his uncle in less than two months after her first husband's death, although he has no conscious suspicion that his father has been murdered or that his mother had committed adultery. He wishes suicide were permissible, he compares the world to Eden after the Fall, he contrasts Gertrude's two husbands, the godlike and the bestial, and, with atendency to generalise characteristic of him, he assumes that all women are like his mother: 'Frailty, thy name is woman!' [I. ii. 146]. We learn later that the melancholy and disillusionment apparent in this soliloquy are not part of his normal state of mind. It is necessary to emphasise this, because those critics who form alow opinion of his character tend to forget that his behaviour in the play is partly explicable by the successive shocks he receives.

His depression and his tears are underlined by his initial failure to recognise Horatio; but he rouses himself sufficiently to make the bitter witticism about the funeral baked

meats, and his crossexamination of the three men who have seen the Ghost reveals that his intelligence has not been blunted by his grief. It is apparent from the fourline soliloquy at the end of the scene, in which he speaks of 'foul play' and 'foul deeds', that he now suspects that his father has been murdered.

In the fourth scene, before the appearance of the Ghost, Hamlet is given aspeech on the drunkenness of the court, which leads him to generalise on the way 'some vicious mole of nature' [I. iv. 24] or some bad habit outweighs aman's good qualities and destroys his reputation in the eyes of the world. Hamlet had already referred in the second scene to the drinking habits of the new court, and one function of this speech is to show the deterioration of Elsinore in the reign of Claudius. Another function, equally important from the theatrical point of view, is to distract the attention of the audience so that they are surprised by the reappearance of the Ghost, and this function is aided by the extreme complexity of the syntax, which would require the undivided attention of the audience.

Bernard Shaw spoke of the Ghost's part as one of the wonders of the play. . . . The weird music of that long speech. . . should be the spectral wail of asoul's bit ter wrong crying from one world to anoth er in the extremity of its torment.

He is, apparently, released from purgatory, although Shakespeare makes use of some of the characteristics of the classical Hades. He speaks of his 'foul crimes', which suggests that Hamlet has idealised his character; ana-it is stressed that he has been sent to his account 'Unhous'led, disappointed, unanel'd' [I. v. 77]-without having taken the sacrament, unprepared, and without having received extreme unction. Hamlet promises to sweep to his revenge, and the Ghost leaves him with two cautions:

> Taint not thy mind. nor let thy soul con trive
> Against thy mother aught.
> [I. v. 85-6]

Gertrude is to be left to the prickings of conscience; but the meaning of the first four words of this sentence is ambiguous. They could refer to Hamlet's attitude to his mother, or they may have amore general application: he is to execute justice on Claudius, without allowing his own mind to become tainted with evil. It is important to realise that Hamlet's task is almost impossible. How can he kill Claudius in such away that justice appears to be done, without at the same time exposing the guilt of his mother? It is apparent from the speech Hamlet utters immediately after the Ghost's disappearance that he is more concerned with his mother's guilt than with his uncle's blacker crime: he speaks first of her. It is also clear from this soliloquy and from the scene which follows that Hamlet's mind is reeling in the distracted globe of his skull. Knowing that he will be unable to behave normally till his vengeance is accomplished, he decides to 'put an antic disposition on', as Hieronimo

(in *The Spanish Tragedy)* had done, or-to use acomparison made in *The Historie of Hamblet-as* the Brutus who had driven out the Tarquins had done. How near to breaking-point Hamlet is after the revelation by the Ghost is made apparent by his inability to stand, by his 'wild and whirling words' [I. v. 133] to his friends, and by the hysteri cal remarks about the 'fellow in the cellarage' [I. v. 151], which are not asign of his egotism and callousness as RebeccaWest assumes, but which may well make his friends suspect that the Ghost is the devil in disguise. The antic disposition is not merely adefence mechanism. It also enables Hamlet to play the rOle of Fool and so make remarks which will appear mad to everyone except the guilty King, and which!ITe ameans of undermin ing his self-control, so that his conscience will be caught by the performance of 'The Murder of Gonzago'.

Hamlet nearly reveals the Ghost's secret twice: first, when he breaks off to inform Horatio and Marcellus that

> There's never avillain dwelling in all Den mark
> But he's an arrant knave;

[I. v. 123-24] and, secondly, when he begins:

> It is an honest ghost, that let me tell
> you...

[I. v. 138] and then finishes;

> For your desire to know what is between
> us,
> O'ermaster it as you may.
> [I. v. 139-40]

Later on, off-stage, he makes Horatio his confidant; but he keeps the secret from Marcellus because he realises that his own safety depends on secrecy.

> The scene ends with asignificant couplet:
> The time is out of joint. 0 cursed spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right!
> [I. v. 188-89]

These lines, in which Hamlet both accepts and revolts against his mission, contrast with his earlier promise to 'sweep to his revenge' [I. v. 31], and with his determination to confront the Ghost, when his fate cries out: they prepare the way for the long months of inaction. (pp. 20-3)

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

Critical Essay #14

[Joseph examines the concept of appearance versus reality with regard to Claudius's character in Hamlet*. When the play begins, the crit ic asserts, there is no indication that Claudius is a villain; rather, he appears to be the consummate monarch, who effectively transacts private and public business. As the play progresses, however, the quality of his villainy is gradually revealed to the audience. Joseph also defines the term "hypocrisy" in relation to Claudius. maintaining that Elizabethans viewed it as aparticularly serious character flaw. The king's hypocrisy is perhaps most evident in his eloquent speech in Act I, scene ii in which he openly discusses his hasty marriage to Gertrude and down plays its awkwardness by providing sound reasons for establishing the union. As aresult, the grief-stricken Hamlet-with whom we are supposed to identifyseems to be the only abnormal character at the court. The critic explores several Renaissance perspectives on Claudius's character which might not be apparent to amodem audience. For instance, Joseph maintains that an Elizabethan audience would not likely sympathize with the monarch as he tries to pray in Act III, scene iii, for his admission of sinning coupled with his inability to repent only makes his wickedness more pronounced. Further, the crit ic shows how Elizabethan audiences would understand that images of sickness and disease in the play relate to Claudius's hypocrisy. Finally, Joseph notes that the king's duplicity rfdlects atruly evil devilishness, and discusses the concept of "white devil"-aterm given to hypocrites by Martin Luther-in relation to this observation. For further commentary on Claudius's character, see the excerpts by Robert Hapgood, Robert R. Reed, Jr., Richard D. Altic/c, Kenneth Muir, Edgar Johnson, Ernest Jones, Carolyn Heilbrun, and Baldwin Maxwell.]*

The last minutes of the play are taken up with preparations for the dead to be placed "high on astage. . . to the view," as silent witnesses when Horatio comes to tell the yet unknowing world How these things came about. [V. ii. 379-80]

What is there to be told? No more than we, the au dience or the readers, have just lived through in our imagination with the poet. And yet we have not imagined the whole of the story as it was present in its author's mind unless we remember, unless we are acutely conscious of, the fact that it is concerned with acountry still completely unaware of what has been taking place since the murder of the elder Hamlet.

Horatio has now to speak of that murder, telling how it was committed by Claudius, the brother who seized the throne and lived incestuously with the murdered king's widow. There will be mention of the Ghost, the Mousetrap, the unintentional killing of Claudius and its results. Denmark must learn of the plot to kill the Prince in England, of the foul details of the second plot after his sudden return home. It is astory of rebounding treachery and multiple slaughter, with the wiping out not of Hamlet alone, but of Gertrude, Laertes, and finally of Claudius himself. At this moment, ifwe imagine

Horatio is about to tell all this to the Danes, with the grim procession forming, we know for certain that the truth in the dying words of Laertes can be ap plied not merely to one episode, but to all the crime and horror of the story

> -the King, the King's to blame.
> [V. ii. 320]

But when the play opens it is by no means certain that Claudius is avillain. Even when the Prince swears vengeance there is still astrong possibility that the Ghost's word ought not to be taken. What we have seen of Claudius suggests aclear conscience: we have been present whilst avery gracious and most noble-looking renaissance monarch transacted private and public business with an admiring court around him. With competence and regal assurance he disposes of the problem of young Fortinbras, sending astatesmanlike embassy to the old king. Claudius never appears to better advantage than in this scene: with what sincere interest in the affairs of atrusted adviser does he assure the young Laertes:

> You cannot speak of reason to the Dane And lose your voice. What wouldst thou beg, Laertes"
> That shall not be my offer, not thy asking? The head is not more native to the heart, The hand more instrumental to the mouth,
> Than is the throne of Denmark to thy fa ther.
> [I. ii. 44-9]

When Claudius turns to "my cousin Hamlet, and my son" [I. ii. 64], there is the same healthyassurance, tempered now with asympathetic restraint which sUl&ests immeasurable reserves of strength and kinclllli1ess. He seems to be justified in everything that he says to cajole or persuade Hamlet to take more interest in the incidents of everyday life.

In the face of his nephew's inability to reconcile himself to that "common theme," the "death off athers" [I. ii. 104], Claudius seems sincere. When the Prince has promised his mother to remain, the gloriousness of Claudius is even more pronounced: now the court departs in amagnificent procession, joyfully expectant of great splendour and felicities to come, with their king proclaiming to the world aliberality and m_animity of soul which renaissance minds founcffitting to amonarch. The scene moves inevitably to his final speech; and this sets the seal on the picture which Shakespeare wants us to have of apersonage whose grandeur swells more and more until at last he holds the stage, dominating the whole company with aradiant splendour:

> No jocund health that Denmark drinks to day
> But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell,
> And the King's rouse the heaven shall bruit again,
> Re-speaking earthly thunder.
> [I. ii. 125-28]

For Claudius, this is the moment of greatest triumph: in his appearance, in the attitude of others towards him, there is no suggestion that he is anything but an ideal king, with all the superb qualities which that implies. To look at him no one would imagine the

foul crimes of which he is guilty, the murder of abrother, the illthy, animal sin of incest. Not the mark of Cain, but aclear conscience seems to show itself on Claudius' brow; he seems to emanate health and brightness of soul, and agracious spirit of nobility. And yet as he wrote the play, Shakespeare, even as he imagined Claudius seeming so splendid, had also imagined him guilty at this very moment of two horrid, ugly crimes. A few scenes later, in the heat of his first reaction to the Ghost's tale, Hamlet cries bitterly:

> 0 villain, villain, smiling, damned villain! My tables-meet it is I set it down
> That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain:
> At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.
> [I. v. 106-09]

Yet even Hamlet begins to wonder if what the Ghost says is true, anano ordinary mortal looking at Claudius and his loving queen, surrounded with ajoyful court, apicture of all that is healthily vital in human beings, could, be expected to peer beneath the smile and find the villain. We would rather be disposed to think that of the world in general it is true that "one may smile, and smile, and be avillain," but if ever there were asure exception to that rule it is to be found in this particular case of Denmark, and of Claudius, its magnificent king.

From one point of view, then, the progress of the play is arevelation of the quality of Claudius' villainy; only gradually do we come to atrue experience of his real nature. How successfully he imposes on Denmark, and how difficult it is to prevent oneself from being deceived by this kind of person, is exemplified excellently by his very first speech. The peculiar quality of this hypocrite lies in his ability not merely to hide evil, but to present it openly when he chooses, in amanner which leads ordinary people not to recognize it emotionally for what it is, but to respond to it as good. Claudius reminds his listeners that his behaviour could indeed be regarded as not in accordance with what is normally held as the best of taste:

Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death
The memory be green; and that it us befit ted
To bear our hearts in grief, and our whole
kingdom To be contracted in one brow of woe; Yet so far hath discretion fought with na ture That we with wisest sorrow think on him, Together with remembrance of ourselves.
[I. ii. 1-71

As this scene develops, with an obviously admiring court and aloving queen, from none of whom comes any hint of shame or disapproval, it is easy to accept Claudius' words as perfectly reasonable, and to forget that he is guilty of at the least agross breach of etiquette in marrying so soon, and in putting an end to court mourning within two months of the last king's death. In asense which Claudius did not intend his words, "so far hath discretion fought with nature" that he has managed to marry his brother's widow without stimulating in his courtiers their normal reaction to incest; and yet in this case, too, he does not attempt to hide what he has done, he merely contrives to make the world mistake the real quality of his actions:

Therefore our sometime sister, now our
queen, . . . Havewe,as.twerewithadefeatedjoy, . . . Taken to wife; nor have we herein barr'd
Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone
With this affair along.
[I. ii. 8-16]

It is the measure of his uncle's success that Hamlet, the only person to react normally to an abnormal situation, is himself made to seem abnormal. The sight of Claudius, to hear him speak, is enough to dispel disapproval; and in the behaviour of Gertrude is so much love and radiance that we can be forgiven for not realizinj;!; that this is awoman who buried abeloved husoand in frenzied grief afew short weeks ago. Shakespeare has presented the facts in such away that our own normal reactions are dulled, and if we recognize later how strange it was that we had no comprehension of the true facts at

this moment, we become more aware of the ev}1 emanating from Claudius as apart of the poet's fundamental conception of his play.

Claudius' nature, then, adds to the difficulties of Hamlet's task. Mer the King has betrayed himself, when the Mouse-trap has been sprung, the posi tion is rectified to acertain extent: the Prince and his only friend are now sure that the appearance of amurderer who does not look guilty is not to be weighed against the word of aGhost which might have been false. But we, the audience, do not react correctly to *The Murder ofGonzago,* unless we are conscious of the kind of problem which it solves, and this means an awareness of Claudius as ahypocrite in the renaissance understanding of that term.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* hypocrisy may be defined as:

The assuming of afalse appearance of virtue or goodness, with dissimulation of real character or inclinations, esp. in respect of religious life or beliefs; hence in general sense, dissimulation, pretence, sham.

We tend to interpret "the assuming of afalse appearance" metaphorically; but the renaissancelooked literally at the face and actions which in ahypocrite were by definition considered to express the opposite of the real nature within; for instance, Robert Cawdrey's *Table Alphabetical* (1604) states: "such aone as in his outward apparel, countenance and behaviour, pretendeth to be other than he is indeed, or adeceiver." (pp. 50-5)

It is because men are only human that hypocrites like Claudius are able to pass themselves off successfully. Only God and the evil-doer's own conscience, says the renaissance, know him as he is with certainty. "Our inward disposition is the life of our actions," [Bishop] Hall declares [in his *Works,* I], "according to that doth the God of Spirits judge us, while men censure according to our external motions." It is for this reason that the disguise of the hypocrite makes him so dangerous: "wicked hypocrites care not to play with God, that they may mock men." And we are assured that: "An

open wicked man doth much hurt, with notorious sins; but an hypocrite doth at last more shame goodness, by seeming good" *[Works,* VIII]. (pp.60-1)

Claudius dares to be both avillain and ahypocrite; his heart does not smile with his face; he is guilty of murder and incest, the smile on his face hides guilt and the planning of yet more villainy in his heart. *Pericles* treats asituation resembling that in *Hamlet:* like Claudius, Antiochus is guilty of incest and plans fresh murder; and like Claudius he dissembles: where Hamlet cries that "one may smile and smile and be avillain" [1. v. 108], Pericles comments:

> How courtesy would seem to cover sin,
> When what is done is like an hypocrite,
> The which is good in nothing but in sight!
> *[Pericles,* I. i. 121-23]

As Hall says: "Hypocrisy gains this of men, that it may do evil unsuspected" *[Works,* I].

After the moment when Claudius has shown his guilt fleetingly in his face and gesture, "upon the talk of the poisoning" [III. ii. 289], there is no more doubt for Hamlet and Horatio, and for audience and reader. And up to this moment Shakespeare does not show Claudius in such away that we know him for what he is: but once murder has spoken with miraculous organ we can see him without the disguise. Denmark, however, is still deluded; his subjects cannot peer through the smile to the guilty heart. And as aresult he is able to send Hamlet away to atreacherously planned death: and even when the Prince returns, Claudius still appears to be the splendid monarch striving hard to reconcile his nephew and Laertes in afair and generous manner.

Claudius shows himself to us as hypocrite in the use he makes of Laertes:

Laertes, was your father dear to you?
Or are you like the painting of asorrow,
A face without aheart?
[IV. vii. 107-09]

These words are spoken by the very man who turned to chide another sorrowing son; to Hamlet,

Claudius declared at the beginning of the play: to persever

In obstinate condolement is. . .
. . . unmanly grief:
. . . Fie! 'tis afault to heaven, A fault against the dead, afault to nature, To reason most absurd: whose common theme
Is death of fathers.
[I. ii. 92-104]

Shakespeare put these sentiments into the mouth of the character whom he had imagined guilty of the murder of the man for whom such grief was being shown. The same hypocritical murderer, as he incites Laertes to yet more killing, asks:

what would you undertake
To show yourself in deed your father's son More than in words?
[IV. vii. 124-26]

And when the answer comes: "to cut his throat i' th' church" [IV. vii. 126], Claudius approves with every show of honest sympathy and indignation, using words which are unwittingly asentence passed on himself:

No place, indeed, should murder sanctua rize:
Revenge should have no bounds.
[IV. vii. 127-28]

Shakespeare makes Claudius ahypocrite in what he says and does as the action progresses, and when the last scene has arrived we have been able to understand the kind of villainy that lurks beneath his fair and smooth appearance. It is obvious then that he has been created by the playwright as this particular kind of dangerous person, the hypocrite, who by virtue of his position and of his seeming splendour can pervert not merely his queen, but the very land which he has stolen from his victim. Claudius is not amixture of good and bad, he is an evil man who seems good.

But it might well be objected that the King tries to pray, that he shows remorse, especially when admitting to himself the justice of the remark made by Polonius:

> 'Tis too much prov'd, that with devotion's
> visage And pious action we do sugar o'er The devil himself.
> [III. i. 46-8]

Then Claudius admits to himself:

> 0, 'tis too true!
> How smart alash that speech doth give my conscience!
> The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'rtng art,
> Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it Than is my deed to my most
> painted word. 0 heavy burden!
> [III. i. 48-53]

At this point the audience cannot be certain that the King's guilt involves murder of abrother, but incest and usurpation are burdens enough. Yet the trouble with Claudius from the renaissance point of view is that however smart alash his conscience may receive, it is powerless to make him really contrite. For Elizabethans there was no more to be seen in his behaviour, especially when he tries to pray (III. iii.); nothing more than horror at the realization of the consequences of his wrongdoing. As Bishop Hall puts it: "Consciences that are without remorse, are not without horror: wickedness makes men desperate." He says this in his commentcuy on the story of

Cain and Abel: and Claudius, who has also slain his brother, is another example of despairing wickedness.

When Claudius tries to pray he fails, because, like Faustus [in Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus],* he cannot bear to part with the fruits of his sinning; and as aresult, in another more deadly sense, he learns to feel the full quality of those fruits as aburden round his neck, pressing him down into the swamp of hell:

> "Forgive me my foul murder"!
> That cannot be: since I am still possess'd
> Of those effects for which I did the mur der
> My crown, mine own ambition, and my
> queen.
> May one be pardon'd and retain th' of fence?
> [III. iii. 52-6]

And the answer which he gives himself is in tune with what we have heard in other renaissance comments On hypocrisy:

> In the corrupted currents of this world
> Offence's gilded hand may shove by
> justice: . . .
> . . . But 'tis not so above:
> There is no shuffling: there the action lies
> In his true nature.
> [III. iii. 57-62]

But Claudius has reduced himself to astate of such depravity that in the corruption of his will his soul is limed: that, struggling to be free,

> Art more engag'd.
> [III. iii. 68-9]

As he rises from hisJmees, having given every outward sign of penitent devotion, he seems to the sentimental modem mind to be pathetic and not all unworthy. But the Elizabethan _ould not necessarily have had this view: he would more likely have given averdict more in keeping with John Bulwer's denunciation of hypocrites [in his *Chirologia]* :

Idolators and hypocrites, in lifting up their hands in prayer, are but apes, who while they by the outward symbol profess to have their minds erected upwards, the first of them stick in the wood and stone, as if God were enclosed there: the second sort, entangled in vain cares, or wick_d cogitations, lie grovelling on the earth, ;:md by acontradiction of gesture, bear witness against themselves.

> Even so does Claudius grieve, that "above," malefactors are compell'd,
> Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
> To give in evidence.
> [III. iii. 62-4]

Thus for Elizabethans the enormous extent of his guilt became more visible with his own despairing recognition:

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

When William Lathum, in *PhyalaLachrymarum* (1633), gives alist of the flowers fit to be thrown upon the bier of his friend, Nathaniel Weld, tulips are rejected:

> No gaudy tulips here admitted be,
> (Emblems of false (fair-fained) sanctity),
> Whose worth all outward is in show alone,
> But inward scent hath not, ne virtue none.

From one point of view, Claudius is like'the "gaudy tulips," but fundamentally they are inadequate as symbols for what Shakespeare has imagined of him. The dramatist is thinking of Claudius in terms of Cain, who is associated in the Bible, not only with the murder of abrother, but with ahypocritical sacrifice which was literally afoul stench. For that reason we are reminded of Cain when Claudius exclaims in horror:

> 0, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven:
> It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't
> A brother's murder!
> [III. iii. 36-8]
> This is his second reference to his biblical prototype: the first occurs in the early hypocritical reproof to Hamlet for mourning his dead father: a fault to nature,
> To reason most absurd: whose common theme
> Is death offathers, and who still hath cried From the first corse till he that died to-day, "This must be so."
> [I. ii. 102-06]

The "first corse," Abel, was killed by his brother, Cain, in fulfilment of the primal curse; but while this is an appropriate example, 1 do not think its appearance here should be taken as anything more than contributory evidence of the way In which Shakespeare himself was reacting to his story; for there is direct evidence enough later when Claudius refers openly to the nature of his own offence. It is. however. important not to neglect the association of Claudius with Cain. for here we have an essential element in Shakespeare's conception of the Hamlet story.

In *Shakespeare's Imagery* (1935). Professor [Carolyn F. E.] Spurgeon calis attention to the number of images in *Hamlet* in which disease is involved:

In *Hamlet* there hovers all through the play in both words and word pictures the conception of disease. especially of ahid den corruption infecting and destroying awholesome body.

Professor Spurgeon suggests that the reason for this lies in the author's having imagined Hamlet as Infected and killed by disease of the spirit: she believes that the imagery of this play suggests that Hamlet's tragedy is the result of a *condition* for which the individual himself Is apparently not responsible any more than the sick man Is to blame for the infection which strikes and devours him. But the Elizabethans knew of aform of sickness for which there was no doubt that the sick man was himself to blame. and that was hypocrisy. Where Professor Spurgeon has assumed that the imagery of disease expresses Shakespeare's attitude to Hamlet. there are stronger grounds for suggesting that the hidden corruption which hovers all through the play emanates from the central conception of Claudius and the part which he occupies in the story as awhole. It is here that we perceive the importance of the association with Cain; for not only did Cain slay his brother. like Claudius. and is known for the foulness of his sacrifice. but Cain like Claudius was ahypocrite. Moreover. the renalssance. with the authority of Holy Writ. often speaks of hypocrisy itself as an inner corruption. aconception which we have retained with the term "whited sepulchre." Claudius' mention of his "rank" offence. just before his useless show of prayer. should be imagined in the light of the distinction made by Hall between sin and penitence:

There Is no sense. that gives so lively arefres_ to the spirits. as that of smelling: no smeT! can yield so true and feeling delight to the sense. as the offerlns!s of OUT penitence. obedience. pralse. senaup Into the nostrils of the Almighty. *[Works.* V]

But sins. he adds. are unsavoury: "no carrion Is so noisome." (pp. 62-8)

It is not strange that the world in which Claudius flourishes should be seen by Hamlet in its true light as an unweeded garden

> That grows to seed; things rank and gross
> In nature
> Possess It merely.
> [I. Ii. 135-37)

And "rank" Is the word which Claudius himself uses of his offence.

When Hamlet breaks away and follows the Ghost. Horatio asks; "To what issue will this come?" And Marcellus gives the right answer: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" [I. iv. 89-90]. But what nelther of them can yet realize is that the rottenness lies at the heart of the country. its king. We cannot understand fully what Hamlet has to fight unless we realize that the triumph of Claudius means spiritual death for Denmark. No wonder that he himself describes his subjects as: muddled.
Thick and unwholesome
In their thoughts and whispers.
[IV. v. 81-2]

And so it must be until the foul deed. never hidden from the sight of God. has risen to the eyes of men. and the cause, the core of corruption, the seemingly fine king, has been removed.

This view of Claudius becomes even more justified if we consider yet another aspect of the hypocrite as conceived of in the renaissance: he is not only rotten, he is devilish. Hall describes how when ahypocrite meets afriend in the street, "the other thinks he reads his heart in his face," and rejoices at receiving avague invitation which will never materialize into hospitality: and in his heart all the time the hypocrite mocks:

In brief, he is the stranger's saint: the neighbour's disease: the blot of goodness; arotten stick, in adark night; apoppy, in acornfield: an ill tempered candle, with agreat snuff, that in going out smells ill; an angel abroad, adevil at home; and worse when an angel than when adevil.

Another devil of this kind to whom Shakespeare gave acentral part is Angelo in *Measure for Measure.* In each play the situation is similar: ahypocrite rules in each. Isabella finds that it would be useless to tell the world

> Aloud what man thou art.
> *[Measurefor Measure,* II. iv. 153-541
> Angelo sneers triumphantly;
> Say what you can: my false o'erweighs
> your true.
> [II. iv. 170]

And the Duke sums up as he moralizes in astring of couplets at the end of the Third Act:

> 0, what may man within him hide,
> Though Angel on the outward side!
> [III. ii. 271-72]

In Measurefor Measure the audience can appreciate the truth of this at once: from what has been shown of Angelo we recognize that Isabellais not mistaken in her words to her brother:

> This outward-sainted deputy,
> . . . is yet adevil;
> His filth within being cast, he would ap pear
> A pond as deep as hell.
> [III. i. 88-93]

The ordinary kind of devil is black within and black without: that is why Thomas Adams followed Martin Luther in applying the term "White Devil" to ahypocrite: "A devil he was," writes Adams of Judas, "black within and full of rancour, but white without, and skinned over with hypocrisy; therefore to use *Luther's* word, we will call him the *white devil" [The White Devil, or the Hypocrite Uncased].*

Claudius shows so white that it takes half aplay before we know him for what he is, and asecond halfbefore anyone is in aposition to unmask him in public. Much of the

horror of the situation with which Hamlet is confronted lies in the certainty that in virtue of his "seeming," Claudius can continue to impose on the world. In *Measurefor Measure,* the Duke has retired, but only temporarily: in *Hamlet* the king has been murdered, and everything lies at the murderer's feet. Isabella can cry in public to her legitimate ruler: do not banish reason

> For inequality; but let your reason serve To make the truth appear where it seems hid,
> And hide the false seems true.
> [V. i. 64-7]

But there is no one to whom Hamlet can make this appeal; even his own friends and well-wishers are, without knowing it, at the usurper's disposal.

Again, when Isabellais at first unsuccessful in her supplication to the Duke, she comforts herself with the apostrophe;

> 0, you blessed ministers above,
> Keep me in patience; and, with ripened time, Unfold the evil which is here wrapt up In countenance!
> [V. i. 115-18]

But Hamlet must not delay, he cannot afford to wait for time to "unfold the evil" which is here "wrapt up" in Claudius' countenance.

In Isabella's speech, Shakespeare has used the image of wrapping and unfolding in association with acountenance: in *Hamlet* he concentrates on the smile into which aface folds when it covers villainy: but in *Titus Andronicus,* that early play, he combines the two. There the word "fold" means not only "wrap," but "cover," "protect," "conceal," with the suggestion of "crease," ending in the concrete "smile." Tamorais made to wonder greatly that man's face can fold In pleasing smiles such murderous tyran ny.

[Titus Andronicus, II. iii. 266-67]

And crude as *Titus Andronicus* undoubtedly is, the situation there is nevertheless not so different from what we have in *Hamlet.* In each play deceit seems to triumph, the normal ways in which murder may be denounced are frustrated. Where Hamlet must say nothing, the opponents of evil in the Roman play lose tongues and hands, the symbols and "adjuncts" of expression. In each playasmile hides villainy, and in each, murder speaks at last with most miraculous organ.

To read *Pericles, Measurefor Measure, The Merchant of Venice* and *Titus Andronicus* is to find that whenever Shakespeare deals with the ele ments which for him are present in the story of *Hamlet,* he reacts in the same way, stressing the contrast between inside and outside, linking apparent health with hidden corruption, the seeming angelic with the actual diabolic. Centuries earlier, *The Proverbs of Alfred* had observed:

> Mony appel is bryht with-ute
> And Bitter with-inne.

The early Middle English Lambeth Homily declares that the hypocrite is 'al swais an eppel iheoweth. he bith with-uten feire and frakel with-innen""like arosy apple, fair without and rotten within." And the tradition went on into Shakespeare's own day.

In this tradition Claudius can be viewed in the right perspective, not as an unfortunate mixture of good and bad qualities, but as an example of how utter corruption can pass itself off as good, an example who makes the words of Antonio in *Twelfth*

Night ring true: .

> Virtue is beauty; but the beauteous evil Are empty trunks o'erftourish'd
> by the devil.
> *[Twelfth Night,* m. iv. 369-70]

If anyone object today that to take Claudius thus is to reduce him from acredible human being, amixture of good and bad in tragedy, to an impossible puppet, avillain who fits nothing but melodrama, only one reply can be given. Shakespeare's age believed that people of this sort actually existed, and that tragedywas often the outcome of their success in deception. And if it be objected further that this is thrusting Shakespeare back into his age, the reply is that he wrote for that age, and that his plays could have succeeded in the theatre only if they had been intelligible to his contemporaries, offering them situations and ideas which were familiar to the early seventeenth century. For Shakespeare's contemporaries, Claudius as ahypocrite in their sense of the word was no caricature. To say that one could smile and be avillain was to express a deep truth which goes right into the nature of things in aworld which has suffered afall; and for the renaissance that was the world of all who came after Adam. To read into Hamlet's words nothing more than apicturesque statement that Claudius is not to be trusted would be to blind ourselves to agreat part of Shakespeare's vision of this particular battle between good and evil as involved in the continual struggle of Satan to assert himself. Only when we are prepared to consider Claudius as an overwhelmingly evil person, whose seeming is the opposite of his being, are we able to appreciate how his creator has organized the elements of the stOlY of the Prince of Denmark into ashape which awakens an understanding of what was to the renaissance mind atrue comment on the place of evil in the world. (pp. 68-73)

Bertram Joseph, "'- *The King, the King's to Blame_" in his* Conscience and the King: A Study of "Hamlet," *Ghatto and Windus,* 1953, *pp. 50-73.*

Critical Essay #15

[Heilbrun contends that, contrary to the predominant critical opinion, Gertrude is not aweak character who lacks "depth and vigorous intelligence." The critic then evaluates Gertrude's lines in Hamlet to demonstrate that while the queen is not "profound." she is certainly never "silly. " The character's actions in fact reveal her to be clear-headed and courageous, especially during the closet scene in Act III, scene iv when, after Hamlet accuses her of lust, she accepts hisjudgment and admits her sin. Heilbrun also provides an Elizabethan df!finition of the tenn "adultery," asserting that the word does not necessarily imply that Claudius and Gertrude had an affair while King Hamlet was alive, rather it suggests that their marriage rfdlects an unchaste sexual relationship. The critic concludes that while Gertrude is indeed lustful, she is also "intelligent, penetrating, and gifted with aremarkable talentfor concise and pithy speech. " For acritical reaction to Heilbrun's interpretation of the queen, see the excerpt below by Baldwin Maxwell. For further commentary on Gertrude's character, see the excerpts by Arthur Kirsch, Kenneth Muir, Edgar Johnson, and Ernest Jones.]

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 Demnark, but the fact of her hasty and, to the Elizabethans, incestuous marriage, the whole question of her "falling off", occupies aposition of barely secondary importance in the mind of her son, and of the Ghost. Indeed, Freud and Jones see her [see excerpt in section on Hamlet's character], the object of Hamlet's Oedipus complex. as central to the motivation of the play. But the critics, with no exception that I have been able to find, have accepted Hamlet's word "frailty" as applying to her whole personality, and have seen in her not one weak ness, or passion in the Elizabethan sense, but acharacter of which weakness and lack of depth and

vigorous intelligence are the entire explanation. Of her can it truly De said that carrying the "stamp of one defect", she did "in the general censure take corruption from that particular fault" [I. iv. 35-6].

The critics are agreed that Gertrude was not aparty to the late King's murder and indeed knew nothing of it; apoint which on the clear evidence of the play, is indisputable. They have also dis cussed whether or not Gertrude, guilty of more than an "o'er-hasty marriage" [II. ii. 57], had committed adultery with Claudius before her husband's death. I will return to this point later on. Beyond discussing these two points, those critics who have dealt specifically with the Queen have traditionally seen her as well-meaning but shallow and feminine, in the pejorative sense of the word: incapable of any sustained rational process, superficial and flighty. It is this tradition which acloser reading of the play will show to be erroneous.

Professor [AC.] Bradley describes the traditional Gertrude thus [in his *Shakespearean Tragedy]:*

The Queen was not abad-hearted woman, not at all the woman to think little of murder. But she had asoft animal nature and was very dull and very shallow. She loved to be happy, like asheep 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 Opheliaand making everything comfortable. . . . The belief at the bottom of her heart was that the world is aplace constructed simply that people may be happy in it in agood-humored sensual fashion.

Later on, Bradley says of her that when affliction comes to her "the good in her nature struggles to the surface through the heavy mass of sloth."

[Harley] Granville-Barker is not quite so extreme. Shakespeare, he says [in his *Prfifaces to Shakespeare],* gives us in Gertrude the woman who does not mature, who clings to her youth and all that belongs to it, whose charm will not change but at last

fade and wither: apretty creature, as we see her, desperately refusing to grow old. . . . She is drawn for us with unemphatic strokes, and she has but apassive part in the play's action. She moves throughout in Claudius' shadow: he holds her as he won her, by the witch craft of his wit.

Elsewhere Granville-Barker says "Gertrude who will certainly never see forty-five again, might better be 'old'. (That is, portrayed by an older, mature actress.) But that would make her relations with Claudius-and *their* likelihood is vital to the playquite incredible." Granville-Barker is saying here that awoman about forty-five years of age cannot feel any sexual passion nor arouse it. This is one of the mistakes which lie at the heart of the misunderstanding about Gertrude.

Professor [John] Dover Wilson sees Gertrude as more forceful than either of these two critics will admit, but even he finds the Ghost's unwillingness to shock her with knowledge of his murder to be one of the basic motivations of the play, and he says of her "Gertrude is always hoping for the best" *[What Happens in Hamlet].*

Now whether Claudius won Gertrude before or after her husband's death, it was certainly not, as Granville-Barker implies, with "the witchcraft of his wit" alone. Granville-Barker would have us believe that Claudius won her simply by the force of his persuasive tongue. "It is plain", he writes, that the Queen "does little except echo his [Claudius'] wishes; sometimes-as in the welcome to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern-she repeats his very words," though Wilson must admit later that Gertrude does not tell Claudius everything. Without dwelling here on the psychology of the Ghost, or the gI;eater 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 acelestial bed and prey on garbage" [I. v. 55-7]. "Lust"-in awoman offorty-five or more-is the key word here. Bradley, Granville-Barker, and to alesser extent Professor Dover Wilson, misunderstand Gertrude largely because they are unable to see lust, the desire for sexual relations, as the passion, in the Elizabethan sense of the word, the flaw, the weakness which drives Gertrude to an incestuous marriage, appals her son,

and keeps him from the throne. Unable to explain her marriage to Claudius as the act of any but aweak-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 atalent 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, apassion of whose force and dangers the Elizabethans were aware. . . . Claudius echoes her with awell-reasoned argument against grief which was, in its philosophy if not in its language, apiece 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 adull 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 mar riage.
> [II. ii. 56-7]

This statement is concise, remarkably to the point, and not alittle courageous. It is not the statement of adull, 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

aphrase more applicable to Polonius. When this gentleman, in no way deterred from his loquacity, after purveying the startling news that he has adaughter, begins to read aletter, 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 aword of kindness to Ophelia. It is ahumane gesture, for she is unwill ing to leave Ophelia, the unhappy tool of the King and Polonius, without some kindly and intelligent appreciation of her help:

> And for your part. Ophelia, I do wish That your good beauties be the happy cause
> Of Hamlet's wildness. So shall I hope your
> virtues Will bring him to his wonted way again, To both your honors.
> [III. i. 37-41]

It is difficult to see in this speech, as Bradleyapparently does, the gushing shallow wish of asentimental 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 aplace in the court of Denmark. She does not speak again until Hamlet asks her how she likes the play. "Thelady doth protest too much, methinks" [III. ii. 230] is her immortal comment on the player queen. The scene gives her four more words: when Claudius leaps to his feet, she asks "How fares my Lord?" [III. ii. 267].

I will for the moment pass over the scene in the Queen's closet, to follow her quickly through the remainder of the play. After the closet scene, the Queen comes to speak to Claudius. She tells him, as Hamlet has asked her to, that he, Hamlet, is mad, and has killed Polonius. She adds, however, that he now weeps for what he has done. She does not wish Claudius to know what she now knows, how wild and fearsome Hamlet has become. Later, she does not wish to see Ophelia, but hearing how distracted she is,

consents. When Laertes bursts in ready to attack Claudius, she immediately steps between Claudius and Laertes to protect the King, and tells Laertes it is not Claudius who has killed his father. Laertes will of course soon learn this, but it is Gertrude who manages to tell him before he can do any meaningless damage. She leaves Laertes and the King together, and then returns to tell Laertes that his sister is drowned. She gives her news directly, realizing that suspense will increase the pain of it, but this is the one time in the play when her usual pointed conciseness would be the mark neither of intelligence nor kindness, and so, gently, and at some length, she tells Laertes of his sister's death, giving him time to recover from the shock of grief, and to absorb the meaning of her words. At Ophelia's funeral the Queen scatters flowers over the grave:

> Sweets to the sweet; farewell!
> I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife.
> I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
> And not t' have strew'd thy grave.
> [V. i. 243-46]

She is the only one present decently mourning the death of someone young, and not heated in the fire of some personal passion.

At the match between Hamlet and Laertes, the Queen believes that Hamlet is out of training, but glad to see him at some sport, she gives him her handkerchief to wipe his brow, and drinks to his success. The drink is poisoned and she dies. But before she dies she does not waste time on vituperation; she warns Hamlet that the drink is poisoned to prevent his drinking it. They are her last words. Those critics who have thought her stupid admire her death; they call it uncharacteristic.

In Act III, when Hamlet goes to his mother in her closet his nerves are pitched at the very height of tension; he is on the edge of hysteria. The possibili ty 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 aking" [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:

> a Shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,
> If thou canst mutine in amatron's bones,
> To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
> And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame
> When the compulsive ardor gives the charge, Since frost itself as actively doth burn, And reason panders will.
> [III. iv. 81-8]

This is not only alust, but alust 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:

> a 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 "asoft 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 alife of sexual experience, her brain is soft or her wit unperceptive.

Some critics, having accepted Gertrude as aweak and vacillating woman, see no reason to suppose that she did not fall victim to Claudius' charms before the death of her husband and commit adultery with him. These critics, Professor Bradley among them, claim that the elder Hamlet clearly tells his son that Gertrude has committed adultery with Claudius in the speech beginning "Aythat incestuous, that adulterate beast" [I. v. 41ft'.] Professor Dover Wilson presents the argument:

Is the Ghost speaking here of the o'erhasty marriage of Clauilius and Gertrude? Assuredly not. His "certain term" is drawing rapidly to an end, and he is already be ginning to "scent the morning air." Hamlet knew of the marriage, and his whole soul was filled with nauseaat the thought of the speedy hasting to "incestuous sheets." Why then should the Ghost waste precious moments in telling Hamlet what he was fully cognisant of before? . . . Moreover, though the word "incestuous" was applicable to the marriage, the rest of the passage is entirely inapplicable to it. Expressions like "witchcraft", "traitorous gifts", "seduce", "shameful lust", and "seeming virtuous" may be noted in passing. But the rest of the quotation leaves no doubt upon the matter. . . .

Professor Dover Wilson and other critics have accepted the Ghost's word "adulterate" in its modern meaning. The Elizabethan word "adultery", however, was not restricted to its modern meaning, but was used to define any sexual relationship which could be called unchaste, including of course an incestuous one. Certainly the elder Hamlet considered the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude to be unchaste and unseemly, and while his use of the word "adulterate". indicates his very strong feelings about the marriage, it would not to an Elizabethan audience necessarily mean that he believed Gertrude to have been false to him before his death. It is important to notice, too, that the Ghost does not apply the term "adulterate" to Gertrude, and he may well have considered the term ajust 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 aconclusion) that Gertrude was unfaithful to him while he lived. It is quite proba ble that the elder Hamlet still considered himself married to Gertrude, and he is moreover revolted that her lust for him ("why she would hang on him as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on" [I. ii. 143-44]) should have so easily transferred itself to another. This is why he uses the expressions "seduce", "shameful lust", and others. Professor Dover Wilson has himself said "Hamlet knew of the marriage, and his whole soul was filled with nauseaat the thought of the speedy hasting to incestuous sheets"; the soul of the elder Hamlet was undoubtedly filled with nauseatoo, 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 be come king, it was necessary to marry her. The elder Hamlet, in marrying Gertrude, ousted Claudius from

the throne. Shakespeare retained the shell of this in his play. When she no longer has ahusband, 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. 65J. 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 aremarkable talent for concise and pithy speech. In all the play, the person whose language hers most closely resembles is Horatio. "Sweets to the sweet," she has said at Ophelia's grave [V. 1. 243J. "Good night sweet prince", Horatio says at the end [V. ii. 359J. They are neither of them dull, or shallow, or slothful, though one of them is passion's slave. (pp. 201-06)

Carolyn Heilbrun, "The Character of Hamlet's Mother, " in Shakespeare Quarterly, *VoL VII, No.2, Spring,* 1957, *pp. 201-06.*

Critical Essay #16

[Maxwell takes exception to Carolyn Heilbrun_ reading ofGertrude as astrong and intelligent character (see excerpt above) and provides ascene-by-scene analysis of the queen to prove that she is highly dependent on, and manipulated by, Claudius. The critic maintains that because Gertrude has generally fewer lines than the other characters with whom she interacts, principally Claudius and Hamlet, she is at best aminor force in the play. Maxwell also compares the queen to her counterpart in the Belliforest version of Hamlet, *one of the chiif sources for Shakespeare's tragedy. Unlike Shakespeare's queen, the critic observes, the Gertrude ofthe Belliforest account is "neither weak nor neutral. "Maxwell then presents examples of the queen in efectuality; when Gertrude describes her marriage as merely "o'er-hasty, " she does not recognize the union as adulterous or incestuous because she has been duped by Claudius's chann to accept it as normal; and, during the closet scene when she asks Hamlet 'What shall I do?" (Ill iv. 180), shefurther demonstrates her lack ofinitiative because she needs to depend on others for guidance. Perhaps the most startling evidence of Gertrude's pronounced dependence, the critic continues, is that she submissively remains with Claudius after Hamlet has told her of the king's crimes. Maxwell further contends that Gertrude_jirst independent act occurs when she dtdies Claudius and drinks from the poisoned cup, but "her crossing him means her death" For further commentary on Gertrude's character, see the excerpts by Arthur Kirsch, Kenneth Muir, 'Edgar Johnson, and Ernest Jones.]*

In an article entitled "The Character of Hamlet's Mother" [see excerpt above], Miss Carolyn Heilbrun expressed strong disagreement with what had been the generally accepted estimate of Queen Gertrude. Seemingly unaware of the essay by Pr0 fessor [John W.) Draper [in his *The Hamlet of Shakespeare_ Audience),* the Queen's most ardent defender, Miss Heilbrun wrote that "critics, with no exception that I have been able to find, have accepted Hamlet's word 'frailty' as applying to [Gertrude's) whole personality. and have seen in her. . . acharacter of which weakness and lack of depth and rigorous intelligence are the entire explanation." She, as had Professor Draper.

rejected almost *in toto* the views of such critics as A C. Bradley, Miss Agnes Mackenzie, H. GranvilleBarker, and others who had declared the Queen "weak", "neutral". or "little more than apuppet".

Professor Draper, who thought Gertrude innocent of adultery prior to King Hamlet's death, not only denied her weakness but excused her hasty and incestuous marriage as politically necessary because of anatlonal crisis, "amarriage more of convenience than of love." To him the Queen appeared "dignified. gracious. and resourceful", one who "as awife, as amother, as aqueen. . . seems to approximate, if not the Elizabethan ideal, at least the Elizabethan norm". She is, he insisted, "no slave to lust." It is only on this last point that Miss Heilbrun and Professor Draper markedly disagreed. Although persuaded that Gertrude was innocent of adultery prior to the elder Hamlet's death, Miss Heilbrun argued that her marriage to Claudius was brought about not by aneed to settle anational crisis, not by the witchcraft of Claudius' wit, but by lust alone, "the need of sexual passion" in her widowhood. Apart from this passion, the Queen is, Miss Heilbrun believed, a"strongminded, intelligent, succinct, and. . . sensible woman", who is, except for her description of Ophelia's death, "concise and pithy in speech, with atalent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes."

This view of the Queen's character is at such variance with that previously current that one may wish to reexamine her appearances in the play, scene by scene, for light upon the impression Shakespeare sought to create. Little time is needed to do so, for however important the part of the Queen in *the story* of Hamlet, her role in *the play* is definitely subordinate. She appears in ten of the play's twenty scenes, but in those ten scenes she speaks fewer lines than does Ophelia, who appears in only five; and, unlike Ophelia, the Queen is never the central or dominant figure on the stage. She speaks but one brief aside and never the concluding line of ascene. To be sure, agifted actress may, by clever stage business and agracious manner, provide for the role an illusion of importance; but this importance is not supported by the lines she speaks and presumably was not purposed by Shakespeare.

Practically all recent critics have agreed that Gertrude was not only innocent of complicity in the murder of her first husband but wholly unaware ofit. That she was, however, guilty of an "o'er hasty [second] marriage" [II. ii. 57], she herselftestifies. Nor is it permissible to see that marriage as other than incestuous. The one sin of which the Queen has been accused but of which her guilt may be debatable is that she had been Claudius' mistress while the elder Hamlet was alive.

When in I. ii, the Queen appears on stage for the first time, the audience has heard nothing whatsoever about her. It is prejudiced neither in her favor nor against her. She doubtless enters on the arm of King Claudius, who directs his ingratiating smile towards her during part of the remarkable speech with which the scene opens and from which we learn that he, having shortly before lost abrother, has recently taken to wife his brother's widow. Incest, to be sure-ahorrible sin in the eyes of both church and state. But with such consummate skill has the King's speech been phrased that all on the crowded stage-or at least all but oneshow neither shock nor disapproval. As aresult the audience may naturally assume that the gener al satisfaction should outweigh the displeasure of one individual, and, in the absence of other details, accept the unusual marriage-at least for the time being-as an act which may well be shown to be both wise and-under the circumstancespermissible.

After the King has explained the present situation and expressed "For all, our thanks" [I. ii. 16], the Queen, apart perhaps from asmile, offers no word of thanks for herself. She remains silent as the King instructs the departing ambassadors and questions Laertes and Polonius on the former's desire to return to France. Gertrude is the last to speak. Upon Hamlet's bitter punning reply to the King,

> Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun,

[I. ii. 67] the Queen makes her first speech-six lines, one of the three longest she speaks in the entire play. She urges Hamlet to "look like afriend on Denmark", to cease mourning for his father since

Thou know'st 'tis common. All that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.
[I. ii. 69, 72-3]

That she misunderstands Hamlet's reply to her cliche, "Ay madam, it is common", is shown by her then asking

If it be,
Why seems it so particular with thee?

[I. ii. 74-5] indicative not only that she has herself ceased to mourn her late husband's death but as well that she completely fails to understand her son. After Hamlet's answer, the King, his composure recovered, quickly speaks thirty-one lines, ending with the wish that Hamlet remain at Elsinore. This wish the Queen now seconds in her third and last speech of the scene:

Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet.
I pray thee stay with us, go not to Witten berg.
[I. ii. 118-19]

Nine lines later all exit save Hamlet.

Such is the Queen's part on her first appearance. She speaks slightly over nine lines in her three speeches-nine lines to the King's ninety-four. Her speeches are short but hardly seem more "concise and pithy" than speech in dramatic verse normally is. Nor do they, composed as they are of acliche, amisunderstanding, and an echo, encourage the view that she is a"resourceful", "strong-minded" woman, "with atalent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes". Perhaps, too, her obedient rising at the King's "Madam, come", suggests her domination by him. Such asuggestion is supported by her leaving the stage in three later scenes upon similar words from the King ("Come, Gertrude", IV. i; "Let's follow, Gertrude", IV. vii; "Sweet Gertrude, leave us", III. i) and by her only once speaking as she makes her

exit.

Such is our introduction to Queen Gertrude. So much do we know about her when Hamlet later in the scene, in his first soliloquy, expresses his disgust that his mother

> A little month, or ere those shoes were old With which she followed my poor father's body
> Like Niobe, all tears, why she, even sheaGod, abeast that wants discourse of rea son
> Would have mourned longer-married with mine uncle,
> My father's brother. . . . a, most wicked speed, to post
> With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
> [I. ii. 147-57]

That unusual marri_e, upon which we had earlier in the scene passeano verdict, we now begin to question. But Hamlet is only one; the court as awhole had seemed neither to disapprove of the marriage nor to condemn its haste. Yet Hamlet's view, as we are soon to learn, is not peculiar to him, does not spring from thwarted ambition or from an excess of filial affection for his mother. Before we again see Queen Gertrude we are to hear another witness, one eminently qualified to judge her.

Three scenes later the Ghost of the dead king is to inform Hamlet that his uncle,

> . . . that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
> With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts
> 0 wicked wit and gifts, that have the power So to seducel-won to his shameful lust The will of my most seeming-virtuous
> queen. . . . But virtue, as it never will be moved, Though lewdness court it in the shape of heaven,
> So lust, though to aradiant anj:(ellinked, Will sate itself in a celestial beef
> And prey on garbage.
> [I. v. 41-57]

Surely we are not now likely to attribute Gertrude's quietness during her earlier appearance either to remorse for her o'erhasty marriage or to an aware ness that her former husband was to her present as "Hyperion to asatyr" [I. ii. 140].

But, one may ask, is the Ghost awholly disinterest ed witness? Are we to accept everything he relates?

Does he really know whereof he speaks? To the accuracy of his knowledge of the present and the future, I must return later, but I think it can hardly be contested that we are to assume that he has, from his vantage point beyond the grave, learned specifically all that concerned his murder. He was asleep when the poison was poured into his ear, and the dumb-show of the play-within-the-play though that at best is only Hamlet's interpretation of what the Ghost had revealed-does not show him as awakening before he died. Yet, be it noted, the Ghost reveals not only the identity of the mur derer and the instant effect which the poison had upon him but, even more remarkable, the very poison used-the "juice of cursed hebona" [I. v. 62]. Further, the King's reaction to the play-within-theplay confirms the Ghost's account of the murder in every detail. Must we not assume, therefore, that every other revelation of the past which the Ghost gives is equally accurate: that Claudius,

> With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts
> . . . won to his shameful lust The will of [theJ most seeming-virtuous
> queen.
> [I. v. 42-6]

Miss Heilbrun, who thinks Gertrude had not been Claudius' mistress, denies that Claudius had won her by the witchcraft of his wit. The real reason Gertrude had entered upon her hasty second mar riage, Miss Heilbrun claimed, was given by the Ghost later in the same speech:

> But virtue, as it never will be moved, Though lewdness court it in the
> shape of heaven,

So lust, though to aradiant angel linked, Will sate itself in acelestial bed
And prey on garbage.
[I. v. 53-7]

But if we accept as true one part of the Ghost's speech, must we not accept the other also? And do not the last three lines quoted above suggest aviolation of the marriage vows? That they were intended to do so is evidenced by the Ghost's having protested in the same speech, in lines immediately preceding, that his

. . . love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the
vow
I made to her in marriage;
[I. v. 48-50]

and that Hamlet understood the Ghost's words as indicating Gertrude's adultery is shown by his charging her in the Closet Scene with

Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modes ty,
. . . makes marriage vows As false as dicers' oaths.
[III. iv. 40-5]

So much, then, do we learn of Gertrude in Act I. On these lines must be based the original impression Shakespeare wished to give us. It is interesting and, I suspect, si,gnificant that avery large part of what we have so tar learned of Gertrude and Clau dius represents modification or elaboration by

Shakespeare of what is found in Belleforest's account. There, of course, Gertrude is neither weak nor neutral. Although she is not said to have par ticipated in planning the murder of her husband, she was an accomplice after the murder, for she did not deny her lover's claim that it was in defence of her that he had slain his brother. Where,

asked Belleforest, would one find "amore wicked and bold woman?" Such aquestion would never be asked by one writing of the Gertrude of the play. Her character Shakespeare has decidedly softened, even though in the play she appears guilty on every count cited by Belleforest except that of _ving support to afalse account of her husband's slaying. Shakespeare has softened her character not only by making her ignorant of the murder of her husband but by elaborating, in away most effective upon the stage, that artful craft of Claudius as reported in Belleforest's account. There the murderer "covered his boldnesse and wicked practise with so great subtiltie and policie, and under the vaile of meere simplicitie . . . that his ,sinne found excuse among the common people, and of the nobili tie was esteemed for justice". Claudius' persuasive cunning is further suggested by Belleforest's observing that Gertrude, "as soone as she once gave eare to [her husband's brother], forgot both the ranke she helde . . . and the dutie of an honest wife". To portray this smooth persuasiveness and subtle craft the dramatist introduced abrilliant dramatic touch for which there is no suggestion in Belleforest-the ingratiating smiling which leads Hamlet to declare Claudius a"smiling damned villain", and to cry out:

> My tables-meet it is I set it down
> That one may smile. and smile. and be a
> villain.
> At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.
> [I. v. 106-09]

So much for Act 1. The Queen next appears in II. ii. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been summoned to spy upon Hamlet, and Gertrude's first two speeches merely echo in fewer words the welcome given them by the King. With one exception her five remaining speeches in this scene are of one line or less, most of them designed to break and give asemblance of dialogue to Polonius' artful narration. The one exception is aspeech of two lines in reply to the King's reporting to her that Polonius claims to have found

> The head and source of all your son's dis temper.
> [II. ii. 55]

The Queen replies:

> I doubt it is no other but the main,
> His father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage.
> [II. ii. 56-7]

This speecJ.1; which some critics (mistakenly, I think) have seen as evidence that the Queen's conscience is already troubled, Miss Heilbrun pronounced "concise, remarkably to the point, and not alittle courageous." One could the more readily agree with her had Gertrude omitted the word "o'erhasty". When the King first announced his marriage to his brother's widow, he passed quickly on to important affairs of state, but since then we have heard the incestuous nature of that marriage emphasized by both Hamlet and the Ghost. Are we to assume from her mentioning only the hastiness of their marriage-acensurable indiscretion perhaps but no mortal sin-that Gertrude failed to realize that her marriage to Claudius, no matter when performed, must bear the graver stain of incest? As she is at the time alone with the King, I think we must so assume. She hardly reveals here "atalent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes". But how can she have been so blind to the true nature of her marriage? The only explanation would seem to be that she is blinded by the traitorous gifts of Claudius, by the witchcraft of his wit. She thinks as he directs, acts as he wishes.

The next scene in which the Queen appears is III. ii-the play scene. Here she is on stage for 187 lines and speaks atotal of two and one half lines.

When to her first speech, "Come hither, my dear Hamlet, sit by me" [III. ii. 108], Hamlet replies that he prefers to sit by Ophelia, the Queen is silent until 12 lines later, when, to emphasize the purport of such lines as "None wed the second but who killed the first", Hamlet asks, "Madam, how like you this play?" She answers simply, "The

lady doth protest too much, methinks" [III. ii. 180; 22930]-aspeech which need not suggest stupidity, for she, unlike us, has not heard the ghost and knows not what is in Hamlet's mind; but unless we are to think of her as an artful villainess indeed, the simplicity of her reply is enough to urge her complete innocence of any participation in the murder. She now follows the play intently, saying nothing more until, when the frightened King rises, she anxiously enquires "How fares my lord?" [III. ii. 267] In this scene then, aside from the first clear indication that Gertrude has been no accomplice in the murder, we see in her just what we see in her in other scenes-her love for her son, her devoted concern for Claudius, and her remarkable quietness, with long periods of silence.

It is when she next appears, in III. iv-the so-called Closet Scene-that the Queen has her biggest part. The scene opens with Polonius' hiding himself behind the arras that he may overhear the interview between mother and son-an interview in which the Queen has promised to "be round with him"

[III. iv. 5] in the hope of discovering the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior. The scheme had been conceived by Polonius and suggested to Claudius in II. ii, when Gertrude was not on stage. We do not witness the King's persuading the Queen to assist in this eavesdropping upon her son, but that she had received specific instructions on how the interview should be conducted is brought out in her conversation with Polonius before Hamlet enters:

> *Polonius:* 'A will come straight. Look youlay home to him.
> Tell him his pranks have been too broad to bear with,
> And that your grace hath screened and stood between
> Much heat and him. I'll silence me even here. Pray you be round with
> him. . . . *Queen:* I'll warrant you; fear me not.
> [III. iv. 1-6]

The Queen had consented to these "lawful espials", as she had consented earlier when Opheliahad been used as adecoy, probably both because she is hopeful that such

ascheme may indeed unearth the secret of Hamlet's strange behavior and because the stronger Claudius is able always to dominate her will and persuade her to serve his purpose. That this second explanation is sound is, I believe, shown by adeparture which Shakespeare here makes from the account of the Closet Scene as related by Belleforest. In Belleforest the King and his councillor, without taking the Queen into their confidence, arrange for the councillor to secrete himself where he may overhear mother and son; the Queen not only has no part in planning the interview, but does not suspect the presence of the eavesdropper until he is discovered by the crafty and suspicious Hamlet's beating his arms upon the hangings. By this change in the Queen's part from that of an unwitting participant to that of an active accomplice Shakespeare seems to emphasize the extent to which Claudius dominates her and uses her as his tool.

The Queen begins the closet interview with bluster and some confidence. She has apparently been well briefed as to what she shall say. But when Hamlet proves recalcitrant, when in an ugly mood he assumes the offensive and by so doing throws her out of the part she has been coached to play, she is for abrief moment bold and stubborn. "What have I done?"_ she cries:

> What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue
> In noise so rude against me?
> [III. iv. 39-40]

But as Hamlet becomes more specific in his charges, Gertrude has neither the strength nor the inclination to bluster it further. She appears, indeed, stricken in conscience:

> 0 Hamlet, speak no more,
> Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul, And there I see such black and grained spots
> As will not leave their tinct.
> [III. iv. 88-91]
> And again,

> 0 Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.
> [III. iv. 156]

Although in this scene the Queen has more speeches and more lines than she has in any other scene, she is throughout overshadowed by Hamlet. In the same number of speeches he speaks four times as many lines as does she. Of her twenty-four speeches, thirteen-more than half-are one line or less, and four others are less than two lines.

Some of her speeches invite comment. Miss Mackenzie has noted that Gertrude sees her penitence not as the consequence of her own actions but rather as aresult of Hamlet's harsh words to her:

> 0 Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain. '
> [III. iv. 156]

Second, it is important to note that the question which she, contrite, puzzled, and helpless, addresses to Hamlet as he prepares to leave, "What shall I do?" [III. iv. 180], illustrates the lack of ini tiative and independence which mark her throughout. Too weak to determine any procedure for herself, she must rely upon others for guidance in every action.

More puzzling is the Queen's last speech in the scene-areply to Hamlet's

> I must to England, you know that?
> *Ger.* Alack,
> I had forgot. 'Tis so concluded on.
> [III. iv. 200-01]

No one has ever questioned G_rtrude's devotion to her son, although in urging him earlier to "stay with us, ff,O not to Wittenberg" [I. ii. 119], she may have spoKen the instructions of Claudius as well as her motherly affection. It is impossible that by "I had forgot" she could have meant other than that the many unhappy events of the

evening had crowded out of her mind the realization that Hamlet was to be sent to England. But the King's decision that he be sent away she had apparently accepted without protest as one accustomed to accepting without question what others decide for her.

In Belleforest's account the Queen, although she never appears after the Closet Scene, is definitely and actively an ally of her son, working in his absence to facilitate his revenge. In Shakespeare, although she protests to Hamlet:

> Be thou assured, if words be made of breath, And breath of life, I have no life to breathe What thou hast said to me
> [III. iv. 197-99]

and although she keeps her promise, the Queen utters not one word in condemnation of the crimes of Claudius which Hamlet has revealed to her, and indeed in the very next scene greets him as "mine own lord" [IV. i. 5]. Never is there an indication in the later scenes that her attitude toward Claudius or her relations with him have been altered by what Hamlet has told her. True it is that immediately following the Closet Scene she apparently lies to the King in an effort to protect her son. Although Hamlet has confessed to her that he is "not in mad7 ness, But mad in craft", she assures the King that Hamlet is

> Mad as the sea and wind when both con tend
> Which is the mightier. In his lawless fit, Behind the arras hearing something stir, Whips out his rapier, cries 'A rat, arat!' And in this brainish apprehension kills The unseen good old man.
> [IV. i. 7-12]

And she reports that Hamlet has gone

> To draw apart the body he hath killed; O'er whom his very madness, like some ore

> Among amineral of metals base, Shows itself pure, 'A weeps for what is done.
> [IV. i. 24-7]

One need have little hesitation in concluding that Gertrude is here lying in an effort to render Hamlet's act less responsible and therefore more pardonable. The Queen has not seen Hamlet since the audience witnessed their parting, and Hamlet was surely not weeping then. But though the Queen lies to help her son, it is important to add in any assay of her character that it was not upon her own initiative that she does so. Here no more than earlier is she acting independently. Incapable of herself determining any course of action, she is merely following the course which Hamlet had suggested to her. To her helpless "What shall I do?" Hamlet had replied:

> Not this, by no means, that I bid you do: Let the bloat King. . .
> Make you to ravel all this matter out, That I essentially am not in madness, But mad in craft. 'Twere good you let him
> know,
> For who that's but aqueen, fair, sober, wise, Would from apaddock, from abat, agib, Such dear concernings hide? Who would do so?
> No, in despite of sense and secrecy, Unpeg the basket on the house's top,
> Let the birds fly, and like the famous ape, To try conclusions, in the basket creep And break your own neck down.
> [ill. iv. 180-96]

Such is Hamlet's sarcastic direction in answer to the Queen's uncertain "What shall I do?" She must decide upon some course immediately, for the King is impatiently awaiting areport of the interview. Accordingly she follows Hamlet's direction; she lies to keep his secret, perhaps because matemallove demands that she protect him, but also because, accustomed to having others make all important decisions for her, she is incapable of substituting for Hamlet's direction any procedure of her own.

In Belleforest, as has been said, the Queen never appears after the account of the interview in her closet. Although we learn later that she had kept her promise to assist her son in his revenge upon her second husband by fashioning, during her son's absence in England, the means of his revenge, we are told nothing of her later life-how she conducted herself in her relations with the King or how she died. In Shakespeare's play, however, she figures in five later scenes-exactly half of the total number in which she appears. Her part in these scenes, having no basis in the older accounts, must have been added either by Shakespeare or by the author of an earlier lost play. The first of these scenes is that just mentioned-that in which she reports to the King. In only one of them, IV. v, her next appearance, does she reveal any re morse or any sense of guilt; and before the end of that scene her sense of guilt seems completely erased by adetermination to follow the easier way, to accept the *status quo,* to continue away of life she had found pleasant.

IV. v opens with her refusal to admit the mad Opheliato her presence-arefusal due perhaps to acharacteristic desire to escape any distressing situation' or perhaps to her already being burdened with grief and remorse. When Opheliaenters, Gertrude is sympathetic but quite inarticulate. Her three speeches to Opheliaare-in full:

1. How now, Ophelia?
2. Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?
3. Nay, but Ophelia

[IV. v. 22, 27, 341

Then, upon the King's welcome entry, with "Alas, look here, my lord" [IV. v. 37], the Queen turns the unpleasant situation over to him and retires into silence until after Opheliahas departed. Her unwillingness to see Opheliaand her inability to express any words of comfort or sympathy may, as I have said, be due in part to her being, at the moment, too heavily oppressed by her own griefs and her own sense of guilt. As Opheliaenters, Gertrude offers in an aside the only admission of guilt she makes after the Closet Scene:

To my sick soul (as sin's true nature is)
Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss.
So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
It spills itself in fearing to be split.
[IV. v. 17-20]

Before the end of the scene, however, the Queen is to cxy out upon Laertes' mob threatening the King:

How cheerfully on the false trail they cry!
0, this is counter, you false Danish dogs!
[IV. v. 110-11]

and, in order to save Claudius, is first to seize Laertes' arm and then to assure him that it was not Claudius who had caused the death of his father. Having, perhaps unconsciously, directed Laertes' hatreatowards Hamlet, she offers no fuller explanation and is silent for the remaining ninety lines of the scene. Her extended silence here is certainly not indicative of remorse for her earlier acts; it has been characteristic of her throughout the play. In this scene she reveals perhaps, as she reveals nowhere else in the play, the sensual side of her love for Claudius. Before the scene is half over her sense of guilt has been crowded out of her mind. She shows no repentance. Unlike the Queen in Belleforest or the Queen in the pirated first quarto, she has not aligned herself on the side of her son. Now that he has gone, she finds it easier simply to continue the life she had led before he had made his dreadful revelation. Had Hamlet remained in Denmark, had he been at hand to remind her of her weakness and to answer whenever necesscuy her question "What shall I do?" it is possible that her sense of guilt might have persisted, that she might even have repented and changed her way of life. But without initiative and independence, she can in Hamlet's absence only drift with the current.

Only twice, then, does Gertrude reveal the least remorse-in the latter part of the Closet Scene and in the single aside as she awaits the entrance of the mad Ophelia. From that

time on, as earlier in the play, her actions and speeches evince no prick of conscience although the Ghost, in his instructions to Hamlet in I. v, had implied that she was to suffer the consequence of her sins. " . . . Howsomever thou pursues this act", the Ghost had told his son,

> Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul con trive
> Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven
> And to those thorns that in her bosomlodge
> To prick and sting her. . . .
> [I. v. 85-8]

The Ghost is, as I have noted, most accurately informed of the past. That ghosts were often well informed of the future is indicated by Horatio's beseeching the Ghost to speak

> If thou art privy to thy country's fate, Which happily foreknowing may avoid.
> II. i. 133-34]

But that ghosts might be ignorant of the future and even uncomprehending of the present is shown in *The Spanish Tragedy* by the repeated questioning by the Ghost of Andreaas he watches the play unfold. The Ghost of King Hamlet clearly expects his son to sweep to aswift revenge; he does not understand the delay; nor surely did he expect such complete catastrophe to engulf the entire royal family. In spite of his exact knowledge of the past, therefore, it would appear that the Ghost's knowledge of the immediate present and of the future was far too limited to warrant our acceptance as testimony of Gertrude's remorse his mention of

> . . . those thorns that in her bosom lodge
> To prick and sting her. . . .
> [I. v. 87-8]

Indeed, if one may, without confusing life and art, delve into the past of characters in adrama, it may be said that King Hamlet had ever but slenderly known his wife. Created in an heroic mould, he understood not the mortal frailties which might lead his "most seeming-virtuous queen" to decline

> Upon awretch whose natural gifts were poor
> To those of [his].
> [I. v. 46, 50-2]

Just as he had, before learning of her transgressions, been deceived by his wile's seeming-virtue, so, after learning of them, he expected her to be tortured by the stings of conscience. He was apparent1y twice deceived.

But to continue tracing the Queen's part in the play. She appears, of course, in all of the last three scenes. She enters late in IV. vii, after the King and Laertes have completed their plans for bringing about Hamlet's death, and in her longest speech in the play announces Ophelia's drowning. Her purpose here, however, is that of amessenger; her speech throws little light On her character-and certainly reveals no awareness of her own responsibility for the young girl's death.

In V. i, the scene in the graveyard, the Queen first mentions in asingle speech her thwarted hope that Opheliamight have been Hamlet's bride, and then, as Hamlet and Laertes struggle in the grave, she, in her remaining speeches, follows the lead of Claudius:

> *King:* Pluck them asunder.
> *Queen:* Hamlet, Hamlet!
> *King:* 0, he is mad, Laertes.
> *Queen:* For love of God, forbear him.
> [V. i. 264, 272-73]

Then:

> This is mere madness;
> And thus awhile the fit will work on him. Anon as patient as the female dove. . . His silence will sit drooping,
> [V. i. 284-88]

The Queen, of course, does not know of the treachery plotted by Claudius and Laertes. She must by these speeches have sought to end the struggle in the grave and to lessen Laertes' resentment at Hamlet's behavior, but it is noticeable-and I think characteristic-that in each of her speeches she echoes or enlarges upon ideas just expressed by Claudius.

In V. ii, the concluding scene of the play, the Queen for the first time, I believe, acts with initiative and speaks for herself. Just before the court enters to watch the fencing match, an unnamed lord brings amessage to Hamlet: "The Queen desires you to use some gentle entertainment to Laertes before you fan to play" [V. ii. 206-07]. As the effect of this message would be to lessen any suspicions of foul play, to encourage Hamlet's acceptance of the match as a"brother's wager frankly play[ed]" [V. ii. 253], one is tempted to suggest that the Queen's message may have originated with the King, that here as earlier the Queen is being used to further the plan of another. (It will be remembered that immediately after the play-within-the-play Polonius brought Hamlet word that "the Queen would speak with you, and presently': [III. ii. 375], but, as previously noted, the ideaof the interview was not the Queen's. It had originated with Polonius, and the King, to whom he suggested it [III. i. 182ff.], had off-stage persuaded the Queen to cooperate.) However, in the absence of any statement to the contrary, I presume we must accept the message as the lord delivers it, as the Queen's own suggestion. And in some respects it is athoroughly character istic suggestion, revealing as it does her recurring hope that in spite of all that had gone before, she and others, without being required to pay the price of penitence, may go on enjoying the present by simply refusing to remember the past.

During the closing scene the Queen is silent for the first sixty-one lines she is on stage. She then within aspace of twenty-four lines has four speeches, totaling six pentameter

lines. She refers to Hamlet's scantness of breath and offers her napkin to mop his brow. Then, for the first time in the play escaping the dominance of Claudius, she acts independently and counter to his expressed wish-and her crossing him means her death.

> *guee_*. . . The queen carouses to thy for tune, Hamlet. *King:* Gertrude, do not drink. *Quee_* I will, my lord; I pray you pardon me.
> [V. ii. 289-9 I]

And so she drinks from the poisoned cup. I can see no justification whatsoever for the view of acritic who sought to defend the Queen's character by suggesting that she, suspecting the wine to be poisoned, drank it to protect Hamlet and to atone for the wrongs and sins of her past. Others, like the author of the *New Exegesis of Shakespeare*

(1859), have remarked that her death was "as exquisitely negative as possible-that is, by poison, from *her own hand,* in aVINOUS BEVERIDGE [sic], and THROUGH MISTAKE." But however negative her death, it was, ironically, the result of her one act of independence. And her final speech, in answer to the King's hasty explanation, "She swounds to see them bleed";

> No, no, the drink, the drink! amy dear
> Hamlet!
> The drink, the drink! I am poisoned
> [V. ii. 309-10]

Here for the first time the Queen seems to understand the essence of the situation. Only in this last speech does she recognize or admit to herself the villainy of her second husband. Only here-long after her counterpart in Belleforest had done sodoes she take her position beside her son and against the King. (pp. 235-46)

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

Critical Essay #17

[Lidz argues that Shakespeare dramatized Ophelia's madness to provide acountertheme to action surrounding Hamlet's own insanity. But whereas the playwright remains ambiguous about the reality of the prince's madness, the critic continues, he portrays Ophelia as classically insane. According to Lidz, Ophelia's descent into madness does not merely the resultfrom her father's murder, but rather his murder by Hamlet, whom she loves. As aresult, Opheliais placed in "the intolerable predicament of having to tum awayfrom the person she loves and idealizes because that person is responsiblefor her father's murder. .. For further commentary on Ophelia's character, see the excerpts by Arthur Kirsch and J. Dover Wilson.]

Shakespeare carefully places Ophelia's madness in apposition to Hamlet's, illuminating the causes of each by making Ophelia's plight the female counterpart of Hamlet's dilemma. The action around Ophelia's insanity forms the countertheme to the action surrounding Hamlet's madness, balancing the plot and leading to Hamlet's death as well as to Ophelia's. Each dies more or less because there is nothing left for them but to desire death as an escape from an existence that has become intolerable.

Whereas Shakespeare is ambiguous about the reality of Hamlet's insallity and depicts him as on the border, fluctuating between sanity and madness, he portrays Opheliaas definitely, one might even say classically, insane. Even before she comes on stage, agentleman gives us an excellent description of her condition. Would that psychiatric texts could describe as clearly!

> She speaks much of her father; says she hears
> There's tricks i' the world; and hems and beats her heart;
> Spurns enviously at straws; speaks things in doubt,
> That carry but half sense; her speech IS nothing,
> Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
> The hearers to collection; they ainI at it,

> And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts;
> Which, as her winks and nods and ges tures yield them,
> Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
> Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.
> [IV. v. 4-13]

She does not storm, or "take arms against aseaof troubles" [III. i. 58]; but rather, as apassive, obedient and very feminine person she is simply poor Ophelia.

> Divided from herself and her fair judge ment,
> Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts.
> [IV. v. 84-6]

She sings one ditty about her love who is dead and gone, as if referring to her father, then another about agirl abandoned because she let her valentine tumble her before being wed-abawdy bit that has led some critics to consider that the sweet Opheliamight have been distraught because she had given in to Hamlet's "unmaster'd importunity" [I. iii. 32] and was now pregnant, with marriage to Hamlet no longer possible. However, to most, including those in the play, who knew her best, the cause of Ophelia's madness seems apparent. Claudius says:

> Oh, this' the poison of deep grief: it springs All from her father's death.
> [IV. v. 75-6]

And Laertes muses about his mad sister:

> 0 heavens! is't possible ayoung maid's wits
> Should be as mortal as an old man's life? Nature is fine in love, and where .tis fine It sends some precious instance of itself After the thing it loves.
> [IV. v. 160-64]
> The comment is accentuated by Ophelia's chant:

They bore him bariifaced on the bier; Hey non nanny, nanny, hey nanny;
And on his grave rain'd many atear.
[IV. v. 165-67]

The gentle Ophelia, it seems, cannot absorb her father's murder. However, it is not her father's murder that has driven her mad but, rather, his murder by Hamlet, the person she loves and upon whose love she has placed her hopes. Now, she can never many him, and worse still, she has an obligation to hate him; indeed she must feel hatred toward him for depriving her of her beloved father, her original love. Shakespeare, then, has not only placed Ophelia's insanity in apposition to Hamlet's but has emphasized the same crucial human frailty as the cause of the emotional disturbance in both the hero and heroine.

As we have seen, Hamlet mourns for his father, but his melancholy is induced by his bitterness against his mother because of her hasty marriage to his uncle; and his anguish and rage against his moth er become intolerable when he learns that she has been untrue to his father. Hamlet is tormented by his desire to take vengeance against his mother, the person who had once been closest and most dear to him. He manages to control his matricidal impulsions, but his mother is lost to him as alove object. He struggles to regain her by imploring her to renounce her sexual life with Claudius and return to him and become faithful to his father's memory. At the very moment when Hamlet believes he may have succeeded, he inadvertently kills Polonius bringing new woes on himself and sealing Ophelia's fate.

Ophelia, like Hamlet, mourns for her father, but his death is not asufficient reason for her to lose her sanity. She, too, is in the intolerable predica ment of having to turn away from the person sheloves and idealizes because that person is responsible for her father's murder. Her father is dead, and Hamlet, as his slayer, is barred to her affections. She can no longer transfer her attachment from her father to Hamlet. Her entire orientation to the future has suddenly been destroyed.

Both Hamlet and Ophelia, then, are faced by the sudden and irretrievable loss of alove object because of that person's unforgivable behavior in killing, actually or symbolically, abeloved parent whose death requires vengeance. Shakespeare clearly saw how such situations could engender aviolently confused emotional state and lead aperson to feel that the world was empty and worthless and those who inhabit it perfidious and deceitful. Life becomes intolerable; the sufferer escapes the dilemmaby abandoning rationality and when that fails, by abandoning life itself.

Now, the reader might not think that Polonius, aman already in his dotage, aspying busybody whom Hamlet considered atedious old fool, could be so important to Ophelia. Indeed, one might similarly wonder why Hamlet should be so concerned about the deceitful and wanton Gertrude. Oedipal attachments do not, as we know from countless patients, involve arational evaluation of the parent. If raised with reasonable parental care, the boy has adeep attachment to his mother, and the girl to her father. Ophelia's attachment to Polonius is accentuated by her motherless state. As awidower, Polonius may have been overly protective of his daughter and especially affectionate to her; and Ophelia, as commonly happens in such situations, may have felt free to fantasy that she could become areplacement for her mother in her father's life, and thus form aparticularly intense attachment to him. Similarly, Hamlet is fatherless, but his situation differed from Ophelia's as he had lost his father much more recently. Nevertheless, as we have noted, his father's death could lead to arecrudescence of Hamlet's old attachment to his mother as well as aheightening of his identification with his father. He could then feel that his mother's infidelity to his father was also an infidelity to him.

Ophelia, we should note, is already under considerable emotional stress at the time her father is killed. The vacillations in Hamlet's attitude and behavior toward her could not but be extremely unsettling to the very young woman who idolized and idealized him. She is, one day, his most beloved, who must never doubt his love [II. ii. 116-24]; shortly thereafter, she is the object of his venom and the recipient of his malignant curse; and then, on the same day, she finds him bantering salaciously with her. She cannot know that Hamlet's attitude toward her reflects his disillusionment in his

mother. To her, Hamlet's inconstancy can only mean deceitfulness or madness. Opheliafinds him mad, and, hopefully, mad because she has been forced to reject him. Hamlet slays Polonlus by mistake; he had not. like Claudius, committed apremeditated murder for his own advancement. We must even consider that were Hamlet not so out of control, he might still beg Ophelia's fOI}tiveness for his error. However, that is not the way the play was written, or could have been written. (pp. 88-92)

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

Critical Essay #18

[Wilson provides a detailed interpretation of the "nunnery scene" between Hamlet and Ophelius Act III. scene i. The critic discusses Ophelias role as adecoy. describing how she makes the prince suspicious of aplot by overplaying her part when returning his love letters. Hamlet is disgusted by her role as a decoy, Dover Wilson maintains. for it mirrors his own mother's betrayal when she married Claudius. According to the critic. Hamlet tests Ophelia by asking where her father is, but when she lies. she provokes the frenry with which the prince concludes the scene. Wilson also emphasizes Hamlets repetition of the word "nunnery, maintaining that for Elizabethans the word not only meant a convent, but also carried the bawdy connotation of abrothel. For adtdense of Ophelia's character and motives in the "nunnery scene. See the essay by Harold Jenkins cited in the Sources for Further Study. For other commentary on Ophelia's character, see the excerpts by Arthur Kirsch and Theodore Lidz.]

In Act III, scene i, the King bids the Queen leave him with Polonius and Ophelia: and tells her of their purpose. He insists, and she accepts the point without question. that they are "lawful espials". The innocent little scheme is justified in the inter ests of Denmark. and of Hamlet himself; and she expresses the hope that the outcome will bring happiness for them all, Opheliaincluded. Gertrude is always hoping for the best. The King's words,

> For we have closely sent for Hamlet hither.
> That he. as 'twere by accident. may here
> Affront Ophelia
> [III, l 29-31]

should be carefully noted in passing, if we wish to understand exactly what follows. Hamlet is not coming to the lobbyofhis own motion; he has been sent for. Not of course, ostensibly by Claudius, but "closely", that is privately or without his knowledge of the real sender of the message. Nevertheless some kind of pretext has

been given; and, when he ,arrives, he will find, not what he expects, but OpheliaThere would be no flaw in this expedient, if the object of it had not happened to overhear the whole plot the day before.

The snare is now laid; the decoy made to appear at once innocent and tempting; and the fowlers take cover. Polonius gives Opheliaaprayer-book, and says "walk you here" [III. i. 42]; "here" being, of course, the lobby at the back of the stage. There is, however, atheatrical tradition that she should be kneeling when Hamlet enters, which is I think asound one; for, if she is only walking up and down with abook in her hands, how does he know that she is at her "orisons"? I presume, therefore, that some kind of prie-dieu stood in the lobby. Finally, before actually "bestowing" himself behind the arras. Claudius utters an aside, which it is also important not to miss. "Read on this book", says the moralising father to his daughter,

> That show of such an exercise may colour Your loneliness; we are oft to blame in this,
> 'Tis too much proved, that with devotion's
> visage And pious action we do sugar o'er The devil himself;
> [III. i. 43-8]

upon which the King comments to himself:

> 0, 'tis too true,
> Howsmart alash that speech dothgive my conscience.
> The harlot's check. beautied with plast'ring art,
> Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it. Than is my deed to my most painted word: 0 heavy burden!
> [III. i. 48-53]

It is the first indication in the play that Claudius possesses aconscience; and it leads up to the "blenching" in the play scene and to the prayer that follows. But there is more in it than this. The reference, after "devotion's visage", to

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art is leitmotiv on Shakespeare's part. The linked images hark back to the "fishmonger" and his "good kissing carrion" [II. ii. 174, 182]; and reopen atheme which Hamlet will presently elaborate.

Hamlet walks into the trap in complete unconsciousness. As he enters, his mind is not on the plot, his uncle or Ophelia. If he remembers the Ghost at all, it is to write it off as asnare of the evil one. He is back again where he was when we first had sight of his inner self; back in the mood of the soliloquy which begins

> 0 that this too too sullied flesh would melt. Thaw and resolve itself into adew,
> Or that the Everlasting had not fixed His canon 'gainst self-slaughter.
> [I. ii. 129-32]

But he is no longer thinking of his own "sullied flesh", still less of the divine command. By constantly turning it over he has worn the problem to the bone:

> To be, or not to be. that is the question.
> [III.i.55]

A like expression of utter weariness is not to be found in the rest of human literature. Sleep, death, annihilation, his whole mind is concentrated upon these; and the only thing that holds his arm from striking home with "the bare bodkin" [III. i. 75] is the thought of "what dreams may come", "the dread of something after death" [III. i. 65, 77]. . . .

He believes in immortality, which means that by death he may exchange one nightmare for aworse. Eternity has him in atrap, which dwarfs the little traps of Claudius and Polonius to nothingness. No one but Shakespeare could have interrupted an exciting dramatic intrigue with apassage like this. The surprise and the audacity of it take our breath away, and render the pity of it the more overwhelming.

As the meditation finishes, Hamlet sees Opheliabehind him upon her knees. The sight reminds him of nothing except "the pangs of disprized love", and those have long been drowned in "aseaof troubles" [III. i 71, 53]. "The fair Ophelia!" [III. i 88] he exclaims; the words have no warmth in them. And, when he addresses her, he speaks in irony:

> Nymph. in thy orisons
> Be all my sins remembered.
> [ill. i. 88-91]

Romantic actors interpret this as gushing tenderness; and even (Samuel] Johnson calls if "an address grave and solemn, such as the foregoing meditation excited in his thoughts". [Edward] Dowden, however, sees "estrangement in the word 'nymph' "; and I find deliberate affectation in that word and in "orisons". They are both pretentious expressions, while the reference to "all my sins", the sins for which she has jilted him, the sins he will enlarge upon later in the scene, surely indicates asardonic tone. In any event, it is certain that most critics have completely misunderstood the dialogue that follows. because in their sympathy with Opheliathey have forgotten that it is not Hamlet who has "repelled" her, but she him. She had refused to see him and had returned his letters; she could not even speak aword of comfort when in deep trouble he forced his way into her room with mute pitiable appeal.

After that he had done with her; and the Ophelia he now meets is a stranger. Stranger indeed! For listen:

> Good my lord,
> How does your honour for this many a day?
> [III. i. 89-90]

Is she implying that *he* has neglected *her?* It was only yesterday he had been with her despite her denial of his access. But at first he takes small note of her words and answers with polite aloofness:

I humbly thank you, well, well, well.
[III. i. 9]

It is aform of address he employs later with people like the Norwegian Captain and Osric, while the repeated "well" sounds bored, Nevertheless, she continues:

My lord, I have remembrances of yours,
That I have longed long to re-deliver.
I pray you now receive them.
[III. i. 92-4]

What should that mean? Once again, however, he brushes it aside: "1 never gave *you* aught" [III, i. 95] ,-the woman to whom 1 once gave gifts is dead. Yet still she persists:

My honoured lord, you know right well
you did,
And with them words of so sweet breath composed
As made the things more rich. Their per fume lost, Take these again, for
to the noble mind Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove un
kind.
There. my lord.
[III. i. 96-101]

And here she draws the trinkets from her bosom and places them on the table before him.

The unhappy girl has sadly overplayed her part. Her little speech, ending with asententious couplet, as Dowden notes, "has an air of being prepared". Worse than that, she, the jilt, is accusing him of coldness towards her. Worst of all, Hamlet who has been "sent for", who meets her in the lobby "by accident", finds her prepared not only with aspeech but with the gifts also. She means no harm; she has romantically arranged alittle play scene, in the hope no doubt of provoking apassion ate declaration

of affection, which perhaps

Will bring him to his wonted way again,

[III. i. 40] as the Queen had remarked just before Hamlet's entrance, and will at any rate prove to the King that she and her father are right in their diagnosis of the distemper. But the effect upon Hamlet is disas trous. Until that moment he had forgotten the plot; it is afar cry from thoughts of "the undiscovered country" [III. i. 78] to this discovery. But he is now thoroughly awake, and sees it all. Here is the lobby and the decoy, playfug apart, only too unblushingly; and there at the back is the arras, behind which lurk the Fishmonger and Uncle Claudius. His wild "Ha, hat" the fierce question "are you honest?" [III. i. 102] that is to say "are you not awhore?" together with asignificant glance round the room, are enough to show the audience that he realises at last, and warn them to expect "antic disposition". Everything he says for the rest of the scene is intended for the ears of the eavesdroppers. As for the daughter who has been "loosed" to him, she will only R;et what she deserves. For play-acting has completed her downfall in his eyes. First the abrupt breaking-off of all intercourse between them, without any reason given, then the failure to meet his last appeal, then the overhearing of the plot in which she was to take aleading part, and last this willing and all too facile participation: is it surprising that to an imagination "as foul as Vulcan's stithy" [III. ii. 83-4] such things should ap pear in the worst possible light, or that he should treat her from henceforth as the creature he believes her to be? He puts her to one final test before the scene is over; but the dice are loaded against her. Thus, through achain of misconceptions, due to nothing worse than narrowness of vision and over-readiness to comply with her father's commands, Opheliablackens her own character in her lover's eyes. The process has been obscured hitherto owing to the absence of one important link in the chain; but the link now in place makes all clear, explains Hamlet's attitude, and shows her fate as even more pathetic than we had supposed.

Everything he says, 1 repeat, for the rest of the scene is intended for the ears of Claudius and Polonius, whom he knows to be behind the arras. The restored entry at

[II. ii. 167] happily rids us of the traditional stage-business of Polonius exposing himself to the eye of Hamlet and the audience, which has hitherto been the only way open to stage-managers of putting any meaning at all into the scene. It is atrick at once crude and inadequate: crude, because the chief councillor of Denmark is neither stupid nor clumsy, and to repre sent him so, as producers are apt to do, is to degrade intrigue to buffoonery; inadequate, because it only tells Hamlet of one, whereas his words clearly lose agreat deal of force if he is not known to be conscious of the presence of two. He speaks at both; but he speaks, of course, to Ophelia, while as he speaks he has yet afourth person constantly in mind, his mother. 1fthis be remembered, and ifwe also keep in view Hamlet's habitual lack of selfcontrol once he becomes excited, the dialogue is easy to follow.

I return to it:

> *Hamlet* Ha, hat are you honest? *Ophelia.* My lord?
> *Hamlet* Are you fair?
> *Ophelia.* What means your lordship? *Hamlet* That if you be honest and fair.
> your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty.
> [III. i. 102-07]

If. that is. you were the chaste maiden you pretend to be. you would not allow your beauty to be used as abait in this fashion. Ophelia. of course. misunderstands and. supposing him to mean that her beauty and his honesty ought not to discourse together. wonderingly enquires: "Could beauty. my lord. have better commerce than with honesty?" [III. i. 1O8-09J To which he, twisting her words back to his own meaning. replies:

> Ay truly. for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to abawd. than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness. This was sometime aparadox. but now the time gives it proof.
> [III. i. 110-14]

To paraphrase again: "physical Beauty is stronger than virtue, and will make use of Virtue herself as her procuress. People used to think this incredible, but your conduct proves its truth." He refers to "devotion's visage" and the "pious action" with which Opheliahad tried to "sugar o'er" her designs upon him. But he is probably also thinking of his mother's conduct. as is suggested by the talk of "our old stock" that follows [III. i. 117]. Indeed. from this point onwards Opheliabecomes identified in his mind with the Frailty whose name is Woman, and that in turn leads to thoughts of his own "sullied flesh". He goes on: "I did love you once" [III. i. 114], that is, before my mother took off the rose

> From the fair forehead of an innocent love.
> [III. iv. 43]

But a son of Gertrude is "rank and gross in nature" [I. ii. 136] and capable of nothing except lust; so that I did not really love you. "Conception is ablessing" [II. ii. 184]. but what children could aman like me and awoman like you hope for save a brood of sinners? Better anunnery!

So far Hamlet's talk has been in fishmonger-vein. and is meant for the Jephthah [cf. II. ii. 403ff.] behind the arras. But now is the turn for Uncle Claudius. The mention of corrupt stock leads by natural transition to an elaborate confession of criminal propensities on Hamlet's part which *we* know to be ridiculous. but which is intended to make the King's blood run cold. "I am very proud. revenge ful, ambitious" [III. i. 123-24] is the gist ofit. Could any other three epithets be found less appropriate to Hamlet? But Claudius says he is ambitious; and Claudius is areasonable man. The following. too, sounds terrible: with more offences at my beck. than I have thoughts to put them in. imagination to give them shape. or time to act them in [III. i. 124-25] until we scan it and find that it amounts to nothing at all. since the same might be said of any mortal.

At this point Hamlet gives Opheliaher last chance with his sudden "Where's your father?" [III.i.129]. She answers with alie. as it would seem to him, though of course

she is observing the most ordinary precautions and. as she thinks, humouring amadman. But it is this crowning proof of her treachery. I suggest, that provokes the frenry with which the episode closes. He goes out. perhaps in the hope that the rats may emerge from their hole and that he may catch them in the act of so doing. Twice he rushes from the room and with each return his manner grows more excited. His two final speeches are mainly food for fishmongers. and he concludes by coming very near to calling Opheliaaprostitute to her face. The repeated injunction "to anunnery go" [III. i. 120, 129. 136. 139. 149] is significant in this connection. since "nunnery" was in common Elizabethan use acant term for ahouse of ill-fame. And that this was the traditional interpretation of Hamlet's meaning on the seventeenth-century stage is shown by the *Der bestrafte Brudermord* which makes him say "go to anunnery, but not to anunnery where two pairs of slippers lie at the bed side".

As he leaves for the last time he throws his uncle one more morsel to chew: "I say we will have no mo marriage-those that are married already. *all but one,* shall live. the rest shall keep as they are" [III. i. 147-49]. Why. it maybe asked. does Hamlet deliberately and recklessly threaten the King in this way? Partly. as I have already suggested. because Hamlet always acts as if he were just on the point of killing his uncle, and partly for reasons which will become clear later. In any event. these threats show that the Prince has thoroughly grasped the hints about ambition dropped by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; and is now posing as the discontented heir thirsting for revenge, arOle he will play to remarkable purpose in the next scene.

After Hamlet's final departure. Opheliais given twelve lines of lamentation over his fallen state, be fore the espials steal warily from their hiding place. acircumspection natural after his repeated exits. but surely enough to warn us that Polonius, with whom caution is almost adisease. could never have revealed his presence to Hamlet. as the traditional stage practice makes him do. The discussion of what they have heard shows that their points of view have in no way converged. Claudius scornfully dismisses the forlorn love theory; nor does he think that melancholy has yet developed into utter madness. But Hamlet has said enough to prove himself to be in avery dangerous frame of mind; too dangerous to remain any longer near the royal person:

> He shall with speed to England,
> For the demand of our neglected tribute. Haply the seas, and countries different,
> With variable objects, shall expel
> This something-settled matter in his heart,
> Whereon his brains still beating puts him thus
> From fashion of himself.
> [III. i. 169-75]

At present Claudius thinks of England as ahealthresort; it is only after the play scene that he sees it as agrave. Polonius agrees with the scheme but cannot subscribe to his royal master's diagnosis of the disease. "But yet I do believe", he mutters while assenting to the projected voyage,

> The origin and commencement of his grief Sprung from neglected love;
> [III. i. 176-78]

and he urges that the theory shall be put to one more test before the voyage takes place. (pp. 12536)

J. Dover Wilson, in his What Happens in Hamlet, *third edition, Cambridge at the University Press,* 1962,357 *p.*

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Distributed by RCA VideoDiscs. 155 minutes.

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General overview of *Hamlet*

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Shakespeare for Students (SfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to

information about the work. Part of Gale's For Students Literature line, SfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on classic novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of classic novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members educational professionals helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.

- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as The Narrator and alphabetized as Narrator. If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name Jean Louise Finch would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname Scout Finch.
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first

received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).
- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures,

and eras.

Other Features

SfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Shakespeare for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Shakespeare for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Shakespeare for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

Night. Shakespeare for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SfS (usually the first piece under the Criticism subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on Winesburg, Ohio. Shakespeare for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition, Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Shakespeare for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. Richard Wright: Wearing the Mask, in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Shakespeare for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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