

Hamlet (Spring 2019–Spring 2021)

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How does one begin to analyze *Hamlet* when “it has already attracted more commentary than any other work in English except the Bible” [Neill, 307–8]. The massive text is rarely performed in its entirety¹; cuts are inevitable, and directors and producers understandably excise lines that counter their own preferred readings. Yet this is true of all Shakespeare’s plays; why does *Hamlet* seem uniquely accommodating of (to borrow from Polonius) “unlimited” readings [II.ii.341–2]? Why does it inspire such (phallogocentric) claims? “It is WE who are Hamlet” [Hazlitt]. “Hamlet nearly has become all things to all men” [Bloom, 1998, 402]. “Scarcely anything can be said that will be untrue of this brilliant and abounding young man the first crisis in whose life is also, to our loss, the last” [Van Doren, 162]. “[E]veryone admits finding something of himself in the Prince of Denmark” [Goddard, 331²]?

None of this should suggest that all readings of *Hamlet*—or Hamlet—are equal. But the advantage of criticism is that we may simultaneously hold contradictory views of a character or scene, while actors and directors must prune away all possibilities but one. Acknowledging from the outset that *Hamlet* encompasses contradictions may be the only way to approach a comprehensive understanding of the play. To begin, then, I shall cast back as far as the text permits, with an indisputable fact that nevertheless can be difficult to accept:

¹ Whatever “entirety” means, since the play comes to us in two mutually exclusive forms, the Second Quarto (1604) and the Folio (1623). (Never mind the First, so-called “bad,” Quarto (1603), which contains such lines as “To be, or not to be, ay there’s the point.”) In this essay I shall quote from both texts: each provides useful insights into Hamlet’s character, and I see no reason to prefer one as more “authentic.”

² On this same page Goddard argues: “*Hamlet* criticism seems destined, then, to go on being what it has always been: a sustained difference of opinion”; “The heart of its hero’s mystery will never be plucked out”; and, more encouragingly, “But that does not mean that a deep man will not come closer to that mystery than a shallow man, or a poetic age than a prosaic one”

Hamlet's Age, and Other Questions of Backstory

We learn Hamlet's age in the play's final act; the prince—having, with the help of pirates, escaped execution in England and returned to Elsinore—strikes up a conversation with an old gravedigger. For no apparent reason than to allow Shakespeare to establish this information, Hamlet asks how long the gravedigger—a proper Shakespearean clown—has been at his profession:

Clown: Of all the days i' th' year, I came to't that day that our last king
Hamlet overcame Fortinbras.

Hamlet: How long is that since?

Clown: Cannot you tell that? Every fool can tell that. It was that very day
that young Hamlet was born—he that is mad, and sent into
England.

[V.i.132–9]

Following some banter, the clown adds, “I have been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years” [V.i.151–2]. And that, it seems, is that: Hamlet is thirty.

Except . . . prior to this point, the play gives the strong impression that Hamlet is younger. Summarizing the views of many (myself included), A. C. Bradley [407] argues:

. . . I think we naturally take [Hamlet] to be about as old as Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and take them to be less than thirty. Further, the language used by Laertes and Polonius to Ophelia in I.iii. would certainly, by itself, lead one to imagine Hamlet as a good deal less than thirty In some passages, again, there is an air of boyish petulance.

On the other hand, Bradley notes elements of the play that seem more consistent with an older prince, including “the maturity of Hamlet's thought” and “his words to Horatio at III.ii.59ff.³, which imply that both he and Horatio have seen a good deal of life” [407]. So too do Ophelia's allusions to Hamlet's past as courtier, soldier, and scholar [III.i.151].

³ “Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice / And could of men distinguish her election, / S' hath sealed thee for herself . . .” [III.ii.62–4].

All of which is to say Hamlet may justifiably be imagined to fall within a range of ages; producers who prefer a younger hero can easily cut that single, contrary line of the gravedigger. We may wonder why Shakespeare left inconsistent impressions in his play. Perhaps (as may often be true) the cause was mere sloppiness, either on Shakespeare's part or his original editors'. We might also speculate that the *Hamlet* we have is a reworking of an older play featuring a younger hero: the so-called *Ur-Hamlet* had been performed in London by 1589⁴; a decade later, Shakespeare may have retained aspects of that older play's energy while increasing Hamlet's age to thirty, to better support his leading man, Richard Burbage (born in 1567). Or perhaps Shakespeare found the inconsistencies aesthetically true: the Hamlet of the play's final act has weathered too many "slings and arrows" *not* to have become, on some level, profoundly older.

Old Hamlet's Victory over Old Fortinbras

We learn something else about the play's backstory from Hamlet's conversation with the gravedigger. Old Hamlet's epic battle with Old Fortinbras—in which the Danish king slew the Norwegian king and thereby gained "all those his lands / Which he stood seized of" [I.i.88–9]—happened thirty years prior, on the same day as young Hamlet's birth. Why is this important? First, it may establish a pattern of an absent father: idealized from afar yet scarcely known. Second, this victory seems to be the main thing for which Old Hamlet is remembered—it identifies him even in death: "Such was the very armor he had on," Horatio notes of the steel-clad Ghost, "When he the ambitious Norway combated" [I.i.60–1]. Old Hamlet killed a man and took his lands ("by a sealed compact / Well

⁴ <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/reference-to-early-hamlet-play-in-lodges-wits-misery-1596>

ratified by law and heraldry,” Horatio is careful to tell us [I.i.86–7]), and thirty years later the conflict still festers:

Now, sir, young Fortinbras,
Of unimproved mettle hot and full,
Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there
Sharked up a list of lawless resolute
For food and diet to some enterprise
That hath a stomach in’t; which is not other,
As it doth well appear unto our state,
But to recover of us by strong hand
And terms compulsory those foresaid lands
So by his father lost . . .

[I.i.95–104]

Between that singular battle and his death, Old Hamlet did . . . what? If something more than smiting “the sledded Polacks on the ice” [I.i.63] and (if his son is to be believed) commanding “the winds of heaven” to pamper his lusty wife’s face [I.ii.140–2], we do not hear of it. At last he is killed himself, violence begetting violence until, by play’s end, another man’s son, another nation’s champion, has claimed the throne.

Old Hamlet’s Murder, Hamlet’s Whereabouts, and Claudius and Gertrude’s Wedding

In his first soliloquy, as he agonizes over memories of his dead father and remarried mother, Hamlet provides two key details for dating the play’s immediate backstory:

That it should come to this,
But two months dead, nay, not so much, not two,
So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. . . .
 . . . and yet *within a month*—
Let me not think on’t; frailty, thy name is woman—
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father’s body
Like Niobe, all tears, why she—
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer—married with my uncle . . .

[I.ii.137–51, *italics mine*]

Bradley gives an excellent analysis of these lines [401–3], the gist being that Hamlet’s father was killed nearly two months prior to the play’s beginning (“But two months dead . . .”); the funeral happened several weeks later, and Gertrude married Claudius “within a month” of the funeral (“or ere those shoes were old . . .”), so that Claudius’s speech to open the play’s second scene, delivered “with mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage” [I.ii.12], may be assumed to mark his and Gertrude’s first appearance before the royal court as husband and wife.

Why might weeks have passed between Old Hamlet’s death and funeral? It is tempting to infer that time was necessary for Prince Hamlet to receive the news at university, in Wittenberg, and journey home to Denmark. After all, one of the first things we learn about Hamlet is his “intent / In going back to school in Wittenberg” [I.ii.112–13]. But is the 30-year-old prince really still a student? Again I defer to Bradley [405]:

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell Hamlet of the players who are coming. He asks what players they are, and is told, “Even those you were wont to take such delight in, the tragedians of the city.” He asks, “Do they hold the same estimation they did when I was in the city?” Evidently he has not been in the city for some time. And this is still more evident when the players come in, and he talks of one having grown a beard, and another having perhaps cracked his voice, since they last met. What then is this city, where he has not been for some time, but where (it would appear) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern live? It is not in Denmark (“Comest thou to beard me in Denmark?”). It would seem to be Wittenberg.⁵

Bradley also notes, among other evidence, lines (which we shall consider later) suggesting a similarly distant relationship between Hamlet and Horatio when the play

⁵ All these lines are quoted from II.ii.295–305 & 363–70. We also know that Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Hamlet are/were “schoolfellows” [III.iv.202]—though only the First Quarto identifies this school as Wittenberg. Claudius’s first lines to the pair also suggest a past rather than current relationship with the prince: “I entreat you both / That, being of so young days brought up with him . . .” [II.ii.10–11].

begins. He finally concludes that “Hamlet has left the University for some years and has been living at Court,” and that Hamlet’s “intent” to return to Wittenberg is motivated by memories, following his father’s death and mother’s remarriage, “of the University where, years ago, he was so happy” [406].

This all makes sense to me, though it necessitates a different explanation of the gap between the death and funeral of Hamlet’s father. And I do not know enough (indeed, anything!) about historical funerary customs—whether ancient Danish or Elizabethan—to know if this is even an issue. Perhaps three or four weeks to plan a king’s funeral was the norm—particularly for pre-modern societies. Perhaps planning was delayed as Claudius and his allies at court first secured the crown. Perhaps Hamlet was elsewhere in a different capacity, performing his duties as courtier or soldier, when Claudius struck. Any of these possibilities seems to me less problematic, given Bradley’s objections, than the claim that Hamlet, two months prior to Act One, was living in Wittenberg with Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Horatio, insouciantly unaware of the local theatre gossip.

* * * * *

No doubt in the grand scheme of *Hamlet* there are more important questions than the protagonist’s age and academic status. Yet Hamlet’s likely backstory—what happened *before* his father lay down in his orchard that last, fateful time—seems as useful an entryway as any into this most layered of characters. Whether I have made the “right” inferences seems irrelevant—if they existed at all, surely *Hamlet* would not be the most argued-over work of secular English literature. But the play makes most sense to me when I imagine its hero far-enough removed from his youthful past that he can

uncritically idealize it when confronted with the crisis that shall corrupt his present and consume his future.

Act One: The Ghost

Shakespeare does not usually specify his characters' costumes, but when we first see Hamlet—and presumably throughout Act One—he is dressed in black. “Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off,” his mother implores him, and his reply sets the bar for the quality of his thought:

Queen: 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.

Hamlet: Ay, madam, it is common.

Queen: If it be,
Why seems it so particular with thee?

Hamlet: Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not “seems.”
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected havior of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passes show—
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

[I.ii.68–86]

Hamlet wears black to mourn his father, of course, and to contrast his continuing grief, nearly two months in, with a court that has moved on. Yet something even more subversive is happening, as Marjorie Garber notes [478]:

If others can counterfeit grief by merely wearing “the trappings and the suits of woe,” what is to become of real grief? Hamlet's mourning clothes have become a “show,” despite him, in the politic air of Denmark. He has become unwittingly and unwillingly complicit in Claudius's display.

Garber tracks how Hamlet, eventually, “finds [a] new costume in the ‘antic disposition’ of madness” [478], but in the meantime his main defense is irony. His first three lines (including the afore-quoted “it is common”) are bitter puns:

King: But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son—
Hamlet: A little more than kin, and less than kind!
King: How is it that the clouds still hang on you?
Hamlet: Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun.

[I.ii.64–7]

Compared to some of Hamlet’s later retorts, the subtext of these lines is obvious. Hamlet is “too much in the sun” not from losing a father but from gaining a stepfather; his “inky cloak” may have become less an expression of his own grief than an insistence that his mother remember hers. Yet Gertrude, to her son’s ever-deepening distress, seems oblivious to the lesson. Her new husband’s presumptions, meanwhile, float between unhelpful and—given what we learn he has done—subtly cruel:

’Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
To give these mourning duties to your father,
But you must know your father lost a father,
That father lost, lost his, and the survivor bound
In filial obligation for some term
To do obsequious sorrow. But to persevere
In obstinate condolment is a course
Of impious stubbornness. ’Tis unmanly grief.

[I.ii.87–94]

He continues in this vein for another twenty lines! At last, after gaining from Hamlet a promise not to return to Wittenberg but to remain “[o]ur chiefest courtier . . . and our son” [I.ii.117], Claudius, Gertrude, and the rest glide away.

For the first of many times, we are alone with Hamlet. The ensuing soliloquy, as we have heard, establishes that what has shattered him, foremost, is his mother’s unexpected and sudden remarriage. This time I’ll quote the whole speech:

O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God,
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't, ah, fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this,
But two months dead, nay, not so much, not two,
So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on, and yet within a month—
Let me not think on't; frailty, thy name is woman—
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body
Like Niobe, all tears, why she—
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer—married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. Within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not nor it cannot come to good.
But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

[I.ii.129–59]

So much to say!

- First, Hamlet is contemplating suicide, though we may wonder how close he really is to killing himself—as we shall see, his behavior throughout most of the play suggests a greater drive to live. For now, at least, the sole argument he musters against “self-slaughter” is religious: that suicide would violate the law “fixed” by “the Everlasting.” (Denmark was Christianized in the tenth century

- BCE [Asimov, 79], so these and similar references—for example, to “our Savior’s birth” in the previous scene [I.i.159]—are not necessarily anachronistic.)
- Second, Hamlet’s idealization of his father—and corresponding contempt for his uncle—is striking. Can we trust his perceptions? Much of how we answer this question turns on casting and directing: Is the actor who portrays Claudius as unattractive as Hamlet claims? Does the Ghost resemble a slaughtered god? Again, what kind of *man* was Hamlet’s father? Horatio says he was “a goodly king”—yet Horatio is also comforting a grieving friend, and regardless he saw Old Hamlet only once [I.ii.186]. Replying to Horatio, Hamlet is as measured as in soliloquy he is extravagant: his father is simply “a man, take him for all in all, / I shall not look upon his like again” [I.ii.187–8]. These lines may be spun in numerous directions, positive or negative, but I hear in them the beginning of acceptance.
 - What Hamlet cannot accept is this new awareness of his mother as a sexual being. The problem is not that she would “hang on” her first husband but that her “appetite” has outlived him. We shall hear this more stridently in the play’s third act, when Hamlet confronts Gertrude in her closet, but it surfaces in this first soliloquy in words such as “wicked” and “incestuous sheets.” (The notion that marriage between a brother- and sister-in-law is incestuous would have been familiar to Elizabethans, only decades removed from the attempt by King Henry VIII to annul, for that very reason, his marriage to Catherine of Aragon and wed Anne Boleyn—a union that would ultimately produce Queen Elizabeth.) Why does his mother’s behavior so repulse Hamlet? Has he considered that Gertrude

may have both shed genuine tears for her dead husband *and*, recognizing her now-precarious position at court, acted decisively to retain what power she has? If so, I suspect he stumbled over two obstacles. First, by helping to crown Claudius, Gertrude is blocking her son from the throne. We may—and shall—question how much Hamlet wants to be king, but twice in the play he alludes resentfully to his thwarted succession [III.iv.99–101; V.ii.64]. Second, if we assume Gertrude truly and publically desires Claudius—an assumption that seems justified, given Hamlet’s bitterness on the topic—it’s difficult not to infer that she and Claudius began their love affair while Old Hamlet was alive.

Given these considerations, we may speculate further about the nearly two months that precede the play’s first scene. Whether Hamlet was at Elsinore or away, his mighty father’s death would have been a shock—the official explanation, we learn, is not old age or illness but a horrible accident: “’Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard, / A serpent stung me,” the Ghost recounts [I.v.35–6]. Indeed, the shock may have been so great that Hamlet failed to see his uncle maneuvering for the crown until it was too late to stop him. (Shakespeare several times makes clear that Danish kings do not inherit their title; they are elected [I.ii.14–16; V.ii.64].) Alas, not only does the court anoint Claudius, Hamlet’s mother marries him—by all observable evidence, loves him! The shock intensifies, turns toxic. Was his mother feigning love for his father all along? Or is spousal love, sexual love, no more enduring than the practiced vows of hypocrites? “For ’tis a question left us yet to prove, / Whether love lead fortune, or else fortune love,” the Player King shall ponder in Hamlet’s “Mousetrap” [III.ii.198–9]. For Hamlet, his mother’s “frailty” answers this question resoundingly for “strumpet” Fortune [II.i.234–5].

A depressing chain of thoughts, and its endpoint is, if not “the centre of the tragedy,” as Bradley deftly argues [127], then a central component. Whatever else he was or may occasionally still be, when we meet him and for most of the play Hamlet is sunk, trapped, in a state of bewildering melancholy. At times this melancholy urges suicide; more commonly, it produces lassitude and self-loathing, for if not kill himself *what can he do?* “But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue”—that is both the final thought in his first soliloquy and a forewarning of the inaction that shall bedevil Hamlet . . . and fascinate us.

What kind of man was Hamlet before his crisis? We catch a glimpse immediately following the soliloquy, when Horatio and two sentries, Marcellus and Barnardo, enter, intending to tell Hamlet of the ghost they have seen:

Horatio: Hail to your lordship!

Hamlet: I am glad to see you well.
Horatio—or I do forget myself.

Horatio: The same, my lord, and your poor servant ever.

Hamlet: Sir, my good friend, I’ll change that name with you.
And what make you from Wittenberg, Horatio?⁶
Marcellus?

Marcellus: My good lord!

Hamlet: I am very glad to see you. [*To Barnardo*] Good even, sir.
But what, in faith, make you from Wittenberg?

Horatio: A truant disposition, good my lord.

Hamlet: I would not hear your enemy say so,
Nor shall you do my ear that violence
To make it truster of your own report
Against yourself. I know you are no truant.

[I.ii.160–73]

⁶ This line too suggests to me that Hamlet has been away from Wittenberg for some time. Had he been at the university when he learned of his father’s death, would Hamlet not have traveled back to Elsinore with Horatio—or at least anticipated Horatio’s arrival shortly thereafter?

In the presence of those he likes and trusts, Hamlet is reenergized; he is generous toward Horatio and warmly greets men far below his station—he even knows at least one of their names. Minor details, perhaps, yet who else in the play makes such an effort to treat common folk with dignity? No doubt this helps explain, as Claudius shall ruefully acknowledge, “the great love the general gender bear [Hamlet]” [IV.vii.18].

Later in that scene, Claudius provides another insightful description. As he schemes with Laertes to murder Hamlet during a fencing match, with an unbated (sharpened) sword, Claudius notes that Hamlet, “being remiss, / Most generous, and free from all contriving, / Will not peruse the foils” [IV.vii.132–4]. This prediction comes true—Hamlet allows Laertes to choose the weapon that slays them both—and we may assume Claudius understands this aspect, at least, of his nephew’s character. Imagine this “free,” “generous” nature—having lived up to thirty years resisting the temptation to suspect others of ill motives—suddenly confronted with evidence that his mother broke her most intimate vows. Would he not revisit, reconsider, every sympathetic assumption he’d ever made, particularly with respect to love? How could such a man avoid such crippling melancholy? For the Hamlet of the play, no pleasure is safe; the bitterness returns even before Horatio can explain himself:

Hamlet: But what is your affair in Elsinore?

We’ll teach you for to drink ere you depart.

Horatio: My lord, I came to see your father’s funeral.

Hamlet: I prithee do not mock me, fellow student.

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

Horatio: Indeed, my lord, it followed hard upon.

Hamlet: Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats

Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven

Or ever I had seen that day, Horatio!

[I.ii.174–83]

The allusion to heavy drinking (in the Folio, the phrase is “teach you to drink deep”) introduces a notable trait, which is developed two scenes later, as Hamlet waits with Horatio and Marcellus for the Ghost to reappear. Their vigil happens simultaneously with a party Claudius throws, offstage, to celebrate Hamlet’s decision to remain at Elsinore [I.ii.123–8]. Upon the frozen parapet, Horatio hears trumpets and cannon blasts and wonders at their meaning. Hamlet is unsparing in his judgment:

Hamlet: The king doth wake tonight and takes his rouse,
Keeps wassail, and the swaggering upspring reels,
And as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down
The kettledrum and trumpet thus bray out
The triumph of his pledge.

Horatio: Is it a custom?

Hamlet: Ay, marry, is’t,
But to my mind, though I am native here
And to the manner born, it is a custom
More honored in the breach than the observance.
This heavy-headed revel east and west
Makes us traduced and taxed of other nations.
They clepe us drunkards and with swinish phrase
Soil our addition, and indeed it takes
From our achievements, though performed at height,
The pith and marrow of our attribute.

[I.iv.8–22]

It is true that several moments in the play (including the bloodbath at the end) feature alcohol, but the text, notwithstanding this one speech, gives little evidence that Claudius—or any Dane we meet—is a drunkard. Hamlet’s condemnation of this “custom” seems rooted in his personal animus toward his stepfather, though the moralizing tone is consistent with other speeches he makes, culminating in his excoriation of his mother in her closet. I can’t imagine that Hamlet would be so beloved by the commons—let alone a troupe of actors!—had he always been so sententious. More likely we are hearing another effect of his crisis: his mother’s unabashed lust has made

Hamlet deeply anxious about physical pleasure; he has retreated into his ever-expanding mind (“I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space . . .” [Folio, II.ii.253–4]), and he shall not begin to recover until his earthy conversation with the gravedigger in Act Five.

Following his critique of Danish drinking, Hamlet turns inward; the remainder of the monologue could be another soliloquy:

So oft it chances in particular men
That (for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As in their birth, wherein they are not guilty,
Since nature cannot choose his origin)
By the o’ergrowth of some complexion,
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
Or by some habit that too much o’erleavens
The form of plausible manners—that (these men
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
Being nature’s livery, or fortune’s star)
His virtues else, be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo,
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault. The dram of evil
Doth all the noble substance often dout,
To his own scandal.

[I.iv.23–38]

This sounds tantalizingly like Hamlet’s commentary on himself—Laurence Olivier opens his film of the play by speaking the lines in voiceover, then patly concluding, “This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind.” But of course Hamlet does not know he is in a tragedy. Whom then, or what, does he mean? Were it not for the gendered language, he might be mourning his relationship with his mother: a noble-seeming woman stained by the “dram” of her lust. Yet Hamlet does not hesitate to identify his mother’s failings (and, later, Ophelia’s) with her sex; the ruminations in this speech are concerned with “particular men.”

In the two months since his father's death, three men have occupied Hamlet's thoughts, and Hamlet would never describe his uncle as "pure as grace." As for the old king, this is no eulogy for a man slain, unawares, by a snakebite. That leaves Hamlet himself, whose reason, virtues, and "plausive" (pleasing) manners have been assailed—perhaps irreparably—by the melancholy seeping from his own "vicious mole," his guiltless birth to a faithless mother. It festers within him, another "imposthume . . . [t]hat inward breaks" [IV.iv.27–8], and for all his brilliance he can imagine no recourse but to shiver atop the castle, at midnight, seeking a spirit that may be his dead father. And no sooner does Hamlet conclude these dark thoughts than the Ghost appears.

Before we examine this encounter, let's briefly focus on the other major characters introduced in this act.

Gertrude and Claudius

Did Gertrude begin her affair with Claudius while her first husband was alive, and did she conspire with him to commit murder? Shakespeare does not definitively answer either question, but I think he gives sufficient reason to exonerate the Queen on the worse charge. In their fraught conversation immediately following the aborted performance of "The Mousetrap"—a play that shows the act of regicide and the murderer's successful wooing of the widow—Hamlet struggles to make Gertrude see the parallels:

Hamlet: Now, mother, what's the matter?

Queen: Hamlet, thou hast thy father [Claudius] much offended.

Hamlet: Mother, you have my father much offended.

Queen: Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.

Hamlet: Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.

Queen: Why, how now, Hamlet!

Hamlet: What's the matter now?

Queen: Have you forgot me?

[III.iv.8–14]

Even after Hamlet slays the eavesdropping Polonius, believing him to be Claudius,

Gertrude remains obtuse:

Queen: O me, what hast thou done?
Hamlet: Nay, I know not. Is it the king?
Queen: O, what a rash and bloody deed is this!
Hamlet: A bloody deed—almost as bad, good mother,
 As kill a king, and marry with his brother.
Queen: As kill a king?
Hamlet: Ay, lady, it was my word. . . .
 Leave wringing of your hands. Peace, sit you down
 And let me wring your heart, for so I shall
 If it be made of penetrable stuff,
 If damned custom have not brazed it so
 That it be proof and bulwark against sense.
Queen: What have I done that thou dar’st wag thy tongue
 In noise so rude against me?

[III.iv.25–40]

In any of these lines—but especially the exasperated questions that conclude each chunk—do we hear a murderer? Gertrude is not that good an actress. Another round from Hamlet leaves her only more bewildered:

Hamlet: Such an act
 That blurs the grace and blush of modesty, . . .
 . . . Heaven’s face does glow,
 O’er this solidity and compound mass,
 With heated visage, as against the doom,
 Is thought-sick at the act.
Queen: Ay me, what act,
 That roars so loud and thunders in the index?

[III.iv.40–52]

Add to this evidence the fact that Claudius never discusses the murder with Gertrude, though he articulates several private pangs of conscience [III.i.49–54; III.iii.36–72], and the Queen’s innocence seems as certain as anything can be in this text. Yet Gertrude is guilty of *something*, as she eventually acknowledges, following one of the most savage

tongue-lashings in Shakespeare. (We shall study the complete speech, with the rest of the scene, more closely later; below I shall quote only its final lines, for context.)

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

Queen: O Hamlet, speak no more.
 Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul,
 And there I see such black and grained spots
 As will leave there their tinct.

[III.iv.82–91]

By this point in the scene, Hamlet has transitioned from the topic of murder to his fixation on his mother's "compulsive ardor"; it is *these* blows that break Gertrude. Consider too that the Ghost accuses Claudius (and, by implication, Gertrude) of adultery [I.v.42], and can we doubt what Gertrude's "black and grained spots" signify? I suppose one might argue that her bewilderment during the first part of the scene proves the Queen is neither murderer *nor* adulterer. "What have I done that thou dar'st wag thy tongue / In noise so rude against me?" she demands—could a guilty person really be so oblivious? Well, perhaps—adultery is easier to rationalize than murder, particularly if your husband is an aging brute. One might even suppose it's none of her grown son's business whom she beds! But if the cause of this sudden shame is not adultery, what is it? Has she suddenly seen Claudius through Hamlet's eyes—does she now find her marriage incestuous? But Hamlet blames Gertrude for more than lusting after an unacceptable partner; he condemns the lust itself, and she seems, finally, to hear him. Maybe he has simply made her feel ridiculous to still want sex at all.

As for her new husband, the most important thing we learn about Claudius in these early scenes (until the Ghost accuses him of murder) is that he seems a reasonably effective king. For starters, he has convinced the nobles to elect him over the popular, accomplished prince. We needn't wonder too much how he managed this: the Ghost himself grudgingly admits that Claudius is charming, albeit in a different context:

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts—
O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power
So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen.

[I.v.42–6]

I see no reason to trust father and son's (understandably) negative descriptions; the play is immeasurably more coherent when Claudius is portrayed as attractive and capable.

Indeed, Shakespeare includes two characters, the ambassadors to Norway, for the apparent purpose of giving Claudius an early victory. In his introductory speech, after exhausting his supply of paradoxes linking Old Hamlet's death and his marriage to the Queen ("defeated joy"; "an auspicious and a dropping eye"; "In equal scale weighing delight and dole" [I.ii.1–14]), Claudius turns to a foreign threat:

Now follows, that you know, young Fortinbras,
Holding a weak supposal of our worth,
Or thinking by our late dear brother's death
Our state to be disjoint and out of frame,
Collegued with this dream of his advantage,
He hath not failed to pester us with message
Importing the surrender of those lands
Lost by his father, with all bands of law,
To our most valiant brother. So much for him.

[I.ii.17–25]

A clearer explanation than Horatio managed [I.i.80–107]! Presumably after ripping up the latest message from the Norwegian prince, Claudius continues:

. . . we have here writ
To Norway, uncle of young Fortinbras—
Who, impotent and bedrid, scarcely hears
Of this his nephew's purpose—to suppress
His further gait herein, in that the levies,
The lists, and full proportions are all made
Out of his subject; and we here dispatch
You, good Cornelius, and you, Voltemand,
For bearers of this greeting to old Norway,
Giving to you no further personal power
To business with the king, more than the scope
Of these delated articles allow.

[I.ii.27–38]

Claudius's plan is authoritative, informed, and—we eventually learn—successful. Two months later the ambassadors return with good news: the king of Norway, young Fortinbras's uncle, has forbid his nephew from attacking Denmark [II.ii.60–80]. Though it is possible to direct the play so that Fortinbras double-crosses both kings—Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film concludes with a surprise attack on Elsinore—nothing in the text urges such a reading. When Fortinbras does finally approach the castle, in Act Five, it is “with conquest come from Poland,” and his army's “warlike volley” is to greet the English ambassadors who have coincidentally also arrived [V.ii.333–5]; Fortinbras claims the Danish crown only because everyone else who might do so is dead!

So, granting that Claudius has the makings of a good king, how does he feel, initially, about his new stepson? The play gives no indication that he and Hamlet were once close; on the contrary, the horror Hamlet feels toward his mother's “o'erhasty marriage” [II.ii.57], and the vehemence with which he vilifies Claudius throughout, suggest he has never felt particular warmth or respect for the man. I can't imagine that Claudius would not have sensed this—or that Hamlet would have made much effort to disguise it—and perhaps this accounts for the spiteful undertones of those previously

quoted lines about “impious stubbornness” and “unmanly grief” [I.ii.92–4]. Still, Claudius names Hamlet his heir and joins with Gertrude in publically entreating him to stay at Elsinore:

We pray you throw to earth
This unprevailing woe, and think of us
As of a father, for let the world take note
You are the most immediate to our throne,
And with no less nobility of love
Than that which dearest father bears his son
Do I impart toward you. For your intent
In going back to school in Wittenberg,
It is most retrograde to our desire,
And we beseech you, bend you to remain
Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye,
Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son.

[I.ii.106–17]

Ah, but *why*? Much of this play’s endless fascination comes from its ability to accommodate nearly every interpretation of nearly every character, and our impression of Claudius in Act One depends on how despicable we already believe him to be. It is not unreasonable to think he genuinely desires a better relationship with his charismatic stepson. Or he may be honoring his new wife’s wishes concerning her only child—this is the excuse he gives Laertes for seeming to countenance Hamlet’s killing of Polonius:

The queen his mother
Lives almost by his looks, and for myself—
My virtue or my plague, be it either which—
She is so conjunctive to my life and soul
That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not but by her.

[IV.vii.11–16]

Such “generosity” may be cynical: as Asimov notes, “The life-expectancy of a thirty-year-old [in Hamlet’s time] was not really very great. By the time Claudius was dead, Hamlet himself would not, in the course of nature, expect a very much longer life

himself. Is he to have the throne for a poor few years?" [140]. Claudius may also be motivated by fear: "Once outside the country, Hamlet may intrigue, gain foreign allies, raise armies. At court, he will be in sight of his suspicious uncle and stepfather, and in his grasp too" [Asimov, 92].

However one feels about Claudius, it is possible to imagine a world in which the Ghost never appears, Hamlet never learns the truth or feigns madness, and Claudius is never spooked into hostility. Denmark's new king is no Edmund, perpetually scheming, or Macbeth, compulsively paranoid . . . until Hamlet forces him into the awkward position of "mighty opposite" [V.ii.61]. What he most wants is to live comfortably in privilege, and forget how he got there. Unfortunately for all, *forget* turns out to be the one thing Hamlet—father and son alike—cannot do.

Polonius, Laertes, and Ophelia

Act One introduces us to another powerful, troubled family: the king's chief counselor—and spymaster—Polonius, and his son and daughter. (As is often the case in Shakespeare, we learn nothing of the wife and mother.) "The head is not more native to the heart, / The hand more instrumental to the mouth, / Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father," Claudius tells Laertes [I.ii.47–9], and despite Polonius's not-earned reputation as a "wretched, rash, intruding fool" [III.iv.31], I do not think the king is merely flattering him. Until his death, in Act Three, Polonius is the only person we see privately advising Claudius; it stands to reason the old eavesdropper was instrumental in his sovereign's rise—indeed, it would help explain Hamlet's especial contempt for him.⁷

⁷ This does not mean we should assume Polonius conspired with Claudius to kill Old Hamlet. As with Gertrude, there is no indication Polonius knows about the murder; he never mentions it, and Claudius never suggests otherwise.

Polonius lives to meddle; his only substantial appearance in Act One is a master class in unsolicited tutelage. It's worth noting that his famous "few precepts" to Laertes [I.iii.57], who is returning to France⁸, aren't inherently bad advice (which is why they're so often quoted out of context)—especially when living among strangers:

Give thy thoughts no tongue,
Nor any unproportioned thought his act.
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel,
But do not dull thy palm with entertainment
Of each new-hatched, unfledged courage. Beware
Of entrance to a quarrel; but being in,
Bear't that th' opposed may beware of thee.
Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment. . . .
This above all, to thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

[I.iii.58–79]

Several of these tips, beginning with the first, are deeply ironic, given the speaker; they establish Polonius as a hypocrite (though they scarcely rate a notch on the scale of harms he causes), and Laertes seems indifferent: "Most humbly do I take my leave, my lord" is all he replies [I.iii.81]. (To Ophelia, he describes his father's speech as a "double blessing" and "second leave" [I.iii.50–3], indicating he has heard it once before—at least!) In contrast, Polonius's charge to Ophelia becomes the wedge between his daughter and Hamlet, and consequently one of the play's tragic fulcrums. "'Tis told me he hath very oft of late / Given private time to you, and you yourself / Have of your audience been most free and bounteous," the father-ogre begins [I.iii.90–2], and the cynicism set against Ophelia's gentle reply is startling:

⁸ We may assume Laertes—not for the only time in sharp contrast to Hamlet—is going back to school, perhaps the University of Paris, though the play does not specify this.

Ophelia: He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders
Of his affection to me.

Polonius: Affection? Pooh! You speak like a green girl,
Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.
Do you believe his tenders, as you call them?

Ophelia: I do not know, my lord, what I should think.

Polonius: Marry, I will teach you. Think yourself a baby
That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay
Which are not sterling. Tender yourself more dearly,
Or (not to crack the wind of the poor phrase,
Running it thus) you'll tender me a fool.

Ophelia: My lord, he hath importuned me with love
In honorable fashion.

Polonius: Ay, fashion you may call it. Go to, go to.

Ophelia: And hath given countenance to his speech, my lord,
With almost all the holy vows of heaven.

Polonius: Ay, springes to catch woodcocks.

[I.iii.98–114]

Months later, Polonius shall tell Claudius and Gertrude that, having sniffed out this budding relationship, he advised his daughter, “Lord Hamlet is a prince, out of thy star” [II.ii.141]—more or less what Laertes warns her: “He may not, as unvalued persons do, / Carve for himself, for on his choice depends / The safety and health of this whole state, / And therefore must his choice be circumscribed / Unto the voice and yielding of that body / Whereof he is the head” [I.iii.18–23]. In his actual words to Ophelia, though, Polonius leaves no doubt of his true fear; the “fool” he does not want to be “tendered” had a second meaning to the Elizabethans—“infant”:

I do know,
When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul
Lends the tongue vows. . . .
 . . . In few, Ophelia,
Do not believe his vows, for they are brokers,
Not of that dye which their investments show,
But mere implorators of unholy suits,
Breathing like sanctified and pious bawds
The better to beguile.

[I.iii.114–30]

It is in this poisoned atmosphere that Hamlet and Ophelia tried to nurture a shared intimacy. Shakespeare provides few details—by the time they appear together, early in Act Three, Hamlet has been brooding on revenge, and faithless women, for months—but we may assume the spark happened recently; Polonius, with all his spies, seems only just to have noticed. The “private time” he claims they have shared [I.iii.90–2] could imply sex—nothing in the play rules out a sexual relationship, though it is not necessary to assume one—but it could also have been something more innocent: a respite for Hamlet from grief, bitterness, and corruption.

Why did—does?—Hamlet love Ophelia?⁹ To begin, she idealizes him—if anyone can appreciate unalloyed adoration, it is the prince of Denmark. Ophelia’s elegiac description of happier times is more poignant—and plausible—than any of Hamlet’s speeches about his father:

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

[III.i.150–61]

When Hamlet felt otherwise abandoned, Ophelia’s love helped him stave off despair. Yet she is more than just a passive adorer, at least when clear of her father’s

⁹ I take it for granted that Hamlet—however he comes to feel—did sincerely love Ophelia. As we shall see, his one protest to the contrary [III.i.119] seems designed, in a moment of extreme vulnerability and suspicion, to wound her.

shadow; she is intelligent and perceptive, though she has precious few opportunities to prove it even before Polonius interferes and Hamlet—as far as she knows—loses his mind. Laertes gets a taste of her medicine after insisting she lock up her “chaste treasure.” “I shall the effect of this good lesson keep / As watchman to my heart,” she replies dutifully, then continues:

but, good my brother,
Do not as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
Whiles like a puffed and reckless libertine
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads
And recks not his own rede.

[I.iii.44–50]

“O, fear me not,” Laertes sniffs, then nods dutifully himself as his father bloviates—neither man inclined to regard his own counsel. One can imagine Ophelia’s moral precepts making a greater impression upon the earnest Hamlet . . . for a time.

The melancholy prince we meet is still able to separate Ophelia from his mother’s and her father’s sins. That he finally forsakes her is made easier by the arrival of an old friend, a man with no ties to Elsinore’s power structure, and therefore one in whom Hamlet can more safely confide:

Horatio

Horatio may frustrate me more than any other character—not because he is especially complex, but because the sum of what we learn about him seems to defy logic. Who is this “scholar” from Wittenberg [I.i.42], and how does he roam freely through Claudius’s surveillance state?

Horatio is Hamlet’s “good friend” and “fellow student” [I.ii.163 & 177], that much is certain; though we may question how long it has been since Hamlet was at

Wittenberg, Horatio seems still to be a student there.¹⁰ He set out for Elsinore upon learning of Old Hamlet's death, but arrived too late for the funeral and shortly after the fateful wedding. As well as to support Hamlet, Horatio may have made the trek to pay his respects to a revered monarch, for he too is subject to the Danish crown. He refers to Old Hamlet as "Our last king" [I.i.80], and his chronicle of Denmark's recent battles with Norway and of young Fortinbras's efforts to redeem Norway's losses—"The source of this our watch, and the chief head / Of this posthaste and rummage in the land" [I.i.106–7]—rings with patriotic prejudice: Old Hamlet was "valiant," and his victories legitimized "by a sealed compact / Well ratified by law and heraldry"; Fortinbras's father was "pricked on by a most emulate pride," and the son, "[o]f unimproved mettle hot and full, / Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there / Sharked up a list of lawless resolute" [I.i.80–100]. Horatio even claims to recognize the Ghost based on memories of Old Hamlet's appearance in battle, as though he'd fought beside the now-dead king ("Such was the very armor he had on / When he the ambitious Norway combatted. / So frowned he once when, in an angry parle, / He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice." [I.i.60–3])—though the battle with Norway (per the old gravedigger) happened thirty years in the past, and Horatio says he saw Old Hamlet (alive) only once [I.ii.186]!

Patriotism notwithstanding, Horatio is a stranger to Elsinore. Hamlet says as much, following his conversation with the Ghost ("And therefore as a stranger give it welcome." [I.v.168]), and he contrasts Horatio's ignorance of local drinking customs with his own disgust ("But to my mind, though I am native here / And to the manner

¹⁰ As previously quoted, in response to Hamlet's query, "But what, in faith, make you from Wittenberg?" Horatio replies, jokingly, "A truant disposition." He then gives the true reason: "My lord, I came to see your father's funeral" [I.ii.168–76].

born, it is a custom / More honored in the breach than the observance” [I.iv.12–16]). It also seems telling that, while Claudius and Gertrude assure Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that Hamlet “hath much talked of you, / And sure I am two men there is not living / To whom he more adheres” [II.ii.19–21], neither reveals any prior knowledge of Horatio.¹¹

Assuming, then, that this visit to Elsinore is Horatio’s first, why is he hanging out with the sentries, watching for ghosts? And how does he know more about foreign threats than the men whose job it is to guard against them? Remember, Horatio has not yet seen Hamlet; when they finally converse, in the next scene, Hamlet is clearly greeting his friend for the first time in months, if not longer [I.ii.160–78]. So easily does Horatio access Hamlet when the plot requires it—he walks right up to the distracted prince—I cannot believe he has been in town more than a day or two; any longer and they’d already have reunited. Yet in that brief time he has apparently not only met Marcellus and Barnardo but won their trust!

To be clear, I’m not suggesting my questions are unanswerable, or that actors playing Horatio can’t invent some private backstory to resolve such inconsistencies. Perhaps Old Hamlet’s armor, following the victory over Norway, became a national icon, recognizable to all Danes. Perhaps the battle with the sledded Polacks happened recently, and this is where Horatio saw Old Hamlet, frowning, for the one and only time. (Perhaps Hamlet too fought at this battle, thereby accounting for Ophelia’s description of him as a soldier, as well as Fortinbras’s conviction that Hamlet, had he survived, would “have proved most royal” [V.ii.380–1].) Perhaps Marcellus is a friend of a friend of a relative. None of this is impossible—just implausible.

¹¹ In Act Five, Claudius orders Horatio, by name, to “wait upon” Hamlet [V.i.282], but by then Horatio has spent months at court.

Absent from Act Two, by Act Three Horatio has settled into the role of Hamlet's sole confidante—indeed, for the rest of the play he says scarcely a word to anyone else.¹² Yet the incoherence of these early scenes lingers. Horatio is hardly the only manifestation of Shakespearean carelessness in service to convenience. Even so, I cannot think of a less artful example in his masterpieces.

The Ghost

We come now to the moment when Hamlet starts down the path from melancholy prince to tragic hero. Horatio initially dismisses the Ghost as “fantasy” [I.i.23], and we may expect Hamlet to be equally skeptical, yet he is eager for the news: “For God's love let me hear!” [I.ii.195]. Though he follows this impulse with questions—“But where was this?” “Did you not speak to it?” “Then saw you not his face?” [I.ii.212–29]—these seem more like attempts to clarify the scene than doubts. “I would I had been there,” he finally concludes, then determines to watch that night for the spirit's return [I.ii.235–43].

As to the Ghost's true identity, Hamlet is slightly more careful: “If it assume my noble father's person, / I'll speak to it though hell itself should gape / And bid me hold my peace” [I.ii.244–6]. When “it” finally appears, two scenes later, whatever caution Hamlet entered with gives way to yearning:

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
 Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
 Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
 Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
 Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
 That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet,

¹² He speaks isolated lines to Gertrude [IV.v.14–15], an anonymous Gentleman [IV.vi.1–4], and Osric [V.ii.110–11], but his only conversations with people other than Hamlet are with fellow “strangers”: a sailor with letters from the prince [IV.vi.7–33], and Fortinbras and the English Ambassador—on the subject of Hamlet—to conclude the play [V.ii.345–86].

King, father, royal Dane. O, answer me!

[I.iv.39–45]

The Ghost silently beckons Hamlet to follow “to a more removed ground” [I.iv.61]. His companions try to restrain him, and Hamlet gives the first of many proofs that, when instinct overrides his other faculties, he has no problem acting; far from “thinking too precisely on th’ event” [IV.iv.41] or unpacking his heart with words [II.ii.524], he is possibly the rashest person in the kingdom:

Horatio: What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
That beetles o’er his base into the sea,
And there assume some other horrible form,
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason
And draw you into madness? . . .

Hamlet: It waves me still.
Go on. I’ll follow thee.

Marcellus: You shall not go, my lord.

Hamlet: Hold off your hands.

Horatio: Be ruled. You shall not go.

Hamlet: My fate cries out
And makes each petty artire in this body
As hardy as the Nemean lion’s nerve.
Still am I called. Unhand me, gentlemen.
By heaven, I’ll make a ghost of him that lets me!
I say, away! Go on. I’ll follow thee.

[I.iv.69–86]

Whatever his initial doubts, by daybreak Hamlet is a true believer. “It is an honest ghost,” he tells a bewildered Horatio [I.v.138]; alone, he repeats the Ghost’s parting admonition, “Remember me” [I.v.91], three times in twenty lines and vows to wipe from his memory all else [I.v.92–112]. What has the Ghost said that Hamlet finds so compelling?

For starters, it's a hair-raising tale. "My hour is almost come, / When I to sulph'rous and tormenting flames / Must render up myself," the Ghost begins, and Hamlet is hooked:

Hamlet: Alas, poor ghost!
Ghost: Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing
To what I shall unfold.
Hamlet: Speak. I am bound to hear.
Ghost: So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.
Hamlet: What?
Ghost: I am thy father's spirit,
Doomed for a certain time to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away.

[I.v.2–13]

If this is indeed purgatory, it begs the question of why a confined spirit would be free to wander the night, seeking vengeance—how does tempting one's son to commit murder fit into God's plan? Regardless, this horrifying vision speaks directly to Hamlet's fears: though he shall continue to wrestle with uncertainty (most famously in "To be or not to be" [III.i.56–88]), the Ghost seems like definitive evidence that death is no end to suffering.

We might wonder if this spirit, if not a devil, is nevertheless in a hell of its own making. Silent for the first four scenes, once it begins spewing venom, only daybreak can exorcise it:

Ghost: Now, Hamlet, hear.
'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forged process of my death
Rankly abused. But know, thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father's life
Now wears his crown.
Hamlet: O my prophetic soul!
My uncle?

Ghost: Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts—
O wicket wit and gifts, that have the power
So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen.
O Hamlet, what a falling off was there
From me, whose love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage, and to decline
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
To those of mine!
But virtue, as it never will be moved,
Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,
So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage.

[I.v.34–57]

And so on—for thirty-four more lines (including “Brief let me be” [I.v.59])! The Ghost may look like Hamlet’s father, but it sounds like Hamlet—or Hamlet sounds like it—when contrasting Gertrude’s first and second lovers: “Hyperion to a satyr” [I.ii.140]. Later, confronting Gertrude in her closet, Hamlet again channels his father’s twisted spirit:

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

[III.iv.53–67]

As Claudius ultimately confirms, through word and deed, the accusations against him, I see no reason to doubt the Ghost's identity. This is indeed Old Hamlet's spirit, though it seems wholly indifferent to the well-being of its still-living son. Yet it retains compassion for the wayward Queen. "But howsoever thou pursues this act," it commands Hamlet, "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her" [I.v.84–8]. Perhaps this most of all convinces Hamlet of the Ghost's honesty: the idealized father, modeling even in death both godlike wrath and mercy.

Hamlet's immediate response to the charge of murder ("O my prophetic soul! / My uncle?" [I.v.40]) might seem like further proof of Claudius's guilt. Yet prior to this moment Hamlet has given no indication that he suspects anyone of anything worse than carnality. "Foul deeds will rise / Though all the earth o'erwhelm them to men's eyes," he declares upon learning of the Ghost from Horatio [I.ii.257–8], but this general conjecture—quite reasonable, given the circumstances—expresses essentially the same idea as Marcellus's "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" [I.iv.90], and Marcellus is not hinting at regicide. No, Hamlet's "prophetic soul" seems like a *post-hoc* justification of the loathing he feels for Claudius and the contempt he has shown him: a more eloquent version of *I was right to hate that guy!*

When the Ghost finally disappears, Hamlet has a long moment alone to deliver his second soliloquy; if previously his secret thoughts were marked by agonized inertia, now he is frightfully focused:

Remember thee?
Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory

I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
 That youth and observation copied there,
 And thy commandment all alone shall live
 Within the book and volume of my brain,
 Unmixed with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!

[I.v.95–104]

The prospect of action briefly lifts Hamlet from his depression. But he cannot escape for long, and his next thought—before abruptly shifting to Claudius—is of his mother:

O most pernicious woman!
 O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
 My tables—meet it is I set it down
 That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.
 At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.
 So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word:
 It is “Adieu, adieu, remember me.”
 I have sworn’t.

[I.v.105–12]

This business with Hamlet’s “tables” has puzzled enough readers that Bradley devotes a multipage note to it [409–12]. Consider what Hamlet has just encountered and learned. “Is it strange,” Bradley asks, “that he should say what is strange? Why, there would be nothing to wonder at if his mind collapsed on the spot.” Instead, with Herculean effort, Hamlet forces his heart to “hold” and his “sinews” to stay firm [I.v.93–5]. He burns what he has heard into his memory. Yet *still* he fears forgetting. Bradley continues:

A time will come, he feels, when all this appalling experience of the last half-hour will be incredible to him, will seem a mere nightmare, will even, conceivably, quite vanish from his mind. Let him have something in black and white that will bring it back and *force* him to remember and believe.

I would quibble with one word here. Hamlet more than *feels* he may forget. “Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven”—that too was the Ghost’s command, no less than vengeance upon Claudius. Yet

immediately after promising to remember, Hamlet curses his “pernicious” mother. If he cannot trust himself—if his own instincts are so unreliable—how can he hope to trust others? Herein, I think (to jump ahead slightly), lies the seed of Hamlet’s delay.

Bradley makes another crucial point, though again I question his phrasing; I do not think Hamlet ever goes truly mad, but I think his mind is closer to “collapsing” than Bradley suggests. Consider how he greets his friends when they charge back onstage—his first conversation following the Ghost’s disappearance:

Marcellus: Illo, ho, ho, my lord!

Hamlet: Hillo, ho, ho, boy! Come and come.

Marcellus: How is’t, my noble lord?

Horatio: What news, my lord?

Hamlet: O, wonderful!

Horatio: Good my lord, tell it.

Hamlet: No, you will reveal it

Horatio: Not I, my lord, by heaven.

Marcellus: Nor I, my lord.

Hamlet: How say you then? Would heart of man once think it?
But you’ll be secret?

Both: Ay, by heaven.

Hamlet: There’s never a villain dwelling in all Denmark
But he’s an arrant knave.

Horatio: There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave
To tell us this.

Hamlet: Why, right, you are in the right,
And so, without more circumstance at all,
I hold it fit that we shake hands and part:
You, as your business and desire shall point you,
For every man hath business and desire
Such as it is, and for my own poor part,
I will go pray.

[I.v.115–32]

These are not the words of a stable mind. Before Hamlet can spiral further away, however, Horatio unwittingly snaps him back to the urgency of his task:

Horatio: These are but wild and whirling words, my lord.

Hamlet: I am sorry they offend you, heartily;
Yes, faith, heartily.

Horatio: There's no offense, my lord.
Hamlet: Yes, by Saint Patrick¹³, but there is, Horatio,
 And much offense too.

[I.v.133–7]

In the dozen lines that follow, Hamlet pronounces the ghost “honest,” tells his friends to “o’ermaster” their desire to know more, and swears them to secrecy [I.v.137–51]. Then the Ghost cries out from below, and Hamlet again seems on the verge of mania:

Ghost: Swear.
Hamlet: Ha, ha, boy, sayst thou so? Art thou there, truepenny?
 Come on. You hear this fellow in the cellarage.
 Consent to swear.
Horatio: Propose the oath, my lord.
Hamlet: Never to speak of this that you have seen,
 Swear by my sword.
Ghost [Beneath]: Swear.
Hamlet: *Hic et ubique?* Then we'll shift our ground.
 Come hither, gentlemen,
 And lay your hands again upon my sword.
 Swear by my sword
 Never to speak of this that you have heard.
Ghost [Beneath]: Swear by his sword.
Hamlet: Well said, old mole! Canst work i' th' earth so fast?
 A worthy pioner! Once more remove, good friends.
Horatio: O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!
Hamlet: And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.
 There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
 Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

[I.v.152–70]

Even these last lines—which (like so much else in the play) may sound, out of context, like wisdom: an appeal to open-mindedness—are really further evidence of Hamlet’s irrationality. Horatio is baffled, not skeptical; a disembodied voice urging *Swear*, and Hamlet darting around in response, alternating between laughter and Latin, *are* strange! And precisely what is “welcome” about this bloody spirit and its demands?

¹³ “the legendary keeper of purgatory,” per Braunmuller’s note

Hamlet knows better. “The time is out of joint,” he concludes, just twenty lines later; “O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!” [I.v.191–2].

All this strangeness, of the scene as well as his own behavior, must unnerve Hamlet—how could it not?—and he demands his friends swear one final, rambling oath:

Here as before, never, so help you mercy,
How strange or odd some'er I bear myself
(As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on),
That you, at such times seeing me, never shall,
With arms encumbered thus, or this headshake,
Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,
As “Well, well, we know,” or “We could, an if we would,”
Or “If we list to speak,” or “There be, an if they might,”
Or such ambiguous giving out, to note
That you know aught of me—this do swear,
So grace and mercy at your most need help you.

[I.v.172–83]

Hamlet’s “antic disposition” may be strategic, a tacit acknowledgement that secure revenge, if it is even possible, will take time; or perhaps the part of him that finds the act repulsive can no longer be ignored. Or perhaps he genuinely fears going mad.

Whatever Hamlet’s motive here, madness and delay are appropriate notes on which to conclude the act, for they shall be dominant motifs in the others. The resolve implied by the act’s final line—“Nay, come, let’s go together,” Hamlet tells his friends [I.v.193]—has completely dissipated by the time we next see Hamlet. Let us turn, at last, to the question of *why*.

Acts Two & Three: The Mousetrap

Between Acts One and Two, approximately two months pass. How do we know? While awaiting “The Mousetrap,” in Act Three, Hamlet exclaims, “What should a man do but be merry? For look you how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died

within's two hours." To which Ophelia replies, "Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord" [III.ii.120–3].¹⁴ Act Three follows Act Two by only a day: when the players reach Elsinore, at the end of Act Two, Hamlet commands a performance "tomorrow night" [II.ii.475–9]. We have already established that Old Hamlet was murdered roughly two months prior to Act One, which also unfolds over a single day; for Ophelia's math to add up, therefore, two additional months are necessary.

During these undramatized months, Hamlet's "antic disposition" successfully convinces the court of his madness—though he seems not to have performed with much urgency, for when Act Two begins Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have only just arrived, having been hastily sent for. "Something have you heard / Of Hamlet's transformation," Claudius declares, then outlines the duo's mission: "To draw [Hamlet] on to pleasures, and to gather / So much as from occasion you may glean, / Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus, / That opened lies within our remedy" [II.ii.1–18]. There is no indication that other remedies have been attempted, and—at least for now—Gertrude does not sound especially concerned. "I doubt it is no other but the main," she confides to her husband: "His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage" [II.ii.56–7].

So . . . if he hasn't killed Claudius, and assuming his antics have interfered with his princely duties, what has Hamlet been up to? To infer from his first appearance in Act Two, he has been wandering the castle, ostentatiously reading and peppering conversations with cryptic insults and non sequiturs. Polonius—ever snooping for the king—makes a particularly inviting target:

Polonius: How does my good Lord Hamlet?

¹⁴ To which Hamlet replies, "O heavens! die two months ago, and not forgotten yet"—but he is being willfully perverse.

Hamlet: Well, God-a-mercy.

Polonius: Do you know me, my lord?

Hamlet: Excellent well. You are a fishmonger.

Polonius: Not I, my lord.

Hamlet: Then I would you were so honest a man.

Polonius: Honest, my lord?

Hamlet: Ay, sir. To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.

Polonius: That's very true, my lord.

Hamlet: For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion—Have you a daughter?

Polonius: I have, my lord

Hamlet: Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to't.

[II.ii.171–86]

These lines begin the play's first extended sequence in prose; excluding his brief recitation of a favorite speech, following the players' entrance [II.ii.390–404], Hamlet does not return to verse until his great soliloquy to conclude the scene [II.ii.487–544]. Prose, with irregular structures, is the better medium for conveying madness, and its suppleness facilitates a mode largely absent from Act One: the comic. Hamlet—man and play—is much funnier now. It is tempting to imagine that, at least initially, Hamlet enjoyed playing the madman—the freedom to, for example, taunt Polonius with visions of bastard grandchildren. And the mocks keep coming:

Polonius: What do you read, my lord?

Hamlet: Words, words, words.

Polonius: What is the matter, my lord?

Hamlet: Between who?

Polonius: I mean the matter that you read, my lord.

Hamlet: Slanders, sir, for the satirical rogue says here that old men have gray beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams. All which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down, for yourself, sir, shall grow old as I am if, like a crab, you could go backward.

[II.ii.191–203]

Imagine what we will, after two months the effort has become tiresome. Hamlet abruptly changes the subject to death (*Polonius*: “Will you walk out of the air, my lord?” *Hamlet*: “Into my grave.” [II.ii.205–6]); does it again (*Polonius*: “My lord, I will take my leave of you.” *Hamlet*: “You cannot take from me anything that I will not more willingly part withal—except my life, except my life, except my life.” [II.ii.212–16]); and mutters, when finally rid of *Polonius*, “These tedious old fools!” [II.ii.218]. This conclusion seems relevant to the question of whether Hamlet is mad; here and elsewhere,¹⁵ he displays too much awareness—of himself and his surroundings—for me to believe he is not feigning.

Consider too his treatment of *Ophelia*. Remember, it has been two months not only since Hamlet saw the Ghost but since *Polonius* ordered *Ophelia* to break off their relationship. Yet only now, at the start of Act Two, does Hamlet seem to have alarmed her:

Ophelia: O my lord, my lord, I have been so affrighted!

Polonius: With what, i’ th’ name of God?

Ophelia: My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
 Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
 No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
 Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle,
 Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
 And with a look so piteous in purport
 As if he had been loosed out of hell
 To speak of horrors—he comes before me.

Polonius: Mad for thy love?

Ophelia: My lord, I do not know,
 But truly I do fear it.

[II.i.74–85]

If Hamlet were truly mad, it seems odd he would not already have done something—many things!—during the previous two months to frighten *Ophelia*, who

¹⁵ for example, the soliloquies

would promptly have told her father, who would promptly have reported to Claudius. Instead, no one seems to have anticipated this kind of behavior from the prince:

Polonius: What, have you given him any hard words of late?

Ophelia: No, my good lord; but as you did command
I did repel his letters and denied
His access to me.

Polonius: That hath made him mad.
I am sorry that with better heed and judgment
I had not quoted him. I feared he did but trifle
And meant to wrack thee

[II.i.106–12]

I take Ophelia here to mean she refused Hamlet’s letters and “denied his access” *immediately* after Polonius commanded it—she is nothing if not obedient (however grudgingly). Why then would Hamlet have waited two months to confront her in this bizarre way?

Again, let’s assume Hamlet loved Ophelia and was pained to hurt her. (Assuming the opposite does not help answer our question.) Her sudden refusal to see him may have confirmed his darker suspicions about faithless, “frail” women—but it may also have been a relief. Denied her company, he does not have to deceive her, convince her he is mad, or hide his despair. He does not have to confront his own deepening ambivalence toward her—a task he struggles mightily with in Act Three, when he can no longer avoid her.

Assuming all this, what might have changed to impel Hamlet—disheveled and dreadful—into Ophelia’s chamber? We know that elsewhere at court, Hamlet’s “transformation” can no longer be overlooked—Gertrude and Claudius are sufficiently concerned to offer Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in exchange for intelligence, “such thanks / As fits a king’s remembrance” [II.ii.25–6]. Their plotting does not fool Hamlet.

“I know the good king and queen have sent for you,” he declares within 30 lines of greeting his old friends [II.ii.250–1]. In the Folio, the amateur spies make little effort to hide their own diagnosis of the problem: to Hamlet’s “Denmark’s a prison,” Rosencrantz replies, “Why, then your ambition makes it one. ’Tis too narrow for your mind”; “for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream,” Guildenstern sagely echoes [Folio, II.ii.244–59]. Even if we follow the Second Quarto and leave out these lines, we may reasonably conclude that Claudius has begun to fear his unpredictable heir. Hamlet’s “antic disposition,” put on to repel danger, has instead attracted it. What better way, then, for Hamlet to distract the king than to make him believe the true cause of his “madness” is lovesickness? Cue the dumb show for Ophelia.

If this is indeed Hamlet’s plan, it works . . . sort of. Ophelia runs directly to her father, who scurries to the king and queen and—after much prating—recites a love letter from Hamlet to Ophelia and declares the mystery solved:

Polonius: [Hamlet], repelled, a short tale to make,
 Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
 Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,
 Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension,
 Into the madness wherein now he raves,
 And all we mourn for.

King: Do you think this?

Queen: It may be, very like.

Polonius: Hath there been such a time—I would fain know that—
 That I have positively said “’Tis so,”
 When it proved otherwise?

King: Not that I know.

[II.ii.146–55]

Not a ringing endorsement! Claudius is open to the theory, though. “How may we try it further?” he wonders aloud, and Polonius immediately proposes to “loose” Ophelia to Hamlet while he and the king eavesdrop behind a tapestry [II.ii.159–67].

Is this what Hamlet wanted? In an instant, his situation at court changes—I do not think for the better. He has ensured at least one more excruciating encounter with Ophelia. Worse, rather than distract the king, Hamlet has pulled his attention—and Polonius’s to boot—dangerously closer. It is easy to stage these scenes—particularly, as we shall see, the Act Three confrontation with Ophelia—so that Hamlet realizes he is being spied on, but even if he doesn’t know he must suspect it. After two months of performing for audiences seen and unseen, the strain on Hamlet must be immense. How much longer can he bear it? Would it not have been easier to have killed Claudius by now?

Apparently not. And if we hope to understand why not, we must first note what should be obvious—what was surely obvious to Amleth, the legendary source of Shakespeare’s hero, and to the many usurpers and would-be usurpers in his history plays: killing a king—let alone surviving the act—is hard! Hamlet can approach his uncle whenever he wants; if he truly did not “set my life at a pin’s fee,” as he claims to Horatio before following the Ghost [I.iv.65], he might have run Claudius through at any time, then sighed with relief as guards hauled him off to jail—or executed him on the spot. The fact that Hamlet *doesn’t* do this seems sufficient evidence, despite his famous ruminations on suicide, that he wants to live. What’s more, he wants to uphold his reputation. “O God, Horatio, what a wounded name, / Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me!” he cries out, dying, at play’s end, then orders his only remaining friend to “draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story” [V.ii.327–32]. There are also indications that Hamlet wants not only to kill his uncle but to succeed him as king: he describes Claudius as “[a] cutpurse of the empire and the rule, / That from a shelf the

precious diadem stole / And put it in his pocket” [III.iv.99–101], and lists among Claudius’s many sins his having “[p]opped in between th’ election and my hopes” [V.ii.64].

So . . . if Hamlet doesn’t want to go down in history as a short-lived regicide, how should he proceed? Asimov summarizes the external obstacles facing the prince [103]:

Hamlet can undoubtedly drive the King off the throne and secure his own succession if he can reveal the truth about his father’s death. He could then kill Claudius, or have him executed, and do so most righteously. Even if he kills Claudius first, he might excuse the deed and gain the throne if he can reveal Claudius to have been a regicide and himself to be an avenger rather than a murderer.

But how can he do that? How can he prove Claudius to be a murderer?

Hamlet has no evidence of the murder except what the Ghost has told him, and who would believe that? That the Ghost exists at all would be backed by the word of three common soldiers, whom no one would believe, and Horatio, whose word *would* carry weight. But who would bear witness as to what the Ghost had said? No one. The Ghost had spoken only to Hamlet and no one else had heard the tale. And who could bear witness that the Ghost is an honest one and not an evil, lying spirit? No one again. Hamlet could say so, but he is an interested party.

Though Hamlet does not dwell on this particular concern—as we have seen, he believes the Ghost more or less immediately—he at least recognizes the potential for error:

The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil, and the devil hath power
T’ assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me.

[II.ii.537–42]

These lines suggest another cause of Hamlet’s delay: his debilitating melancholy. In emphasizing this cause, Bradley describes Hamlet’s “habitual feeling,” when the play

begins and the Ghost appears, as “one of disgust at life and everything in it, himself included. . . . Such a state of feeling is inevitably adverse to *any* kind of decided action; the body is inert, the mind indifferent or worse; its response is, ‘it does not matter,’ ‘it is not worth while,’ ‘it is no good’” [122]. Cruelly, tragically, Bradley argues [120],

. . . this is the time which [Hamlet’s] fate chooses. In this hour of uttermost weakness, this sinking of his whole being towards annihilation, there comes on him, bursting the bounds of the natural world with a shock of astonishment and terror, the revelation of his mother’s adultery and his father’s murder, and, with this, the demand on him, in the name of everything dearest and most sacred, to arise and act. And for a moment, though his brain reels and totters, his soul leaps up in passion to answer this demand. But it comes too late. It does but strike home the last rivet in the melancholy which holds him bound.

Hamlet remains “bound,” incapacitated, well into Act Two, when he gives perhaps the most poignant description of his mental state. He has just compelled Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to admit the king and queen have sent for them; theirs is no “free visitation” [II.ii.244–62]. “I will tell you why,” Hamlet continues, but the lines that follow make no mention of madness or lovesickness or even ambition:

I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth,
forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed, it goes so heavily with
my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a
sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you,
this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with
golden fire—why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and
pestilent congregation of vapors.

[II.ii.263–73]

I find no strategic reason for this speech. To a pair of known spies, working (even if unawares) for a murderer, Hamlet speaks . . . the truth? Claudius did not send for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Polonius is not manipulating his daughter, because Hamlet is depressed; what becomes of his cover if his old friends report he is sane? “I am

but mad north-northwest,” he tells them later [II.ii.321], but in this moment Hamlet chooses vulnerability over riddles. Why?

Interestingly, unlike Hamlet’s soliloquies, this monologue is written in prose. There are many reasons why Shakespeare might have chosen prose over verse, but one that appeals to me is that verse is inherently artificial; prose, being less filtered through form, seems more authentic—might it therefore be more truthful? If so, we may infer that in his soliloquies Hamlet is covering well-trodden ground. Round and round in his head he goes, endlessly dissecting his mother’s faithlessness, his failure to act, his fascination with death; the speeches we hear are the latest iterations of these obsessions, apotheoses of language but increasingly cold. What Hamlet has not done before now, it seems, is reveal the depths of his despair to other people—not even Horatio. (Is this more evidence that Hamlet and Horatio were not especially close in the play’s backstory?) To people he might expect to empathize with rather than conspire against him. The impact of such a betrayal could begin to account for Hamlet’s gratuitous dispatching of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, in England.

That is several acts away, however; for now, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern say nothing, and Hamlet abruptly transitions to the kind of philosophizing we might imagine three precocious young men indulging in at university:

What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me—nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.

[II.ii.273–80]

We cannot know for sure why Rosencrantz—and probably also Guildenstern—smiles, but the reaction clearly bothers Hamlet:

Rosencrantz: My lord, there was no such stuff in my thoughts.

Hamlet: Why did ye laugh then, when I said “Man delights not me”?

Rosencrantz: To think, my lord, if you delight not in man, what lenten entertainment the players shall receive from you. We coted them on the way, and hither are they coming to offer you service.

[II.ii.281–8]

This has always seemed to me a lame excuse, though perhaps it is sincere. Regardless, in Hamlet’s pique I sense a deeper hurt: despite their duplicity he has opened himself to his friends, and rather than reciprocate—or even just listen respectfully—they chuckle.

Heaven and earth no longer move Hamlet, but Rosencrantz thinks an itinerant troupe of actors will do the trick?

And yet . . . for a brief while, it does. Especially in the Folio, upon learning the troupe’s identity Hamlet becomes as engaged in the present moment as we have seen him:

Hamlet: Do they hold the same estimation they did when I was in the city?
Are they so followed?

Rosencrantz: No indeed, are they not.

Hamlet: How comes it? Do they grow rusty?

Rosencrantz: Nay, their endeavor keeps in the wonted pace, but there is, sir, an eyrie of children, little eyases, that cry out on the top of question and are most tyrannically clapped for’t. These are now the fashion, and so berattle the common stages (so they call then) that many wearing rapiers are afraid of goosequills and dare scarce come thither.

Hamlet: What, are they children? Who maintains ’em? How are they escorted? Will they pursue the quality no longer than they can sing? Will they not say afterwards, if they should grow themselves to common players (as it is most like, if their means are no better), their writers do them wrong to make them exclaim against their own succession?

[Folio, II.ii.303–21]

This apparent non sequitur may be foremost an inside joke—several of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, including Ben Jonson, wrote satirical plays for children’s companies during the so-called “War of the Theaters”—but as a window into Hamlet’s character it is nevertheless revealing. “Th’ appurtenance of welcome is fashion and ceremony,” he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. “Let me comply with you in this garb, lest my extent to the players (which I tell you must show fairly outwards) should more appear like entertainment than yours” [II.ii.314–8]—but when the players finally enter, the prince leaves no doubt as to whom he is happier to entertain:

You are welcome, masters, welcome, all.—I am glad to see thee well.—Welcome, good friends.—O, old friend, why, thy face is valanced since I saw thee last. Com’st thou to beard me in Denmark?—What, my young lady and mistress? By’r Lady, your ladyship is nearer to heaven than when I saw you last by the altitude of a chopine. Pray God your voice, like a piece of uncurrent gold, be not cracked within the ring.—Masters, you are all welcome. We’ll e’en to’t like French falconers, fly at anything we see. We’ll have a speech straight. Come, give us a taste of your quality. Come, a passionate speech.

[II.ii.363–73]

Hamlet then recites (“with good accent and good discretion” [II.ii.406–7], says Polonius!) the first twelve-and-a-half lines [II.ii.392–404] of the speech he wants to hear—though he has heard it only once, he scrupulously notes, “for the play . . . pleased not the million; ’twas caviar to the general, but it was (as I received it, and others, whose judgments in such matters cried in the top of mine) an excellent play, well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty as cunning” [II.ii.375–81].¹⁶ In such moments—including his celebrated “advice to the players” [III.ii.1–44], when he instructs professional actors

¹⁶ This may be another inside joke, for the unnamed play dramatizes the fall of Troy—the setting of Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, written around the same time as *Hamlet* and possibly never performed at the Globe; Harold Bloom [1998, 327] describes *Troilus* as “the most difficult and elitist of all [Shakespeare’s] works.”

on how to speak lines he has written, for a play he is producing (“Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you . . .”)—we understand Hamlet not as tragic hero or avenger or philosopher-prince but as thwarted artist. How tempted he must be to cast all else away and follow the players straight out of Elsinore! “Let them be well used,” he tells Polonius, “for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time.” When Polonius is unmoved, Hamlet—for arguably the only time in the play—combines the moral high ground with unconditional charity:

Polonius: My lord, I will use them according to their desert.

Hamlet: God’s bodkin, man, much better! Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping? Use them after your own honor and dignity. The less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty.

[II.ii.463–72]

Small wonder, then, that Hamlet sees in the players the opportunity that for two months has eluded him. As they exit with Polonius, Hamlet buttonholes one:

Hamlet: Dost thou hear me, old friend? Can you play “The Murder of Gonzago”?

Player: Ay, my lord.

Hamlet: We’ll ha’t tomorrow night. You could for a need study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines which I would set down and insert in’t, could you not?

Player: Ay, my lord.

Hamlet: Very well.

[II.ii.476–83]

Then they are gone; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exit too, and for the first time in the scene—the longest in the play, at well over 500 lines—Hamlet is alone. (Indeed, that is the first thing he says, in what becomes his longest soliloquy [II.ii.487–544].) And instantly, with no one to distract him, the cheer falls away and the self-loathing returns. “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!” he begins, contrasting his own passivity with

the “passionate speech” he has just heard. Actors can bring themselves to tears merely by imagining some outrage—“Yet I,” Hamlet continues,

A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
 Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
 And can say nothing. No, not for a king,
 Upon whose property and most dear life
 A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?
 Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?
 Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face?
 Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i' th' throat
 As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?
 Ha, 'swounds, I should take it, for it cannot be
 But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall
 To make oppression bitter, or ere this
 I should ha' fatted all the region kites
 With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!

[II.ii.505–19]

Of course, the entire point of theatrical acting is to *feign* emotion; the greatest tragedian may be helpless with a real blade in his hand—as Hamlet assuredly is not. I do not think he is feigning anything in this rant, despite my prior thoughts contrasting prose and verse—the ability to “unpack my heart with words” [II.ii.524] may be all that is keeping him sane—yet there is a layer of performance here, for an audience of one. If he can whip himself into a sufficient frenzy, perhaps he can find the energy to sustain real action. “About, my brains,” he cries—and suddenly, seemingly, inspiration strikes:

I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play
 Have by the very cunning of the scene
 Been struck so to the soul that presently
 They have proclaimed their malefactions.
 For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
 With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
 Play something like the murder of my father
 Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks.
 I'll tent him to the quick. If a do blench,
 I know my course.

[III.i.526–37]

I say “seemingly” because there is an irony here, easily overlooked: Hamlet has already had this idea—fifty lines earlier—when he asked the players to perform “The Murder of Gonzago” with a short speech penned by himself. Surely Hamlet’s “dozen or sixteen lines” (though Shakespeare never identifies them) are intended to heighten the parallels between Gonzago’s murder and his father’s. Yet now he speaks as though formulating the plan on the spot. Why?

Note that Hamlet never suggests his aim is to reveal Claudius’s treachery to the court—he shall be watching for a “blench,” or flinch, not a spectacle. But even if Claudius gives himself away to Hamlet (and to Horatio, whom Hamlet posts during the performance to observe Claudius), the problem of how to kill the king without ruining himself remains. Rather than pursue a solution, Hamlet grasps at a question that until now has scarcely bothered him: can the Ghost be trusted? He concludes:

The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil, and the devil hath power
T’ assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. I’ll have grounds
More relative than this. The play’s the thing
Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.

[II.ii.537–44]

Hamlet has had two months to probe the Ghost’s accusations, if this were truly his concern—can we believe it’s only now occurring to him? What I hear in these lines are more excuses for delay. As he greeted the players and heard their “quality,” Hamlet instinctively realized they might help “catch” his uncle, and he arranged—with the same decisiveness that impelled him to follow the Ghost—to produce such an occasion. Yet the prospect of meaningful action remains daunting, and once alone he begins reframing his

instinct as a chance to test the Ghost. It does not occur to him that Claudius—and Gertrude—might have non-incriminating reasons to flinch during a performance that features such lines as “A second time I kill my husband dead / When second husband kisses me in bed” [III.ii.180–1] and an act of regicide by the king’s *nephew*¹⁷ [III.ii.240]! The fact that his plot ultimately works out better than he’d hoped—Claudius not only blanches, he flees the theatre calling for “light” [III.ii.264]—is not evidence of a clear path forward. Hamlet does not even seem to have planned his next move; rather than pursue the guilty king, he hurries to his mother, still intent—contrary to the Ghost’s instructions—on verbally scourging her [III.ii.385–92]. It is merely an accident that, en route to Gertrude, Hamlet happens upon Claudius at prayer.

But we are leaping forward again, for there is one more scene before “The Mousetrap,” and it is further proof that Hamlet’s melancholy is the overwhelming constraint on his will and corrupter of his thought:

Act Three, Scene One

Act Two ends with Hamlet’s vow to “catch the conscience of the king,” and Act Three takes place the following day: Rosencrantz notes that the performance Hamlet has ordered is scheduled “[t]his night to play before him” [III.i.20–1]. Yet when Hamlet next enters, his trap might as well be an eternity from springing; he is anticipating neither vengeance nor certitude nor even the diversion of theatre. Instead, in perhaps the most famous speech ever written in the English language, Hamlet—again—longs for death:

To be, or not to be—that is the question:
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer

¹⁷ We know Hamlet is willing to revise his source material, so the presence of a lethal nephew, rather than brother, in “The Mousetrap” seems intentional—but again, where is the strategy in signaling his motives like this?

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep
No more, and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished.

[III.i.56–64]

How interesting that the lines most associated with this bottomless character are themselves straightforward. There is little mystery here to Hamlet's meaning, though his preferred metaphor—death as sleep—breaks down when he remembers not all sleep is restful: “For in that sleep of death what dreams may come / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil / Must give us pause” [III.i.66–8]. After reciting a litany of outrages, from the “oppressor's wrong” and “law's delay” to the “pangs of despised love” and the “spurns . . . of th' unworthy” [III.i.70–4]—no abstractions, despite the generalized language, but the very pains he has suffered—he concludes, reasonably enough:

Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?

[III.i.76–82]

Only at the end does Hamlet hint at something more profound than the ending of his life:

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

[III.i.83–8]

What “enterprises of great pitch and moment” does he mean? Suicide, however desired, is a rejection of action—one final act to obviate all future ones. Yet until that peculiar phrase it has been his main focus. The “conscience” (or *consciousness*) that he scorns is terrifying only if eternal: unending, tormenting thought. (It is tempting to read “the dread of something after death” as hellfire and damnation, but nowhere else does Hamlet seem worried about a punitive afterlife—except perhaps when wishing it on enemies [III.iii.94–5].) Does he simply mean the “enterprise” of avenging his father’s murder? From the Ghost’s perspective, at least, no deed could be greater than to slaughter Claudius . . . but (need I say?) the son is not the father. Besides, after two long months of delay Hamlet is literally hours from executing a plan meant to spur him to vengeance. What has happened to change the previous night’s resolution to this present apathy if not his melancholy reasserting itself?

There is no doubt in the play that Hamlet acts most decisively when he lacks time to reflect: we saw this when he followed the Ghost, despite the risk, and we shall again when he kills Polonius and, finally, Claudius. But should we therefore conclude that Hamlet’s root problem is he thinks too much? I understand why Hamlet might conclude this, particularly in soliloquy—inconstant thinking, with no resolution at hand, would be exhausting; one might come to loath one’s mind. Again, consider that verse in Shakespeare may signify artifice, performance. Hamlet has been making these arguments to himself for months—that’s partly why they are so finely crafted, each speech a jewel. But does he still credit them? Or is it some relief, however small, to cut himself off and condemn thought itself?

At leisure ourselves to reflect, who would seriously claim that Hamlet's mind, that miracle of consciousness, is what defeats him? It is what we value most in him. What undermines Hamlet, again and again, are his thoughtless instincts, which lead him to strike out, rashly and cruelly, at both friend and foe. The remainder of Act Three, Scene One, underscores how lost Hamlet is when he loses his intellectual perspective. Setting aside the Ghost and his questionable demands, what "enterprises of great pitch and moment" has Hamlet failed to sustain? We know of one for sure: his love affair with Ophelia, whose presence onstage Hamlet finally notices.

This is no coincidence, of course: her father and Claudius have placed her in Hamlet's path as a decoy. "For we have closely sent for Hamlet hither," the king announces,

That he, as 'twere by accident, may here
Affront Ophelia.
Her father and myself, lawful espials,
We'll so bestow ourselves that, seeing unseen,
We may of their encounter frankly judge
And gather by him, as he is behaved,
If't be th' affliction of his love or no
That thus he suffers for.

[III.i.29–37]

As always, Ophelia has no say in the matter, though Gertrude's tender encouragement suggests that, in this instance at least, Ophelia might appreciate her role:

Queen: 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.

Ophelia: Madam, I wish it may.

[III.i.38–42]

Gertrude exits, and Claudius and Polonius hide. Hamlet enters, brooding, and

Ophelia ostentatiously reads a devotional text [III.i.44–6]. The encounter begins amicably, considering the last time they were together, following weeks of enforced separation, he burst into her closet, feigning madness. But nostalgia is fleeting:

Hamlet: Soft you now,
The fair Ophelia!—Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remembered.

Ophelia: Good my lord,
How does your honor for this many a day?

Hamlet: I humbly thank you, well.

Ophelia: My lord, I have remembrances of yours
That I have longed long to redeliver.
I pray you, now receive them.

[III.i.88–95]

This reeks of Polonian stage managing: force Ophelia to further reject Hamlet, then watch Hamlet give himself away. Though he tries to refuse the bait, Ophelia persists, and Hamlet cannot check his anger:

Hamlet: No, not I,
I never gave you aught.

Ophelia: My honored lord, you know right well you did,
And with them words of so sweet breath composed
As made the things more rich. Their perfume lost,
Take these again, for to the noble mind
Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.
There, my lord.

Hamlet: Ha, ha! Are you honest?

Ophelia: My lord?

Hamlet: Are you fair?

Ophelia: What means your lordship?

Hamlet: That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no
discourse to your beauty.

Ophelia: Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?

Hamlet: Ay, truly; for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty
from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate
beauty into his likeness. This was sometime a paradox, but now the
time gives it proof.

[III.i.95–115]

When Hamlet insists that “your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty,” what does he mean? I’ve never been sure, but he seems to be implying that an “honest” woman should hide her beauty and ignore overtures from men. Never mind whether Elizabethans found such expectations misogynistic (as presumably modern audiences do); they come from the same diseased place that produces Hamlet’s revulsion with his mother’s sexuality. Ophelia’s reply is both commendable and beside the point—Hamlet has no interest in debating the ideas he has dumped on the conversation; he really just wants to hurt her. Yet as he unpacks his breaking heart with bitter words, we hear how deeply Ophelia—and Gertrude—has, unwillingly or unintentionally, hurt him:

Hamlet: I did love you once.

Ophelia: Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

Hamlet: You should not have believed me, for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not.

Ophelia: I was the more deceived.

Hamlet: Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses 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? We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery.

[III.i.115–130]

“Nunnery,” as every footnote reminds us, can refer to a whorehouse as well as a convent, yet in this moment I hear only the literal meaning—the point of Hamlet’s diatribe is that Ophelia should *not* be “a breeder of sinners”: she should choose chastity. I can also believe Hamlet is responding—badly, but understandably—to the return of his gifts and the accusation that *he* has been “unkind.” (It is Ophelia, after all, who has refused to see Hamlet.) He then asks what seems on the page a total non sequitur—and, upon hearing the answer, explodes:

Hamlet: Where's your father?

Ophelia: At home, my lord.

Hamlet: Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool
nowhere but in's own house. Farewell.

[III.i.130–133]

The clearest explanation for this sudden change—and, in my experience, the typical directorial choice—is that Polonius or Claudius has made an inadvertent noise from their hiding place, thereby revealing to Hamlet (or confirming his suspicion) that he is being watched. His reaction is to give Ophelia one last chance to prove her honesty; when she lies, he damns her with the rest:

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

Ophelia: Heavenly powers, restore him!

Hamlet: I have heard of your paintings well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you lisp; you nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't; it hath made me mad.

[III.i.135–147]

Should we infer from this last line that Hamlet truly is—or has been—insane? I don't think so; he is ranting and prone to hyperbole. It is, however, the nastiest we have yet seen him. Yes, Ophelia lied, but she is in an impossible situation.¹⁸ Unfortunately, Hamlet is too close for perspective; all he knows is that one more person he trusted—one more woman he loved—has betrayed him. For Ophelia, the unbearable venom is further proof that Hamlet's "noble mind" has been "o'erthrown" [III.i.150]. Such thoughts bring

¹⁸ Bradley says it well [163]: ". . . if ever an angry lunatic asks me a question which I cannot answer truly without great danger to him and to one of my relations, I hope that grace may be given me to imitate Ophelia."

no solace: the memory of what was, and the contrast with what is, make her “of ladies most deject and wretched” [III.i.155]. She has no idea worse awaits.

Neither does Hamlet, though he clings to the thought he might master his fate. “I say we will have no more marriage,” he declares before exiting. “Those that are married already—all but one—shall live. The rest shall keep as they are” [III.i.146–9]. Surely by now he has guessed Polonius is not the only eavesdropper in the room; in some productions—for example, Branagh’s film—Hamlet hurls these final lines directly at the barrier separating nephew from uncle, stepson from stepfather, avenger from murderer. Before we proceed further in the scene, let’s consider the other half of this catastrophic pairing. What has happened to the king in the two months since Hamlet saw the Ghost?

Claudius

For all his importance, Claudius appears only once in each of the first two acts; both scenes are public performances, before the court, and thus reveal little about his true character. To Rosencrantz and Guildenstern he declares, of Hamlet, “What it should be, / More than his father’s death, that thus hath put him / So much from th’ understanding of himself, / I cannot dream of” [II.ii.7–10]. The king of Denmark, and the tragedy’s villain, cannot be so naïve; his wife, as previously quoted, acknowledges their “o’erhasty marriage” as a likely factor in Hamlet’s “distemper” [II.ii.54–7]. Though he has no reason—yet—to believe Hamlet has discovered his dark secret, Claudius cannot be insensitive to his stepson’s undisguised hostility; perhaps the most important decision an actor playing Claudius shall make during these early acts is the extent to which he masks his own antipathy toward Hamlet.

However he feels, the king clearly prefers to outsource the problem. He agrees to

spy directly on Hamlet only when Polonius urges it:

Polonius: You know sometimes he walks four hours together
Here in the lobby.

Queen: So he does indeed.

Polonius: At such a time I'll loose my daughter to him.
Be you and I behind an arras then.
Mark the encounter. If he love her not,
And be not from his reason fallen thereon,
Let me be no assistant for a state
But keep a farm and carters.

King: We will try it.

[II.ii.160–7]

The “encounter” is set for the following day, by which time Claudius already seems impatient. When he gave Rosencrantz and Guildenstern their charge, Claudius emphasized his desire to find a “remedy” for Hamlet’s “transformation—so call it, / Sith nor th’ exterior nor the inward man / Resembles that it was” [II.ii.1–18]. Twenty-four hours later, having received no useful intelligence, his tone sharpens:

And can you by no drift of conference
Get from him why he puts on this confusion,
Grating so harshly all his days of quiet
With turbulent and dangerous lunacy?

[III.i.1–4]

At the same time, Claudius is eager for good news; he is palpably relieved to learn of Hamlet’s interest in the players, and he agrees to attend the performance “[w]ith all my heart,” instructing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to “drive [Hamlet’s] purpose into these delights” [III.i.24–7]. This cheer does not last long; as Polonius preps Ophelia to meet Hamlet, he places a religious text in her hand and succumbs again to the temptation to moralize obliviously:

Polonius [to Ophelia]: Read on this book,
That show of such an exercise may color
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.

King [Aside]: O, 'tis too true.
How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!
The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word.
O heavy burden!

[III.i.44–54]

The aside is notable for two reasons. First, it confirms the Ghost's story, even if Claudius does not explicitly name his "deed." (He does so two scenes later, while praying for mercy for his "rank" offense: "A brother's murder" [III.iii.36–8].) Second, it places Claudius in the relatively small pool of Shakespearean villains who struggle with their conscience while redemption is still possible. Because his defining sin happened in the play's backstory, Claudius's arc is that of a man who *remains* on the path to hell—implying the possibility, however slight, of turning. In his heart of hearts, he wants to be relieved of his "heavy burden." Then Hamlet enters and the king hides.

When he reenters, following Hamlet's soliloquy, cruelty, and not-so-veiled threats, Claudius is deeply shaken:

Love? his affections do not that way tend,
Nor what he spake, though it lacked form a little,
Was not like madness. There's something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,
And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger; which for to prevent,
I have in quick determination
Thus set it down: he shall with speed to England
For the demand of our neglected tribute.
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.162–75]

idea of revenge morally repugnant. The difficulty with this argument is that Hamlet never articulates this objection—it must be entirely subconscious. His cold dispatching of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern demonstrates that Hamlet is quite willing to kill those who have wronged him. Claudius [III.i.49–54; III.iii.36–72] and Laertes [V.ii.279] both suffer pangs of conscience; if Hamlet’s were truly bothering him, why does he not spare a soliloquy to wrestle with it? (In the famous line “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all” [III.i.83], *conscience* means *consciousness*, “the dread of something after death” [III.i.78]; to the extent it also refers to Hamlet’s moral compass, it is in the context of suicide, not vengeance.) As Bradley stresses, Hamlet “habitually assumes, without any questioning, that he *ought* to avenge his father. Even when he doubts, or thinks that he doubts, the honesty of the Ghost, he expresses no doubt as to what his duty will be if the Ghost turns out honest . . .” [97]. Would Shakespeare really leave his hero confused about so key a point?

And yet . . . intuitively, the argument is compelling. Throughout his career—in plays as diverse as *Titus Andronicus*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Tempest*—Shakespeare dramatized the destructive consequences of revenge. I do not think we are anachronistically imposing contemporary values when we ask how someone like Hamlet could uncritically accept the brutal task he is given; this is not the Denmark of *Beowulf*. When we blame Hamlet’s tragedy on his delay, we are echoing the Ghost; if only Hamlet had dutifully slaughtered his uncle, we imply, all would have been well. What if the true tragedy is that Hamlet heard the Ghost *too well*—that its horrible tale squelched the protests of conscience?

“Give Me Some Light”

Goddard centers on Act Three, Scene Two: the performance of “The Mousetrap” for the guilty king, during which Hamlet—even as his plan is succeeding—behaves about as badly as he can. “The play’s the thing,” Goddard contends [361–2],

. . . is an inspiration if Hamlet ever had one—no injunction from a dead man but an intimation straight from his own innermost genius. His evil spirit has told him to kill the King. His good angel tells him to show the King to himself by holding up the mirror of art before him. The dagger or the play? That is the question. It is God’s Hamlet who chooses the play.

Alas, it is the evil spirit who watches the king—and queen, and ex-lover—watch the play. Goddard makes the eye-opening point that Shakespeare twice establishes this crucial dichotomy—good actor vs. bad; good reactor vs. bad—*before* the performance, in lines that are easy to overlook or even cut. The scene begins with Hamlet instructing the players to perform truthfully:

. . . Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as ’twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it makes the unskillful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve, the censure of the which one must in your allowance o’erweigh a whole theater of others. . . .

[III.ii.17–28]

The topic is still on Hamlet’s mind when the players exit and Horatio enters: immediately and without prompting, Hamlet praises his friend as “e’en as just a man / As e’er my conversation coped withal” [III.ii.53–4]. When Horatio tries to protest, Hamlet doubles down:

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice

And could of men distinguish her election,
 S'hath sealed thee for herself, for thou hast been
 As one in suff'ring all that suffers nothing,
 A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
 Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and blessed are those
 Whose blood and judgment are so well commedled
 That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
 To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
 That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
 In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
 As I do thee.

[III.ii.62–73]

Extravagant words! Horatio proves a good friend—to the isolated, betrayed prince, what greater virtue in friendship than loyalty?—but when is his equanimity really tested? We neither see nor otherwise hear of Horatio “suff'ring all”; the nearest he comes is the final scene, when—overcome with grief for Hamlet's impending death—he tries to kill himself [V.ii.323–5]. Goddard [362–3] locates the subtext, the connection between Hamlet's fulsome praise of Horatio and his investment in the players' technique:

Though Hamlet has had a hand in the version of *The Murder of Gonzago* that is to be presented, he has naturally not cast himself for a part in the play. But he has a role in another play—along with the King one of the two leading roles—in the drama, namely, which he is even now shaping out of the unique conditions under which he has seen to it that *The Murder* is to be presented. . . . The success or failure of this other play which Hamlet, unknown even to the players, is staging will depend on whether he himself, as playwright-spectator, can maintain precisely that temperance he has recommended to the players in his “advice” and whether he can avoid those excesses against which he has warned them. . . . The affecting scene with Horatio, with its blessing upon those whose blood and judgment are so well commingled that they are not passion's slaves or a pipe for Fortune's finger, re-enforces the advice to the players in another more intimate and tender key.

Then . . . the royal court arrives for the performance and, almost at once, Hamlet—Polonius-like—forgets everything he has advised and praised in others. The fall begins with his shameful treatment of Ophelia; whereas in the previous scene Hamlet at

least could plead to having been surprised by Ophelia's presence—and wounded by the return of his gifts and the apparent proof of her dishonesty—now his insults are cold and calculated:

Hamlet: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

Ophelia: No, my lord.¹⁹

Hamlet: Do you think I meant country matters?

Ophelia: I think nothing, my lord.

Hamlet: That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.

Ophelia: What is, my lord?

Hamlet: Nothing.

[III.ii.110–16]

The pun on “nothing” (“no-thing,” or vagina) is standard Shakespearean fare, but “country matters” is shockingly vulgar. Hamlet is just warming up. Following a dumb show, an actor enters to speak the prologue. “Will a tell us what this show meant?” Ophelia wonders. “Ay, or any show that you will show him. Be not you ashamed to show, he'll not shame to tell you what it means,” Hamlet taunts. Ophelia turns back to the play (“You are naught, you are naught.”), but after three lines of doggerel Hamlet grows restless: “Is this a prologue, or the posy of a ring?” “'Tis brief,” Ophelia agrees. “As woman's love,” Hamlet spits back [III.ii.131–49]. (“He is already fingering the mental dagger,” notes Goddard [365].)

All these lines could be staged as private dialogue or public shaming; the fact that the latter is crueler does not make the former less hurtful. The barbs aimed at Gertrude and Claudius, however, seem intended for all to hear. Let us return to the dumb show, which pantomimes Claudius's crimes—from the poisoning of the sleeping king to the wooing of his fickle widow—in advance of “The Mousetrap” itself. What is the point of

¹⁹ The Folio gives Hamlet one more line here to draw out Ophelia's embarrassment: “I mean, my head upon your lap?” “Ay, my lord” is all she can answer.

this redundancy? “If the King sees it, he either stops the play at once on some pretext or is warned and steels himself to show no emotion when the play actually takes place,” Asimov objects [123]. One explanation is that the players (who know nothing of the performance’s true purpose) tacked on the dumb show reflexively, out of habit or tradition, without Hamlet’s foreknowledge; as Goddard points out [365], Hamlet responds scornfully to it: “The players cannot keep counsel; they’ll tell all” [III.ii.136–7].

Fortunately for Hamlet, Claudius and Gertrude do not yet seem to be paying attention; whatever the reason—they may be canoodling or otherwise distracted or simply bored—neither reacts to the dumb show. The real “Mousetrap” begins with a lengthy dialogue between an unnamed king and queen—a philosophical meditation more than a piece of drama. Hamlet keeps up his commentary, twice interjecting after the Player Queen vows never to remarry: “That’s wormwood,” he mutters, and later, “If she should break it now!” [III.ii.177 & 220].²⁰ At last the scene ends, and Hamlet can no longer brook his mother’s silence. “Madam, how like you this play?” he asks, and the real King and Queen confirm they have, at some point, started listening:

Queen: The lady doth protest too much, methinks.

Hamlet: O, but she’ll keep her word.

King: Have you heard the argument? Is there no offense in’t?

Hamlet: No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest; no offense i’ th’ world.

[III.ii.225–31]

A few lines later, Hamlet rubs it in thicker—and further arouses Claudius’s suspicion:

This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna. Gonzago is the duke’s name; his wife, Baptista. You shall see anon. ’Tis a knavish piece of work, but what of that? Your majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not. Let the galled jade wince; our withers are unwrung.

[III.ii.234–9]

²⁰ Again, despite the Ghost’s warning, Hamlet seems most upset by his mother’s perfidy.

“And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them,” Hamlet once advised the players,

for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to be considered. That’s villainous and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it.

[III.ii.37–43]

What is Hamlet’s own conduct now, Goddard asks [366], if not “villainous”?

If all this were not enough, Hamlet also resumes humiliating Ophelia. The Player King having lay down to sleep, and the Player Queen having exited, a new character—typically costumed ominously and clutching a vial—enters:

Hamlet: This is one Lucianus, nephew to the king.

Ophelia: You are as good as a chorus, my lord.

Hamlet: I could interpret between you and your love, if I could see the puppets dallying.

Ophelia: You are keen, my lord, you are keen.

Hamlet: It would cost you a groaning to take off mine edge.

Ophelia: Still better, and worse.

Hamlet: So you mis-take your husbands.—Begin, murderer. Leave thy damnable faces and begin. Come, the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge.

[III.ii.240–50]

“We know who that raven is and can hear his ferocious tone,” Goddard writes [367].

Hamlet cannot even wait for Lucianus to finish his monologue—one candidate for the “dozen or sixteen lines” he wrote for the performance—before forcing his own poison down his uncle’s ears:

Hamlet: A poisons him i’ th’ garden for his estate. His name’s Gonzago. The story is extant, and written in very choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago’s wife.

Ophelia: The king rises.²¹

²¹ The Folio gives Hamlet one more gleeful line here, after the king rises: “What, frightened with false fire?”

Queen: How fares my lord?
Polonius: Give o'er the play.
King: Give me some light. Away!

[III.ii.257–64]

The moment is among the most dramatic in the play—and, for Goddard [367], the true turning point, propelling everyone to tragedy two scenes before Hamlet kills

Polonius:

The dagger has descended. Hamlet himself has o'erstepped the modesty of nature and betrayed the right of dramatic art to speak obliquely. He has produced an abortion. Forgetting that “the play’s the thing,” he has ruined his imaginative experiment by “telling all”—just what he damned the players for doing, far less blatantly and offensively, in their dumb-show. He is hoist with his own petar. He has sprung the mousetrap instead of letting it spring itself, and has caught two royal mice, himself as well as the King.

The exit of Claudius—frightened by false fire, seeking light—marks the end of his willingness to believe, even for Gertrude’s sake, that Hamlet is anything but an existential threat. “I like him not, nor stands it safe with us / To let his madness range,” he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

Therefore prepare you.
I your commission will forthwith dispatch,
And he to England shall along with you.
The terms of our estate may not endure
Hazard so near’s as doth hourly grow
Out of his brows.

[III.iii.1–7]

Note that the “commission”—which shall ultimately contain Hamlet’s death order—does not seem to have been written yet, which means Claudius still may not have settled on that evil path. He consents, again, to Polonius’s plan to eavesdrop on Hamlet and Gertrude’s conversation [III.iii.27–35]—though if Hamlet truly is as dangerous as Claudius fears, it’s playing with real fire to let him “range” a moment longer. Clearly the

king is distracted, for as soon as he is alone he collapses in prayer—the play’s only soliloquy not spoken by Hamlet. More precisely, he *tries* to pray:

O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t,
A brother’s murder. Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will.
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And like a man to double business bound
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect.

[III.iii.36–43]

As he fumbles for grace, Claudius reveals a self-awareness that, while not rivaling Hamlet’s (whose does?), is nevertheless impressive:

“Forgive me my foul murder”?
That cannot be, since I am still possessed
Of those effects for which I did the murder,
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardoned and retain th’ offense?
In the corrupted currents of this world
Offense’s gilded hand may shove by justice,
And oft ’tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law. But ’tis not so above. . . .
O wretched state! O bosom black as death!
O limed soul, that struggling to be free
Art more engaged! Help, angels! Make assay.
Bow, stubborn knees, and, heart with strings of steel,
Be soft as sinews of the newborn babe.
All may be well.

[III.iii.52–72]

This naïve half-line cues Hamlet’s entrance, and the tragedy arrives at another crossroads. “If the mere fragment, marred by interruptions, of *The Murder of Gonzago* which Hamlet allowed his uncle to witness—with a hurried summary of the rest—could produce this degree of repentance, what might the whole play, left to itself, have effected?” Goddard wonders [369–70]:

Granted that open penitence and confession on Claudius' part would have been a miracle. Still, who was better fitted to perform that miracle than a man with the spiritual endowment of Hamlet, who better fitted to be the subject of it than a man as contrite as Claudius? Plainly Shakespeare put the play scene and the prayer scene side by side expressly to force us to ask that question. And no less plainly he framed the characters of the two men to suggest that, if Hamlet had managed his part better, that miracle I do not say would have taken place—it is the very nature of a miracle to be to the last degree improbable—but might have taken place.

Part of me loves this argument, but another part resists. I just cannot imagine what Hamlet might say—at this or any juncture—to effect such a “miracle.” Can Hamlet? On the contrary, his fierce desire to see Claudius damned becomes the rationalization for further delay. As he watches his unsuspecting uncle pray, Hamlet instinctively draws his sword, then stops himself:

A took my father grossly, full of bread,
 With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;
 And how his audit stands, who knows save heaven?
 But in our circumstance and course of thought,
 'Tis heavy with him; and am I then revenged,
 To take him in the purging of his soul,
 When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?
 No.
 Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent.
 When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
 Or in th' incestuous pleasure of his bed,
 At game a-swearing, or about some act
 That has no relish of salvation in't—
 Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
 And that his soul may be as damned and black
 As hell, whereto it goes.

[III.iii.80–95]

Goddard's position implies that—setting aside his stated motive—Hamlet did well here not to kill Claudius; his *true* error came earlier, when he boorishly undermined his “Mousetrap,” smashing the mirror of art before it could inspire lasting penitence.

Though not arguing specifically with Goddard, Bradley [100] dismisses any theory that

requires us to suppose that, when the Ghost enjoins Hamlet to avenge the murder of his father, it is laying on him a duty which *we* are to understand to be no duty but the very reverse. And is not that supposition wholly contrary to the natural impression which we all receive in reading the play? Surely it is clear that, whatever we in the twentieth century may think about Hamlet's duty, we are meant in the play to assume that he *ought* to have obeyed the Ghost.

Goddard might not agree with this, but I do. Could things really have turned out worse had Hamlet killed Claudius at prayer? Presumably Hamlet would then have summoned the court and—with Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo as witnesses—revealed the Ghost's existence and its accusations against Claudius. Everyone has just seen the king start guiltily from a dramatization of these same crimes; in light of this public evidence, when handed the perfect opportunity for revenge, Hamlet took it—that strikes me as a very plausible defense, by a charismatic and popular prince, in a culture that would have expected no less from a son whose father has been murdered. Would Hamlet have suffered private guilt from killing a defenseless man? Perhaps—though I'm not sure where in the play he expresses such a qualm. Still, better to have an unarmed Claudius on his conscience than Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Laertes, Gertrude—all of whose terrible deaths are set in motion at this fateful moment, when Hamlet “spares” Claudius to damn him.

To be clear, I don't believe Hamlet is solely—or even mostly—responsible for all these killings. But time and again he meets hostility with hostility, thoughtlessly escalating the violence until Elsinore is less prison than battlefield. The most obvious example happens in the next, and final, scene of the act,

The Closet Scene

After sheathing his sword and leaving Claudius, Hamlet heads straight to his mother's

private chamber, or “closet”—his destination before he happened upon the praying king—fully aware of his volatile state. “Now could I drink hot blood / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on,” he soliloquized following the success of his “Mousetrap”:

O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.
Let me be cruel, not unnatural;
I will speak daggers to her, but use none.
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites:
How in my words somever she be shent,
To give them seals never, my soul, consent!

[III.ii.383–92]

The Roman emperor Nero, among other infamous acts, committed matricide. Does Hamlet really fear he might do likewise? If so, it seems a terrible idea to confront Gertrude so soon after stifling the urge to kill Claudius. Yet he enters her closet spoiling for a fight—“Mother, you have my father much offended,” he bellows [III.iv.10]—and within a dozen lines she is fearing him too. “What wilt thou do?” she cries as he grabs her. “Thou wilt not murder me?” [III.iv.21]. Polonius, hiding behind an arras, calls out for help, and Hamlet, assuming it’s the king, immediately stabs him. But Hamlet cannot think Claudius, whom he left deep in prayer, has gotten to Gertrude first, let alone had time to conceal himself. Hamlet is not thinking at all—one scene after over-calculating, he now kills instinctively, blinded with rage. The sudden discovery of his error scarcely moderates his tone; having slain Polonius, he rhetorically buries him, then turns back to his mother, certain as ever:

Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!
I took thee for thy better. Take thy fortune.
Thou find’st to be too busy is some danger.—
Leave wringing of your hands. Peace, sit you down
And let me wring your heart, for so I shall

If it be made of penetrable stuff,
If damned custom have not brazed it so
That it be proof and bulwark against sense.

[III.iv.31–8]

We have already considered how Gertrude's oblivious responses during this sequence [III.iv.27–52] suggest she knows nothing of her first husband's murder. But Hamlet does not really care about this crime—not here, not now. Nowhere else does he combine fury with obsession to such obnoxious effect; ever the director, he even incorporates props into his tirade:

Look here upon this picture, and on this,
The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.
...
Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,
And batten on this moor? Ha! have you eyes?
You cannot call it love, for at your age
The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble,
And waits upon the judgment, and what judgment
Would step from this to this?

[III.iv.53–71]

Set aside the question of whether Hamlet is accurately contrasting his “wholesome” father and “mildewed” uncle (the answer depends on the production): how does he presume to know anything of his mother's—or any woman's—“blood”? Never mind—his rancid imagination, after months of repression, has found an outlet:

What devil was't
That thus hath cozened you at hoodman-blind?
Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,
Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,
Or but a sickly part of one true sense
Could not so mope.
O shame, where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,
If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame
When the compulsive ardor gives the charge,
Since frost itself as actively doth burn,

And reason panders will.

[III.iv.76–88]

As in his first soliloquy, Hamlet locates the wellspring of his despair in Gertrude. But the problem runs deeper than her apparent lack of shame (again, set aside whether she *should* be ashamed). If a son cannot depend on his mother's virtue—if he can be so mistaken as to her character—what can he depend on? The play to this point is an increasingly negative answer to that question: neither uncles nor friends nor lovers; not political, legal, or religious institutions. One cannot even know whether to go on living. Of course this is an unfair burden to place on Gertrude. There are hints she feels guilt for her part in her son's affliction, but at present what she mainly wants is for him to shut up. A more charitable prince might have opened her to repentance, but rubbing her face in her sins (as he perceives them) is self-indulgent and—if he truly wants to help her—ineffective. Yet he is powerless to stop—each cry lances deeper wounds:

Queen: O Hamlet, speak no more.
Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will leave there their tinct.

Hamlet: Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty—

Queen: O, speak to me no more.
These words like daggers enter in my ears.
No more, sweet Hamlet.

Hamlet: A murderer and a villain,
A slave that is not twentieth part the tithes
Of your precedent lord, a vice of kings,
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole
And put it in his pocket—

Queen: No more.
Hamlet: A king of shreds and patches—

[III.iv.88–102]

Hamlet's frenzy is so alarming it summons his father, apparently for the first time since Act One. "This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose," the Ghost announces, though its next lines reveal a different concern: "But look, amazement on thy mother sits. / O, step between her and her fighting soul! / Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works" [III.iv.110–14]. This seems off-target—it is Hamlet, at least in this scene, whose eyes "wildly peep" and "bedded hair" stands on end [III.iv.119–22] as he imagines the worst. For Gertrude, the Ghost—neither visible nor audible—is merely an opportunity to rationalize her son's behavior:

Queen: This is the very coinage of your brain.
This bodiless creation ecstasy
Is very cunning in.

Hamlet: My pulse as yours doth temperately keep time
And makes as healthful music. It is not madness
That I have uttered. Bring me to the test,
And I the matter will reword, which madness
Would gambol from. Mother, for love of grace,
Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass but my madness speaks.
It will but skin and film the ulcerous place
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,
Infects unseen.

[III.iv.137–49]

The remainder of the scene consists of similar speeches from Hamlet ("Good night—but go not to my uncle's bed. / Assume a virtue, if you have it not." [III.iv.159–60]; "For who that's but a queen, fair, sober, wise, / Would from a paddock, from a bat, a gib, / Such dear concernings hide?" [III.iv.189–91]) and interjections from Gertrude—who, for all her suffering, never explicitly repents. "O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain," she exclaims [III.iv.156]; twenty-five lines later, when he pauses for breath, she manages to ask, "What shall I do?" [III.iv.180]. Yet she promises only not to reveal to Claudius that Hamlet is "mad in craft" [III.iv.188]. "Be thou assured," she tells Hamlet,

“if words be made of breath, / And breath of life, I have no life to breathe / What thou hast said to me” [III.iv.197–9]. Such careful language! Does she even believe her son sane, as he “lug[s] the guts” of Polonius into another room [III.iv.212] and threatens the old friends whose help she requested? “Let it work,” he mutters of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and his impending exile, which he has (correctly) inferred to be “knavery”:

For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
Hoist with his own petard, and 't shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines
And blow them at the moon. O, 'tis most sweet
When in one line two crafts directly meet.

[III.iv.205–10]

Whatever she might think, Gertrude more than keeps her promise. The next scene begins with Claudius pressing for answers. “How does Hamlet?” he demands, and her reply omits several crucial details:

Mad as the sea and wind when both contend
Which is the mightier. In his lawless fit,
Behind the arras hearing something stir,
Whips out his rapier, cries “A rat, a rat!”
And in this brainish apprehension kills
The unseen good old man.

[IV.i.6–12]

No mention that Polonius stirred because he and Gertrude both feared for her life, or that Hamlet believed he was slaying the king. No mention of any of Hamlet’s hateful words toward Claudius. Mother shields son.

It doesn’t matter; Claudius already knows. “It had been so with us, had we been there,” he reflects [IV.i.13], and whatever he may once have planned or hoped for, his next move is obvious—to himself and, apparently, Hamlet. Their final conversation before Hamlet sails for England—and, Claudius intends, the executioner—is as chilling as those Act One battlements:

King: The bark is ready and the wind at help,
Th' associates tend, and everything is bent
For England.

Hamlet: For England?

King: Ay, Hamlet.

Hamlet: Good

King: So is it, if thou knew'st our purposes.

Hamlet: I see a cherub that sees them. But come, for England! Farewell,
dear mother.

King: Thy loving father, Hamlet.

Hamlet: My mother—father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is
one flesh; so, my mother. Come, for England!

[IV.iii.43–52]

They are mutual enemies now—“mighty opposites” [V.ii.61]—and over the final two acts, between Claudius’s scheming and Hamlet’s ruthless instincts, the bodies pile up. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, tasked with escorting Hamlet to England—and almost certainly ignorant of the king’s treachery—are instead “put to sudden death, / Not shriving time allowed” [V.ii.46–7], after Hamlet replaces his sealed death warrant with a forgery.²² Ophelia, suddenly bereft of the most important people in her life—father, brother, lover—and “[d]ivided from herself and her fair judgment” [IV.v.85], drowns. Laertes and Gertrude, both poisoned, collateral damage in Claudius’s baroque plot to assassinate Hamlet. Finally, the king and prince themselves, leaving the throne empty for a foreigner, Fortinbras, to claim. Who would not trade the sum of these losses for Claudius only, by whatever means? Goddard may be correct that the *best* outcome would have been for Hamlet to transcend his hatred and help redeem his uncle, but this very slight possibility doesn’t make every other outcome bad. *Hamlet* the play ends in tragedy for several reasons, one of which is that Hamlet the man makes a series of unwise

²² By denying Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “shriving time”—confession to and absolution by a priest—Hamlet is dooming his onetime friends to hell with Claudius.

choices. Forgoing the chance to kill Claudius in Act Three is not Hamlet's first such choice, but it sets him—and half-a-dozen others—unescapably upon a tragic path.

* * * * *

Why does Hamlet delay? If I've made one thing clear (in 80 pages!), I hope it's that there is no simple answer. Different productions may emphasize different things, but for me the best explanation lies in the confluence of the three main factors—practical, psychological, moral—previously considered:

- First, Hamlet has been given a difficult task—especially if we assume he wants to survive and be king; we can hardly expect him to march straight from the Ghost to slay Claudius. Until he can formulate a plan, he plays defense and feigns madness.
- Unfortunately, the Ghost appears at the worst possible time for high-stakes plotting. The death of his father and remarriage of his mother have shocked Hamlet, and the resulting melancholy has incapacitated him. In scene after scene he proves unable to sustain the energy and determination necessary for action.
- I called this third factor *moral*, but a better word may be *aesthetic*. The problem could be, as Goddard suggests, that Hamlet morally objects to revenge killing—though, again, I don't find much evidence for this in the text. Perhaps Hamlet simply considers it beneath him. Melancholy does not make him wholly inactive, after all. It did not keep him from falling in love with Ophelia or producing "The Mousetrap." When is Hamlet happier than during his scenes with the players? Nothing he says or does sparks a similar passion for vengeance.

The question of Hamlet's delay may be central to his character, but it has little relevance to the play's remaining scenes. Once Hamlet is banished to England, he loses the chance to kill Claudius on his own terms—when he returns to Elsinore, in Act Five, he cannot count on another “Mousetrap,” let alone private access to the wary king. From a certain perspective, it doesn't matter. If the play's first three acts are driven mainly by Hamlet's choices, the final two are left to his insistence that fate will do the work for him—until, tragically, he is proven correct.

Act Four: The Fallout

Granting that Shakespeare didn't actually divide his plays into numbered acts and scenes, the first three scenes of Act Four seem more of a piece with Act Three; they happen in rapid succession after the events in Gertrude's closet and follow the slaying of Polonius to its inevitable end: Hamlet, escorted by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, shipped off to England and (if Claudius has his way) to “present death” [IV.iii.64]. I have little more to say about these scenes, but I'll note that Gertrude—doing what she can to soften the consequences for her son—claims Hamlet “weeps” for Polonius's death [IV.i.27]; Hamlet does nothing to suggest this is true. Though he'd vowed to “answer well” the killing [III.iv.176–7], to Claudius the only answers Hamlet gives are riddles:

King: Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius.

Hamlet: At supper.

King: At supper? Where?

Hamlet: Not where he eats, but where a is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. . . .

King: Where is Polonius?

Hamlet: In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger find him not there, seek him i' th' other place yourself. But if indeed you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby.

[IV.iii.16–36]

Probably Hamlet feels he must continue performing madness if he is to escape with his life, but the effect is grating. As he taunts Claudius, he anticipates some of his Act Five insights in the graveyard—“A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.” [IV.iii.26–7]—but I find the graveyard lines more interesting: they aren’t tone-deaf deflections of his own guilt.

The scene that follows is the center of Act Four, and the last we see of Hamlet for a while (though later in the act, two of his letters are read aloud). We are somewhere between Elsinore and the sea, still in Danish territory. Fortinbras enters with his army; in six-and-a-half lines [IV.iv.1–7], he orders a captain to greet Claudius and request “the conveyance of a promised march / Over his kingdom,” then exits, the picture of military efficiency. Enter Hamlet. In case we had not yet realized Fortinbras’s role as a foil to the prince of Denmark, Hamlet immediately starts gabbing with the Norwegian captain.

Where, he wonders, is this great army headed:

Hamlet: Goes it against the main of Poland, sir,
Or for some frontier?
Captain: Truly to speak, and with no addition,
We go to gain a little patch of ground
That hath in it no profit but the name.
To pay five ducats, five, I would not farm it,
Nor will it yield to Norway or the Pole
A ranker rate, should it be sold in fee.
Hamlet: Why, then the Polack never will defend it.
Captain: Yes, it is already garrisoned.

[IV.iv.15–24]

In other words, if we recall the play’s opening scenes, the army’s purpose is to occupy young Fortinbras far from home—and from Denmark, if Cornelius and Voltmand have done their job. This cynical thought does not seem to occur to Hamlet—

he does not articulate it, at least, though he has a memorable retort before the captain exits:

Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats
Will not debate the question of this straw.
This is th' imposthume of much wealth and peace,
That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
Why the man dies.

[IV.iv.25–9]

I'm not sure I agree, though perhaps I misunderstand this dense thought. The cause of battle for this “little patch of ground” is plain: Fortinbras is itching to fight *someone*, so why not Poland? Should the Polish king *not* defend his borders?

Regardless, Hamlet does not linger on this idea. Instead, he interprets Fortinbras as one more rebuke. “How all occasions do inform against me / And spur my dull revenge!” he begins his final soliloquy [IV.iv.32–3]; after a digression, he elaborates:

Witness this army of such mass and charge,
Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit, with divine ambition puffed,
Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
Even for an eggshell. Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honor's at the stake.

[IV.iv.47–56]

Pardon?! This battle “for an eggshell” now evinces greatness? What happened to the imposthume? Hamlet can't be serious, any more than Shakespeare—the poet who resurrected Falstaff and buried Hotspur at Shrewsbury Field can't now be valorizing honor . . . right? These lines make sense only as satire—the image of Fortinbras as “delicate and tender,” “puffed” with ambition, cinches it. (Hamlet's language may also be

parodying parts of “To be or not to be,” with the earlier speech’s sincere yearning for “enterprises of great pitch and moment” [III.i.86].)

Yet even as he recognizes the absurdity of “honorable” violence, Hamlet scourges himself for his perceived failure:

Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th’ event—
A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward—I do not know
Why yet I live to say “This thing’s to do,”
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do’t. Examples gross as earth exhort me.

[IV.iv.39–46]

Note I am moving backward through the speech. Still further back are *these* lines, which—as much as any can—seem a critical insight into Hamlet’s mental state:

What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
To fust in us unused.

[IV.iv.33–9]

At a glance this seems illogical. Claudius is still alive, but not because his nephew’s “godlike reason” has “fusted” (molded). Hamlet’s recent activities—the feigning of madness, the producing of plays, the endless soliloquizing—may be futile in retrospect, but in no way are they “bestial.” If there is one tool Hamlet has been using constantly, it is his intellect—and *still* he cannot solve the Ghost’s fatal problem. All he can show for his efforts are hands stained with the wrong man’s blood and exile. The disordered structure of this final soliloquy, then, mirrors Hamlet’s own mind at arguably his lowest moment in the play. Reason is not unused. It is useless.

The conclusion does not help. “O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!” Hamlet bellows to end the scene [IV.iv.65–6].²³ Once again, upon reflection this sounds absurd—even if we stick to the scenes that follow, which of Hamlet’s worthy thoughts meet this new criterion? “Now get you to my lady’s table, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come” [V.i.181–3]? “Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away” [V.i.202–3]? “The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is’t to leave betimes” [V.ii.200–1]? Delivered coolly from death’s shadow, yes, but not bloody. Consider too the lines that set up this final couplet:

How stand I then,
That have a father killed, a mother stained,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men
That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain?

[IV.iv.56–65]

What is this—the part that follows “shame,” at least—if not a clear-eyed critique of bloodshed, of violent means and ends? Hamlet recognizes the stupidity of this “fantasy and trick of fame”—these deluded, death-marked soldiers are anything but role models for a mindful prince. No: when Hamlet proclaims his future thoughts “bloody,” he is mocking the impulse.

²³ Does this mirror another soliloquy-capping couplet? Hamlet concludes Act Two with a similarly structured rhyme: “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king” [II.ii.543–4]. There too, the tone sounds boldly decisive—and the decision leads nowhere good.

Mocking is not escaping, however, and Hamlet—though he has every reason to leave Elsinore (and soon will have the chance, thanks to pirates)—cannot stay away. Could one of the forces that pulls him back be lingering concern for Ophelia, bereft now of father, brother, and lover, and abandoned to lead the play’s most pitiful sequence?

Ophelia in Madness and Death

After his inexcusable cruelty toward her, why should we think Hamlet still cares for Ophelia? The scene shifts back to Elsinore and Gertrude enters, accompanied by an anonymous gentleman and Horatio. But why is Horatio still there? Presumably Hamlet wanted his own spy at court, though he cannot know when—or if—he shall return. Might Hamlet have asked Horatio also to watch over Ophelia? In this scene, at least, she is Horatio’s focus: “’Twere good she were spoken with,” he advises the queen, in his only two lines, “for she may strew / Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds” [IV.v.14–15].

Gertrude emphatically does not want to speak with Ophelia [IV.v.1], but Horatio’s warning changes her mind. As she waits, Gertrude mutters four vague lines to herself:

To my sick soul (as sin’s true nature is)
Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss.
So full of artless jealousy is guilt
It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.

[IV.v.17–20]

Recall that Gertrude also intimated guilt in her last conversation with Hamlet [III.iv.88–91], though now as then the key question is *for what?* The answer might have little to do with her son or either husband—Gertrude may simply regret that Ophelia’s father was

slain in her closet, spying on her behalf; perhaps this is why she has been avoiding the poor girl.

Whatever the explanation, Gertrude does not elaborate, and everyone is distracted by Ophelia's entrance. The gentleman has already prepared us for the pathos of this moment:

She speaks much of her father, says she hears
There's tricks i' th' world, and hems, and beats her heart,
Spurns enviously at straws, speaks things in doubt
That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing,
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
The hearers to collection; they aim at it,
And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.

[IV.v.4–13]

Is Shakespeare warning us not to diagnose Ophelia's madness, lest we "botch" her ravings against our own biases and assumptions? The bits of song she scatters through the scene all but beg to be interpreted. The first two, possibly related verses are sung to the queen:

How should I your truelove know
From another one?
By his cockle hat and staff
And his sandal shoon.

[IV.v.23–6]

He is dead and gone, lady,
He is dead and gone;
At his head a grass-green turf,
At his heels a stone.

[IV.v.29–32]

Claudius, like the gentleman, assumes these "conceits" refer to Polonius [IV.v.45], but they could also indicate Hamlet—dead to Ophelia if not yet literally in the ground—or

prompt Gertrude to remember (nostalgically? bitterly?) her first husband. Or Ophelia might simply be singing whatever comes to mind, absent any intention but to displace more painful thoughts. Later verses seem even more fraught with subtext, however:

Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day.
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine.
Then up he rose and donned his clo'es
And dupp'd the chamber door,
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more.

. . .

Quoth she, "Before you tumbled me,
You promised me to wed."

He answers:

"So would I 'a' done, by yonder sun,
And thou hadst not come to my bed."

[IV.v.48–66]

Is this Ophelia's veiled confession that she and Hamlet had sex? And if so, has she taken his change of heart to mean sex was all he wanted? (Certainly it was his obsession during their last conversation, at "The Mousetrap.") Would this thought be enough to drive Ophelia mad?

As with so many of the play's mysteries, I think the answer is . . . not necessarily. Ophelia would not be the first to have found maidenhood no shield against a man's callous disregard. If we wonder why she has gone mad, consider that after a lifetime of subservience to father, brother, and lover, within a couple months all three men are gone. What evidence suggests she has an identity beneath these socially prescribed roles? "I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife," the queen says (whether truthfully we cannot know) as she scatters flowers over Ophelia's grave [V.i.233]. Instead, from

everything she has been told, by rejecting Hamlet Ophelia is directly responsible for his madness, and thus indirectly responsible for her father's death. Heavy burden indeed.

After the "Saint Valentine's day" verses, Ophelia mercifully exits, then returns 80 lines later, by which point a grief-stricken Laertes has improbably stormed the castle.

Even before she speaks, he too has deduced the cause of her madness:

O rose of May,
Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia!
O heavens, is't possible a young maid's wits
Should be as mortal as an old man's life?

[IV.v.157–60]

This time Ophelia does seem to be thinking specifically of Polonius—perhaps she is prompted by the sight of her brother, though she does not otherwise indicate she recognizes him. "I would give you some violets," she tells Laertes, "but they withered all when my father died" [IV.v.178–80]; just before exiting (for the final time in the play), she sings of a dead man whose "beard was as white as snow" [IV.v.184–93].

After Ophelia's prior exit, Claudius instructed someone (possibly Horatio) to "[f]ollow her close; give her good watch" [IV.v.74]. Now, focused on the threat Laertes poses, Claudius does not bother to set a watch. If Horatio has indeed remained at Elsinore to look out for Ophelia, she soon loses this protection too; in the next scene, Horatio leaves to meet up with Hamlet, who has sent letters announcing his return to Denmark [IV.vi.13–30]. Alas, the tragedy hurtles apace. In the act's final scene, as Claudius and Laertes plot to assassinate Hamlet, Gertrude brings the woeful news: Ophelia has drowned. Where, Laertes asks, and the queen recites a speech so lyrical, it could be mistaken for a stand-alone poem:

There is a willow grows askant the brook,
That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream.

Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead-men's-fingers call them.
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook.

[IV.vii.164–73]

The fact that Ophelia drowns in a brook (as opposed to, say, a lake or river) is not itself suspicious if we assume (not implausibly) she cannot swim. The same cannot be said for the rest of Gertrude's report:

Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaidlike awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.

[IV.vii.173–81]

If Gertrude is telling the truth, either she or her source chose to watch Ophelia drown (and note every poetic detail) rather than save her—or at least find someone who could! How many people in this peninsular, seafaring nation must we assume stood helplessly on shore as Ophelia's clothes filled with water and pulled her under? The likelier alternative is that she committed suicide and Gertrude then crafted a pretty lie to preserve the girl's memory—and soul.

The church does not shy from this conclusion. Watching the funeral procession from afar, Hamlet wonders,

Who is this they follow?
And with such maimed rites? This doth betoken
The corpse they follow did with desp'rate hand

For do it own life.

[V.i.207–10]

When Laertes objects to his sister's "maimed rites," the priest is brutally clear:

Laertes: What ceremony else?

Doctor: Her obsequies have been as far enlarged
As we have warranty. Her death was doubtful,
And, but that great command o'ersways the order,
She should in ground unsanctified have lodged
Till the last trumpet. . . .

Laertes: Must there no more be done?

Doctor: No more be done.
We should profane the service of the dead
To sing a requiem and such rest to her
As to peace-parted souls.²⁴

[V.i.214–27]

The clowns digging her grave are, in their way, as blunt:

First Gravedigger: Is she to be buried in Christian burial when she
willfully seeks her own salvation?

Second Gravedigger: I tell thee she is. Therefore make her grave straight.
The crowner hath sat on her, and finds it Christian burial.

First Gravedigger: How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her
own defense?

[V.i.1–7]

"Will you ha' the truth on't?" they finally agree. "If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out o' Christian burial" [V.i.22–4].

Let us not dismiss Ophelia so easily. From what I have seen in productions, hers is the most difficult role after Hamlet's. Ophelia as written does not seem much older than Juliet, yet what audience today would accept an actual teenager cast opposite a 30-year-old prince? Instead, older actresses must convey the character's fragile girlhood while maintaining an exacting balance: too passive to bear losing the men who dominate

²⁴ Laertes's reply contains perhaps the most righteous lines uttered by someone other than Hamlet: "I tell thee, churlish priest, / A minist'ring angel shall my sister be / When thou liest howling" [V.i.229–31].

her, yet bright enough to attract Hamlet and capture his heart. Ophelia's passivity may be the main reason her death does not reach the level of tragedy—classical or Shakespearean—but that doesn't make it less outraging. If Hamlet is cut down in his prime, Ophelia scarcely glimpses hers. Yet Shakespeare shows enough for us to infer the wasted potential.

Claudius and Laertes

Claudius enters midway through Ophelia's first "mad" appearance, though he has little to contribute—"How do you, pretty lady?" and "Pretty Ophelia!" are two of his lines [IV.v.41 & 56]. As Ophelia loses herself in song, however, the king asks a question that is unintentionally revealing: "How long hath she been thus?" [IV.v.67]. All through the play, Elsinore has been a rat's nest of royal spies—does Claudius really not know how long the daughter of his dead spymaster has been (as he shall later put it) "[d]ivided from herself and her fair judgment" [IV.v.85]? We might explain his ignorance as due to Ophelia's political insignificance—the king has several more-pressing concerns—yet after Ophelia exits, there is a truly stunning lapse. Alone with Gertrude, Claudius bemoans his "battalions" of sorrows [IV.v.78–9], building to this crisis:

Last, and as much containing as all these,
[Ophelia's] brother is in secret come from France,
Feeds on this wonder, keeps himself in clouds,
And wants not buzzers to infect his ear
With pestilent speeches of his father's death,
Wherein necessity, of matter beggared,
Will nothing stick our person to arraign
In ear and ear.

[IV.v.87–94]

For a moment, Claudius sounds adequately informed: Laertes, having snuck home from France, is blaming his father's death on the king. Then—within three lines!—

Laertes, with considerable backing, is at the door.²⁵ “Save yourself, my lord,” a messenger shrieks:

The ocean, overpeering of his list,
Eats not the flats with more impetuous haste
Than young Laertes, in a riotous head,
O’erbears your officers. The rabble call him lord,
And, as the world were now but to begin,
Antiquity forgot, custom not known,
The ratifiers and props of every word,
They cry, “Choose we! Laertes shall be king!”
Caps, hands, and tongues applaud it to the clouds,
“Laertes shall be king! Laertes king!”

[IV.v.98–108]

Three more lines, and Laertes has forced his way past Claudius’s mercenary guard and into his presence.

How has all this happened?! Ironically, the fact that Claudius could not track Polonius’s incensed, grieving son until Laertes is pointing a sword in his face and screaming “To hell allegiance” [IV.v.131] is the best evidence Polonius was good at his job. The king’s new spymaster has some holes in his network. To be fair, who would have predicted that any faction of Danes would call for Laertes—absent for most of the play, save for a few courtesies and a condescending speech—to be king? It’s a ludicrous twist, as though concocted to demonstrate how easily Hamlet might have turned the mob (whose judgment Shakespeare never overestimated) against Claudius and secured the crown for himself, if he had only tried.

²⁵ The suddenness of this turn is so incredible, one wonders if Shakespeare compressed time in the middle of the scene—might several weeks “pass” as Claudius recounts his woes? (How long should we assume it takes for news of Polonius’s death to reach Laertes in France, and for Laertes to gather a small army and march on Elsinore?) Yet as written the impression is of Fortune’s wheel wildly spinning.

Claudius also, by his own admission, botched Polonius's burial: "we have done but greenly / In hugger-mugger to inter him," he confides to Gertrude [IV.v.83–4].

Laertes, confronting Claudius, is more specific:

His means of death, his obscure funeral—
No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o'er his bones,
No noble rite nor formal ostentation—
Cry to be heard, as 'twere from heaven to earth,
That I must call't in question.

[IV.v.207–11]

Later, Claudius tells Laertes why he did not publically charge Hamlet with slaying

Polonius: "The queen his mother / Lives almost by his looks . . .";

The other motive
Why to a public count I might not go
Is the great love the general gender bear him,
Who, dipping all his faults in their affection,
Work like the spring that turneth wood to stone,
Convert his gyves to graces . . .

[IV.vii.11–21]

There is truth in this, however much Claudius leaves out. Yet to guard against trouble, he chose barely to acknowledge Polonius's death at all! (Might this insult have contributed to Ophelia's madness?) His faults notwithstanding, Polonius was a powerful man at court—for Claudius to think everyone would forget or ignore the bloody body reveals a brash trust in his own authority. Is there similar hubris—does this regicide even perceive the irony—when he schools Gertrude, frightened by Laertes, "There's such divinity doth hedge a king / That treason can but peep to what it would, / Acts little of his will" [IV.v.123–5]? Perhaps, having survived (so he believes) both Fortinbras and Hamlet, Claudius has become complacent and shortsighted.

"With witchcraft of his wit," Old Hamlet grumbled, Claudius won Gertrude's love [I.v.42–6]; now, with a sword at his throat, he falls back on his slippery words. "I'll

not be juggled with,” Laertes insists [IV.v.130], but that is precisely where Claudius excels. “Go but apart,” he orders Laertes,

Make choice of whom your wisest friends you will,
And they shall hear and judge ’twixt you and me.
If by direct or by collateral hand
They find us touched, we will our kingdom give,
Our crown, our life, and all that we call ours,
To you in satisfaction; but if not,
Be you content to lend your patience to us,
And we shall jointly labor with your soul
To give it due content.

[IV.v.197–206]

If this trial indeed happens, it is offstage; when next we see them, Claudius has convinced Laertes of his innocence. This speaks more to Laertes’s and his followers’ gullibility than to Claudius’s craft—though the king’s defense is in fact true, at least superficially. Yet Claudius shows unquestionable skill in what follows, for Laertes has not been so pacified that he no longer demands vengeance. The situation becomes more urgent when a messenger delivers letters from Hamlet. “Tomorrow shall I beg leave to see your kingly eyes,” the prince writes [IV.vii.43–4], and Laertes smolders: “It warms the very sickness in my heart / That I shall live and tell him to his teeth, / ‘Thus didest thou’” [IV.vii.53–5].

This will not do—Laertes is too impetuous, and Claudius too guilty, to risk such a confrontation. Instead, Claudius hints at what Laertes desires—“I will work him / To an exploit now ripe in my device, / Under the which he shall not choose but fall” [IV.vii.61–3]—then shifts to flattery:

King: You have been talked of since your travel much,
And that in Hamlet’s hearing, for a quality
Wherein they say you shine. Your sum of parts
Did not together pluck such envy from him
As did that one, and that, in my regard,

suspicion? Or whether his more powerful co-conspirator, in response to that suspicion, might feign ignorance and blame Laertes alone?

Perhaps he considers the first problem, at least, for after agreeing to Claudius's plan Laertes proposes a fail-safe:

And for that purpose I'll anoint my sword.
I bought an unction of a mountebank,
So mortal that, but dip a knife in it,
Where it draws blood no cataplasm so rare,
Collected from all simples that have virtue
Under the moon, can save the thing from death
That is but scratched withal. I'll touch my point
With this contagion, that, if I gall him slightly,
It may be death.

[IV.vii.138–46]

Laertes just happens to have this deadly potion? Probably he has intended for a while to poison Hamlet. Given how things work out, Claudius might have done better not intervening at all. Instead, having hatched a new plot, he cannot stop himself. "Let's further think of this," he ponders:

We'll make a solemn wager on your cunnings—
I ha't!
When in your motion you are hot and dry—
As make your bouts more violent to that end—
And that he calls for drink, I'll have prepared him
A chalice for the nonce, whereon but sipping,
If he by chance escape your venom'd stuck,
Our purpose may hold there.

[IV.vii.146–60]

This is bonkers. What does Claudius imagine will happen if Hamlet, moments after drinking from a cup that Claudius himself has prepared, drops dead before the court? Will witnesses assume the prince had a heart attack? (The same objection holds for Laertes: does he really believe, if a scratch from his sword is enough to kill Hamlet, no one will realize the sword has been poisoned?!) Perhaps, given more time to reflect,

they'd have spotted the gaping holes in their plot. Instead, Gertrude enters with news of Ophelia's drowning and Laertes storms out. "Let's follow, Gertrude," Claudius barks. "How much I had to do to calm his rage! / Now fear I this will give it start again" [IV.vii.189–91]. Thus ends the act. Hamlet returns—and brawls with Laertes in Ophelia's grave—the very next day. (Following the brawl, Claudius urges Laertes to remember "our last night's speech" [V.i.283].) The king and his instrument—and consequently Hamlet, Gertrude, and the rest of Elsinore—are locked in their disastrous, ridiculous plan.

Act Five: The Rest

Act Five contains perhaps the play's most iconic image: Hamlet contemplating a skull. How he ends up with a skull, though, seems a bit forced. Apparently the road to Elsinore winds through the castle graveyard. (We might speculate that Hamlet, returning from exile, is taking a less-traveled road to avoid detection, but he has already announced his imminent return in a letter to Claudius [IV.vii.42–6].) When he enters with Horatio, Hamlet pauses to observe the first gravedigger (the other has gone to get liquor) tossing up skulls from past burials and singing as he clears the ground. (Hamlet does not yet know the new grave belongs to Ophelia.) "Has this fellow no feeling of his business?" the prince wonders aloud [V.i.60], then demonstrates his own, droller method of holding death at a distance:

Hamlet: Why might not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quillities, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this mad knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery? Hum! This fellow might be in's time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries. . . . Will his vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and double ones too, than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures? The very conveyances of his lands will scarcely lie in this box, and must th' inheritor himself have no more, ha?

Horatio: Not a jot more, my lord.

Hamlet: Is not parchment made of sheepskins?

Horatio: Ay, my lord, and of calfskins too.

Hamlet: They are sheep and calves which seek out assurance in that.

[V.i.91–110]

Surely a mind such as Hamlet's has already thought such thoughts—indeed, the last time we saw him, regarding Fortinbras's army and ambitions, he made a similar point about coveting “eggshells.” Here I suspect he is being cheeky more than philosophical—he had not expected to stumble upon so private a scene, and is using irony to deflect.

He also does not expect to meet his match in a simple laborer. “Whose grave's this, sirrah?” he calls down, and the clown replies—without pausing in his digging, I like to imagine—“Mine, sir.”

Hamlet: I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in't.

First Gravedigger: You lie out on't, sir, and therefore 'tis not yours. For my part, I do not lie in't, yet it is mine.

Hamlet: Thou dost lie in't, to be in't and say it is thine. 'Tis for the dead, not for the quick; therefore thou liest.

First Gravedigger: 'Tis a quick lie, sir; 'twill away again from me to you.

[V.i.110–20]

This goes on a bit longer before Hamlet exclaims, “How absolute the knave is! We must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us,” and gripes that “the age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier he galls his kibe” [V.i.128–32]. Nevertheless, I hear appreciation in his tone—when was the last time someone (who wasn't a poorly disguised spy) verbally sparred with him? (“'Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so” is the most that Horatio contributes to the scene [V.i.194–5].)

Does the First Gravedigger recognize Hamlet? The role may be played either way, though I prefer when he does: it adds an interesting subtext when he shifts the topic of conversation to the prince:

Hamlet: How long hast thou been gravemaker?

First Gravedigger: . . . It was that very day that young Hamlet was born—
he that is mad, and sent into England.

Hamlet: Ay, marry, why was he sent into England?

First Gravedigger: Why, because a was mad. A shall recover his wits
there; or, if a do not, 'tis no great matter there.

Hamlet: Why?

First Gravedigger: 'Twill not be seen in him there. There the men are as
mad as he.

Hamlet: How came he mad?

First Gravedigger: Very strangely, they say.

Hamlet: How strangely?

First Gravedigger: Faith, e'en with losing his wits.

Hamlet: Upon what ground?

First Gravedigger: Why, here in Denmark.

[V.i.132–51]

Recognized or not, Hamlet has limited interest in this topic. “How long will a man lie i' th' earth ere he rot?” he asks abruptly [V.i.153], and (after a few more puns) the gravedigger produces a skull that he claims “hath lien you i' th' earth three and twenty years.”

Hamlet: Whose was it?

First Gravedigger: A whoreson mad fellow's it was. Whose do you think
it was?

Hamlet: Nay, I know not.

First Gravedigger: A pestilence on him for a mad rogue! A poured a
flagon of Rhenish on my head once. This same skull, sir, was Sir
Yorick's skull, the king's jester.

[V.i.161–70]

Is it quibbling to wonder how the First Gravedigger could identify a skull after so much time?²⁸ Regardless, Hamlet accepts what he is told and, in another famous speech, reveals his childhood love for the jester:

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times. And now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chopfallen? Now get you to my lady's table, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. Make her laugh at that.

[V.i.173–83]

Like the earlier “What piece of work is a man,” this speech is neither soliloquy nor verse, and to my ears it sounds wholly sincere, a clash of conflicting emotions—in this case, unexpected delight and horror. Again Hamlet has let himself be vulnerable before others, only this time no one interrupts with a smirk. Yorick seems to have been a father figure—more, we may surmise, than the warrior-king—and why not? The prince of Denmark is a natural jester, and he conjures this spirit to push back his “rising gorge” as he ponders the skull in his hands:

Hamlet: Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' th' earth?

Horatio: E'en so.

Hamlet: And smelt so? Pah!

Horatio: E'en so, my lord.

Hamlet: To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till a find it stopping a bung-hole? . . . Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer barrel?

²⁸ Filmmakers can leverage their medium to answer this question in ways Shakespeare couldn't—in a flashback, Branagh gives the living Yorick buckteeth that remain in death, for example—but on stage the puzzle seems insoluble. Perhaps it is Shakespeare's subtle point: Death erases identity, until all that remains are other people's assumptions.

Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
 Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
 O, that that earth which kept the world in awe
 Should patch a wall t' expel the winter's flaw!

[V.i.186–205]

This seems to me the healthiest attitude toward death in the play. Should Hamlet sacrifice his own life, and risk his sanity and soul, avenging a patch of earth that once was a man? The question is not how great the dead *were*, but what they mean to us *now*. Perhaps Hamlet has matured in exile, or perhaps the setting is key: this is the only scene at Elsinore that does not take place within (or atop) the castle walls.²⁹ As Northrop Frye notes [96], “there are no ghosts” in this peaceful graveyard:

. . . characters are either alive, like Hamlet and Horatio and the gravediggers, or dead, like Yorick and Ophelia. The terrible ambiguity of life in death, which the Ghost has brought into the action, and which has transformed the action of the play into this nightmarish sealed labyrinth, is resolving into its primary elements.

And then that peace is shattered. The funeral procession enters, with the king and queen and Laertes, and Hamlet soon realizes the corpse is Ophelia's. Laertes curses the man “[w]hose wicked deed” (i.e., Hamlet's slaying of Polonius) drove his sister to madness [V.i.235–8]; then—pushed perhaps by the “maimed rites” and “churlish priest” [V.i.208 & 229]—he leaps into the grave, embraces Ophelia's body, and cries, “Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead / Till of this flat a mountain you have made / T' o'ertop old Pelion or the skyish head / Of blue Olympus” [V.i.240–3]. And Hamlet, suddenly outraged, reveals himself:

What is he whose grief
 Bears such an emphasis? whose phrase of sorrow

²⁹ The only other “external” scene is IV.iv, which in several ways—Hamlet's conversation with the Norwegian captain; his climactic soliloquy—anticipates the graveyard epiphanies.

Conjures the wand'ring stars, and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,
Hamlet the Dane.

[V.i.243–7]

Is Hamlet so offended by Laertes's performance? The vague curse—if Hamlet realizes he is the target—may have primed his anger, but it also stems from grief and his own sense of guilt: he must know how cruelly he treated Ophelia—even before he killed her father! Yet he cannot stop hyperbolically ranting about Laertes's hyperbole:

'Swounds, show me what thou't do.
Woo't weep? woo't fight? woo't fast? woo't tear thyself?
Woo't drink up eisel? eat a crocodile?
I'll do't. Dost come here to whine?
To outface me with leaping in her grave?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I.
And if thou prate of mountains, let them throw
Millions of acres on us, till our ground,
Singeing his pate against the burning zone,
Make Ossa like a wart!

[V.i.263–72]

Hamlet must be the hero even of someone else's funeral! Ophelia lies forgotten—in fact, she is not mentioned again—along with any culpability on Hamlet's part. “What is the reason that you use me thus,” he inexplicably asks Laertes when they are separated. “I loved you ever” [V.i.278–9]. His declaration earlier in the scene, “I loved Ophelia,” is more convincing, yet even then his aim is to outshine Laertes: “Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum,” he insists [V.i.258–60].³⁰

In short, this unfortunate sequence showcases Hamlet at his least aware. (He also claims to be “not splenitive and rash”—as he fights Laertes in a grave [V.i.250]!) The

³⁰ This is not the first time Hamlet reveals a callow understanding of love, as though it were a zero-sum game. His major problem when the play begins, before he learns anything of the Ghost, is that he cannot believe his mother can simultaneously love her late husband, her new husband, and her son.

poison of Elsinore works quickly, breaking down his posture of thoughtful acceptance. We should remember this as we pick our way through the bloody conclusion.

Miscellaneous Thoughts before the Final Scene

- Gertrude continues to defend her son. “This is mere madness; / And thus a while the fit will work on him,” she maintains as Hamlet rants in the graveyard: “Anon, as patient as the female dove / When that her golden couplets are disclosed, / His silence will sit drooping” [V.i.273–7]. Whether these last lines are a mother’s willful blindness or a conscious effort to de-escalate, they do not describe the prince—at least not since the play began. If Hamlet appreciates the help, he does not say so; he addresses neither Gertrude nor Claudius and exits still grumbling about Laertes: “The cat will mew, and dog will have his day” [V.i.281].
- If it were not previously evident, by scene’s end the gulf between Claudius and Gertrude is gaping. The king’s closing lines are aimed at pacifying Laertes, with one exception: “Good Gertrude, set some watch over your son” [V.i.285]. What a change that word “your” marks from Act One, when Claudius called Hamlet “my son” and “our son” [I.ii.64 & 117].
- Who can forget Polonius’s hackneyed advice to Laertes, back in Act One, in what turned out to be their last conversation? Apparently Laertes can! Even considering his outrage and grief (which I believe are genuine), it is worth noting how much Laertes ignores his father. “Give thy thoughts no tongue, / Nor any unproportioned thought his act,” Polonius urged, and “Beware / Of entrance to a quarrel,” and “Take each man’s censure, but reserve thy judgment” [I.iii.58–9, 64–5 & 68]. Instead Laertes plots to murder Hamlet and screams, while choking

him, “The devil take thy soul!” [V.i.247]. Like Old Hamlet, Polonius was sure he knew better than his children what to do. The children are destroyed whether they obey or not.

Carnal, Bloody, and Unnatural Acts

The final scene of Shakespeare’s longest play begins with Hamlet affecting tranquility—stemming, he claims, from yet more rashness! He is recounting to Horatio the events, en route to England, that led to his uncovering Claudius’s plot to have him executed:

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
That would not let me sleep. Methought I lay
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes. Rashly,
And praised be rashness for it—let us know,
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well
When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us
There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will—

[V.ii.4–11]

“That is most certain,” Horatio interjects,” which might be laughable in a play with fewer corpses. Hamlet was on that deadly voyage only because he had mistaken Polonius for Claudius and rashly killed him, after sparing Claudius in the previous scene, after losing his cool at “The Mousetrap” and signaling his regicidal intent to the entire court, after dithering for two months—can anyone seriously claim to spy “divinity” in this mess? What might Ophelia think, were she still alive and sane?

Ah, but Hamlet has lost all concern for others; the fates of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are further proof. “Up from my cabin,” he resumes his tale to Horatio, “. . . Groped I to find out them, had my desire, / Fingere their packet, and in fine withdrew / To mine own room again” [V.ii.12–16]. In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s packet, Hamlet finds the order for his execution. “Being thus benetted round with villainies,” he

continues, “Or I could make a prologue to my brains, / They had begun the play” [V.ii.29–31]. It seems significant that, in describing this crisis, Hamlet returns again to the metaphor of his favorite art form: imagining his former friends as villains in a play must make it easier to kill them with a stroke of his pen. For Hamlet drafts a new commission to the English king. “I once did hold it, as our statistes do, / A baseness to write fair, and labored much / How to forget that learning, but, sir, now / It did me yeoman’s service,” he tells Horatio [V.ii.33–6]—just a writer talking shop—then builds the suspense through half-a-dozen modifying clauses before making his point:

An earnest conjuration from the king,
As England was his faithful tributary,
As love between them like the palm might flourish,
As peace should still her wheaten-garland wear
And stand a comma ’tween their amities,
And many suchlike as’s of great charge,
That on the view and knowing of these contents,
Without debatement further, more or less,
He should those bearers³¹ put to sudden death,
Not shriving time allowed.

[V.ii.38–47]

Horatio’s initial response to this cold-blooded confession is strangely tangential—“How was this sealed?”—though Hamlet is happy to answer: he used his father’s signet, which he happened to be carrying (“Why, even in that was heaven ordinant,” he exclaims) [V.ii.47–53]. Only then does Horatio (euphemistically) note the personal consequences of Hamlet’s craft: “So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to’t” [V.ii.56]. Hamlet is unrepentant: “They are not near my conscience; their defeat / Does by their

³¹ Hamlet never names Rosencrantz or Guildenstern in this scene. Horatio finally identifies them, ten lines later.

own insinuation grow” [V.ii.57–8].³² How is it that Hamlet, so sure of the rightness of these two murders, within a few lines requires a pep talk to justify committing another?

He asks Horatio:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath killed my king and whored my mother,
Popped in between th’ election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such coz’nage—is’t not perfect conscience?

[V.ii.62–6]

In the Second Quarto, at least, he never finishes this thought. The Folio adds a conclusion (“ . . . is’t not perfect conscience / To quit him with this arm?”), but more interesting is what follows. “It must be shortly known to him from England / What is the issue of the business there,” Horatio points out. “It will be short,” Hamlet replies; “the interim is mine, / And a man’s life no more than to say ‘one’” [Folio, V.ii.70–3]. Sounds decisive—yet Hamlet gives no indication in either text of a plan to leverage the interim. Instead, a new character enters: the courtier Osric, a windbag even by the standards of Shakespearean satire. “Dost know this waterfly?” Hamlet mutters to Horatio [V.ii.69], then spends an incredible amount of time proving—and re-proving—his judgment.

Though it is very funny, I shall pass over this dialogue—the crucial point is not any specific moment but the length itself. For over a hundred lines, Hamlet mercilessly catalogues—both behind Osric’s back and to his face—the courtier’s innumerable varieties of foolishness. Of these lines, fewer than ten concern the sole reason for Osric’s entrance: to convey to Hamlet the challenge from Claudius to duel Laertes. Not once

³² The Folio adds one more rationalization: “Why, man, they did make love to this employment.” Apparently Hamlet cannot—or will not—conceive of the possibility that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern too were manipulated by Claudius and ignorant of the true purpose of their employment.

does Hamlet even consider that his challengers, each of whom has separately tried to kill him, might be plotting together.³³ Only after Osric exits does Hamlet hint at this possibility:

Horatio: You will lose, my lord.

Hamlet: I do not think so. Since he went into France I have been in continual practice. I shall win at the odds. Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart, but it is no matter.

Horatio: Nay, good my lord—

Hamlet: It is but foolery, but it is such a kind of gaingiving as would perhaps trouble a woman.

Horatio: If your mind dislike anything, obey it. I will forestall their repair hither and say you are not fit.

Hamlet: Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.

[V.ii.188–202]

First, Hamlet certainly has not “been in continual practice”—whether we interpret *continual* to mean “constant” or something more like “regular”—since Laertes went to France (i.e., the play’s third scene). He has not even mentioned dueling, fencing, rapiers, etc., before now. Second, apparently even tranquil Hamlet retains his misogyny. Third, what is the difference between “a divinity that shapes our ends,” which Hamlet is eager (so he claims) to trust completely, and “special providence,” which he incuriously dismisses? (For that matter, Hamlet not long ago praised Horatio precisely for *not* being “a pipe for Fortune’s finger / To sound what stop she please” [III.ii.67–70]—and accosted Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for treating *him* like such a pipe [III.ii.363–5].) It hardly requires augury to see a deathtrap in a duel arranged by one’s mortal enemies. The

³³ I see no reason to doubt that both scenes in Act Five happen on the same day—why would Hamlet wait to tell Horatio about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?—which means mere hours have passed since Laertes choked Hamlet in Ophelia’s grave.

entire sequence, though as memorable as anything Hamlet utters, is shockingly incoherent—and damning. “When we are compelled to confront the consequence of some weak or bad act of our own, the easiest way to escape a sense of sin is to put the blame on fate or the stars,” Goddard argues [378]. Though nothing has physically compelled him, perhaps Hamlet has returned to Elsinore so that he may continue shifting responsibility to fate. Regardless, he is greatly diminished before Claudius and Laertes get to him.

For that, at long last, is where we are. The king, queen, and court enter, fencing accouterments are laid out, and Hamlet approaches Laertes:

Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong,
But pardon't, as you are a gentleman.
This presence knows, and you must needs have heard,
How I am punished with a sore distraction.
What I have done
That might your nature, honor, and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it then? His madness. . . .
Let my disclaiming from a purposed evil
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts
That I have shot my arrow o'er the house
And hurt my brother.

[V.ii.204–22]

This sounds beautifully sincere—it is a marked improvement over his cry, hours earlier in the graveyard, “What is the reason that you use me thus? / I loved you ever” [V.i.278–9].

But does Hamlet mean it? He stabbed Polonius in a fit of blind rage, but rage is not madness—at least not the kind that might excuse, if not absolve, his deadly error. He was not mad when he meticulously produced the conditions that convinced him, sword at hand, to “speak daggers” to his mother [III.ii.389]. So these public words to Laertes

now—are they just one more performance, or does Hamlet want desperately to believe them? He could be both sincere and wrong. Perhaps the desire to heighten this contrast between himself and “his madness” is Hamlet’s underlying motive for agreeing to the duel: the best he can do, apparently, is play “this brother’s wager” with another grieving son [V.ii.231].

Regardless, Laertes is unmoved. “I am satisfied in nature, / Whose motive in this case should stir me most / To my revenge,” he claims (leaving out the fact that he is an unbated, envenomed rapier away from revenge). “But in my terms of honor,” he continues, “I stand aloof, and will no reconcilment / Till by some elder masters of known honor / I have a voice and precedent of peace / To keep my name ungor’d” [V.ii.222–8]. I have no idea what this means—is he requesting a trial with judges?—but no matter, for of course Laertes does not desire peace: clearly more than Hamlet’s, his words here are empty. Even so, once the poisoned rapier is actually in hand, and he and Hamlet have played a few bouts (both won by Hamlet), Laertes wavers:

Laertes: My lord, I’ll hit him now.

King: I do not think’t.

Laertes [Aside]: And yet it is almost against my conscience.³⁴
[V.ii.278–9]

But tragedy has struck already, though most people onstage do not yet feel it. For Gertrude, not Hamlet, has drunk from Claudius’s poisoned cup. The events that precipitate this catastrophe are further evidence that the king may not be so gifted a schemer as Hamlet imagines. “Set me the stoups of wine upon that table,” Claudius demands just before the match begins:

³⁴ Thus, to avenge his father, Laertes must disregard Polonius’s best advice: “This above all, to thine own self be true . . .” [I.iii.77].

If Hamlet give the first or second hit,
 Or quit in answer of the third exchange,
 Let all the battlements their ordnance fire.
 The king shall drink to Hamlet's better breath,
 And in the cup an union shall he throw
 Richer than that which four successive kings
 In Denmark's crown have worn. Give me the cups,
 And let the kettle to the trumpet speak,
 The trumpet to the cannoneer without,
 The cannons to the heavens, the heaven to earth,
 "Now the king drinks to Hamlet."

[V.ii.245–56]

Ten lines later, after Hamlet has indeed given the first hit, Claudius interrupts again:

"Stay, give me drink. Hamlet, this pearl is thine. / Here's to thy health. Give him the cup"

[V.ii.265–6].

Since Claudius's first speech seems to culminate in his own drinking, the pearl (or "union") that he now drops in the wine presumably contains the poison. Short of labeling the cup with a skull and crossbones, it is difficult to imagine a more ostentatious, pointless display. Even if Hamlet were an enthusiastic drinker—have Claudius's spies never reported the prince's thoughts on "[t]his heavy-headed revel"? [I.iv.17]—gulping wine is a lousy strategy for winning a fencing match. Unsurprisingly to everyone but the king, Hamlet declines: "I'll play this bout first; set it by awhile" [V.ii.267]. After scoring a second hit, he still does not reach for the cup . . . but Gertrude does:

King: Our son shall win.

Queen: He's fat, and scant of breath.

The queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet.

Hamlet: Good madam!

King: Gertrude, do not drink.

Queen: I will, my lord; I pray you pardon me.

[V.ii.270–4]

It's possible to stage this sequence so that Gertrude suspects Claudius of treachery—in drinking, she is sacrificing herself for Hamlet—but this seems out of character: both more

selfless and more perceptive than she has been. Probably she is carried away by simple enthusiasm: her son, though out of shape, shall win! Cheers!

What comes next is rapid fire. Because Shakespeare wrote minimal stage directions, each beat must be inferred from the dialogue, but what typically happens onstage is that Laertes—realizing his adversary is better than planned—cuts Hamlet on an arm or leg between bouts. Infuriated by what he perceives to be poor sportsmanship, Hamlet fights back and disarms Laertes; he then uses the unbated foil—still not realizing the blade is poisoned—to cut Laertes. Suddenly, Gertrude collapses:

Hamlet: How does the queen?

King: She swoons to see them bleed.

Queen: No, no, the drink, the drink! O my dear Hamlet!
The drink, the drink! I am poisoned.

[V.ii.291–3]

Again, this is sometimes staged so that Gertrude understands not only what has happened but who is responsible. Yet her lines indicate no greater awareness as she dies—if she truly suspected Claudius, she might have clued in Hamlet, who has not yet reached the only plausible explanation for his mother’s death. “O villainy!” he cries. “Ho! let the door be locked. / Treachery! Seek it out” [V.ii.294–5].

Laertes, repentant in his own death, immediately confesses³⁵:

It is here, Hamlet. Hamlet, thou art slain;
No med’cine in the world can do thee good.
In thee there is not half an hour’s life.
The treacherous instrument is in thy hand,
Unbated and envenomed. The foul practice
Hath turned itself on me. Lo, here I lie,
Never to rise again. Thy mother’s poisoned.
I can no more. The king, the king’s to blame.

[V.ii.296–303]

³⁵ A minor point that nevertheless irritates me: Laertes is poisoned after Hamlet yet dies first.

This information diminishes two key obstacles to Hamlet's vengeance. First, the court now knows Claudius is (at least by proxy) a murderer. Second, Hamlet can stop worrying about the consequences of killing Claudius—at least to his life and prospects. (His legacy is another story, as we shall see.) Yet even now, so close to the end, we cannot know how much this matters. We have seen Hamlet kill thoughtlessly, furiously, before. It seems quite possible that simply witnessing his mother's death and learning "the king's to blame," combined with adrenaline from fencing and a weapon in hand, might suffice to produce another impulsive killing, consequences be damned.

Whatever the cause, Hamlet not only stabs Claudius—he forces the rest of the poisoned wine down his throat:

Hamlet: The point envenomed too?

Then venom, to thy work.

All: Treason! treason!

King: O, yet defend me, friends. I am but hurt.

Hamlet: Here, thou incestuous, murd'rous, damned Dane.

Drink off this potion. Is thy union here?

Follow my mother.

[V.ii.304–10]

It must be cathartic for Hamlet finally to shout his feelings for all to hear. Yet note the response. Despite what they have seen and heard, the court instinctively calls it "treason."

Thus Hamlet, with his dying breaths, turns outward:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,

That are but mutes or audience to this act,

Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death,

Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you—

But let it be. Horatio, I am dead;

Thou livest; report me and my cause aright

To the unsatisfied.

[V.ii.317–23]

“Let [it] be” again—but not really. Hamlet will not tell us . . . *something*, but he orders Horatio to make a satisfactory report. When Horatio prefers suicide—“I am more an antique Roman than a Dane. / Here’s yet some liquor left.” [V.ii.324–5]—Hamlet insists:

As th’ art a man,
Give me the cup. Let go. By heaven, I’ll ha’t!
O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.

[V.ii.325–32]

The urgency—from a man who hours earlier wondered, “what is’t to leave betimes?” [V.ii.201]—is striking. Yet whose story will be told? As Marjorie Garber notes [505], “Horatio himself cannot really do this. He has not heard the soliloquys, without which the play has a very different quality, far more sensational and inexplicable.” Indeed, what Horatio omits from his initial report to Fortinbras (we shall turn to him momentarily) is more interesting than what he mentions:

So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall’n on th’ inventors’ heads.

[V.ii.363–8]

This might describe any number of now-forgotten revenge tragedies. It falls woefully short of Hamlet, whose dying words—and especially Horatio’s reply—have not ceased reverberating:

Hamlet: O, I die, Horatio!
The potent poison quite o’ercrows my spirit.

I cannot live to hear the news from England,
But I do prophesy th' election lights
On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice.
So tell him, with th' occurrents, more and less,
Which have solicited—the rest is silence.

Horatio: Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

[V.ii.335–43]

Fortinbras

Hamlet's final thought is so apt, and Horatio's farewell so moving, that it is not uncommon for productions to end with them; these are necessarily more personal, less political *Hamlets*. Yet the wider world churns on, and much is still rotten in Denmark. We hear this in the "warlike noise" [V.ii.332] and half-dozen lines that precede Hamlet's "rest," and in the entrances that follow. An English Ambassador, oblivious to the irony, confirms that "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead" [V.ii.354]. But the stage now belongs to Fortinbras, last seen on his way to seize some worthless Polish frontier. Apparently he has succeeded: he is, per Osric, "with conquest come from Poland" [V.ii.333]—but why to Elsinore?

Though Fortinbras (for obvious reasons) never says so, it is plausible to think he has brought his victorious army to probe Elsinore's defenses. Had he found a living, undistracted king, he might well have marched on. Alas, he finds a slaughterhouse, and so with dubious "sorrow" he assumes the Danish throne. "I have some rights of memory in this kingdom, / Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me," the Norwegian prince asserts [V.ii.371–3]—though Horatio spent much of the opening scene explaining why Fortinbras has no such rights at all. No matter—Hamlet has already endorsed the succession, and who remains to object? Thus when the curtain falls the political situation

has been reversed: Denmark will be a vassal state of Norway, and all that Old Hamlet gained will be lost. The play's unreserved winner is its least known figure.

There is not much more to say about Fortinbras. He speaks scarcely twenty lines in two scenes, yet he hangs over the action like another bloody ghost, as important a foil to Hamlet as Horatio, Laertes, the First Gravedigger, and half the other characters. In a sense, he is also a foil to Horatio. At play's end, the two outsiders are left alive: one is tasked with telling his prince's story; the other will make a show of listening respectfully. Fortinbras even gets the final words, sure to become the official interpretation of Horatio's tale:

Let four captains
 Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
 For he was likely, had he been put on,
 To have proved most royal; and for his passage
 The soldiers' music and the rite of war
 Speak loudly for him.
 Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this
 Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.
 Go, bid the soldiers shoot.

[V.ii.378–86]

How does he know this? (Do *we* even know it?) Is it simply what a budding tyrant would want his own eulogizers to say? “It would be a mistake,” Michael Neill argues, “to underestimate the dramatic significance of Horatio's story or of the ‘music and the rite of war’—these last gestures of ritual consolation—especially in a play where . . . we have seen the dead repeatedly degraded by the slighting of their funeral pomps. In this context it matters profoundly that Hamlet alone is accorded the full dignity of obsequies suited to his rank, for . . . it brings Hamlet's story to a heroic end” [322]. I suppose. But it also underscores how woefully the structures and expectations of Hamlet's world have served him. Who—Fortinbras excepted—would rather have a heroic corpse than a living prince?

* * * * *

I used to wonder if *Hamlet* is even a tragedy, considering Hamlet achieves what he seems to have wanted. He kills Claudius in the depths of the king's villainy, "fit and seasoned for his passage" to Hell. He dies without imperiling his own soul through suicide. He has a devoted follower who shall tell a favorable story about him. He seems, finally, at rest, his exhausted mind silent.

I no longer think so. For one, the speeches that precede Hamlet's last half-line suggest greater agony, physical and psychological. Whatever silence he may find or release from his prison, Hamlet dies fearing the loose ends he leaves behind. But the play is also tragic for its wasted potential: for forcing its brilliant, vital hero out of joint and necessitating his murder. As Bradley argues [39], with respect to Shakespearean tragedy in general:

We remain confronted with the inexplicable fact, or the no less inexplicable appearance, of a world travailing for perfection, but bringing to birth, together with glorious good, an evil which it is able to overcome only by self-torture and self-waste.

I also like Northrop Frye's description [90]:

In tragedy the typical effect on the audience is traditionally assumed to be a catharsis, a word that has something to do with purification, whatever else it means. *Hamlet* seems to me to be a tragedy without a catharsis, a tragedy in which everything noble and heroic is smothered under ferocious revenge codes, treachery, spying and the consequences of weak actions by broken wills.

And Michael Neill's [325]:

The only story Hamlet is given is that of a hoary old revenge tragedy, which he persuades himself (and us) can never denote him truly; but it is a narrative frame that nothing (not even inaction) will allow him to escape. The story of our lives, the play wryly acknowledges, is always the wrong story; but the rest, after all, is silence.

What these interpretations have in common is their emphasis on the mismatch between what Hamlet merits and what he receives. Bradley in particular also stresses the inexplicability of this mismatch. Yet each generation of readers, actors, directors, critics attempts to explain it anyway—likely never to anyone’s satisfaction, including their own. I don’t envision writing a 100-page essay for another play—and 100 pages is not enough for this one. Two years after beginning, I don’t know how to end. Except with silence.

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Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from *Hamlet* are from the Pelican Shakespeare edition of the text, derived from the Second Quarto and published by Penguin Books (cited above).