

# The Soliloquies in *Hamlet*

## The Structural Design

Alex  
Newell



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ALEX NEWELL

At this late date in the history of *Hamlet* criticism, it is surprising to find that the soliloquies in *Hamlet*, although they are crucial in any reading of the tragedy, have not been recognized or fathomed as a major structural system within the play. The purpose of this study is to define the dramatic rationale of the soliloquies in their dramatic contexts and thereby clarify the tragic idea that organizes this most problematic of Shakespeare's plays. In fulfilling this purpose, the study provides detailed examinations of the soliloquies.

Because there are so many soliloquies in *Hamlet*, they provide important perspectives from which to regard Shakespeare's conception of the play and its central character. In these speeches, which are not free from the developing action but which free a character from complex social and interpersonal qualifications in what the character says and does, Shakespeare has highlighted the themes and issues that guided his dramatic thought throughout the play. Of special interest, in this regard, are recurrences, variations, and amplifications of similar matters in more than one soliloquy, as well as contrasts, progressions, and other sequential interrelationships that can serve to define or emphasize an idea or point of view.

The large number of soliloquies that *Hamlet* has in the play is a matter of special dramatic significance, both in terms of Shakespeare's technique in rendering the character and in terms of the way *Hamlet* figures in the developing action of the play. One of the most impor-

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The Soliloquies  
in *Hamlet*



Pablo Picasso, *The Actor*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Thelma Chrysler Foy, 1952.

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Alex Newell



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For Julia,  
my dearest friend  
“Je t’admire” —Narcisse Mondoux



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## Preface

When Henry Thoreau said, late in his short life, “I have traveled a good deal in Concord,” he was not speaking of terrestrial travel but of far-ranging, transcendental journeys of the mind and spirit, journeys of expanding and unifying insights. In some measure, if I may venture the analogy, *Hamlet* has been for me a version of Thoreau’s Concord. Over a period of twenty-five years, since I first published a well-received essay on “The Dramatic Context and Meaning of Hamlet’s ‘To be or not to be’ Soliloquy” (*PMLA* 80 [March 1965]), I have traveled a good deal in *Hamlet*. Indeed, the first Shakespearian role I performed was in a production of *Hamlet*, an experience that in itself made me aware of—and caused me to think about—facets of the play that tend to elude us on the page but greatly enrich the play’s complexities on the stage, where the drama fulfills itself in its medium, sometimes with Pirandellesque laminations of theatricality.

Anyone who takes an interest in this most problematic of Shakespeare’s plays, and has tried to explore it, soon finds that there are shelves upon shelves of scholarly books waiting to serve as guides to point things out—like the enthusiastic drivers of calèches that line some streets in Old Montreal and Quebec City, men and women eager to share their knowledge with anyone who engages their vehicle. Having traveled a good deal in *Hamlet*, including frequent excursions with students in the classroom, I became aware that other travelers might find it useful to have a guide of sorts to the major verbal monuments in the dramatic world of *Hamlet*, a kind of Baedeker to and through the soliloquies within the larger landscape of the play. Surprisingly, there has not been such a study among the innumerable books about the play one finds on library shelves. That circumstance, combined with an unusual clarity that the tragedy has when viewed from the perspective of the soliloquies, seemed to justify yet another critical work on *Hamlet*.

In the writing of this book I am indebted to many persons for a range of splendidly humane actions and attitudes that *Hamlet* would have had to include in a full catalogue of noble traits

defining "what a piece of work is a man"—and, of course, a woman, too, though Hamlet might not have been willing to go this far. Maurice Charney spontaneously and generously took an interest in the idea for this book and, though I hardly knew him at the time, invited me to send him the manuscript; he read and provided critical comments on manuscript versions at various stages of development. His second book on the play, *Hamlet's Fictions*, appeared as I was completing my study, and enabled me to appreciate his generous spirit all the more. For while our views of a number of matters complement each other, there are also areas where we see things quite differently. Clearly this had made no difference to him in helping the idea for this book fulfill itself. The shortcomings that remain rest entirely with me.

Harry Keyishian, who learned about the work by chance (I regard it as special providence), also took an encouraging interest in it and invited me to submit the manuscript to the Editorial Committee of Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, which he chairs. I am indebted to him for useful bibliographical references, constructive editorial suggestions, and a strongly supportive interest that was reassuring in ways he could not know about.

At Concordia University, former Dean Donat Taddeo supported the project with funds for typing services, and his successor, Dean Charles L. Bertrand, granted me a sabbatical that enabled the book to advance toward completion. Vice-Dean Gail Valaskakis and English Department chairpersons Arthur Broes and Gerald Auchinachie were supportive in matters relating to teaching assignments and schedules. The General Research Fund provided a small grant that helped defray some expenses. G. David Sheps, serving as acting chairperson, provided the services of a student research assistant, Janet Madsen, who undertook various tasks to help the work along in the final stages of preparing the manuscript.

Howard Fink, a dear colleague with whom I discussed this study at various times, and John Ripley of McGill University befriended me in ways that enabled me to work during a difficult period of illness. Doctors Maria Perrone and Robert Lewis have provided medical attention with patience, candor, and understanding that I have appreciated. John O'Meara carefully proofread the final manuscript and offered a number of refining suggestions for which I am grateful. The book was also well served by the fine work of Donald Lyons as copy editor for Associated University Presses. From the Houghton Mifflin Company I received permission to use *The Riverside Shakespeare* (G. Blakemore Evans, ed.,

copyright © 1974 by Houghton Mifflin Company) in this study. And I wish to thank Ms. Beatrice Epstein of the Metropolitan Museum of Art Photo and Slide Library for her assistance in obtaining permission to use a picture of Picasso's "The Actor."

I was nourished in my work, as I always am, by the memory of three of my teachers at the University of Pittsburgh: Henry Fisher, Alan Markman, and Charles Crow. Great teachers often publish through their students; in that respect, this book is a memorial tribute to them. It is also a memorial tribute to my parents, whose reverence for learning remains an enduring influence, an influence transmitted by them as well through my sister, Anita Newell, a librarian whose inspiring intellectual values have always been instructive to me.

There are many other persons, including innumerable students and personnel at various libraries, who also haunt my mind with a sense of my indebtedness to them, and who call to my conscience with the words of Hamlet's father: "Remember me!" I regret that I cannot name them all here.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the contribution of my wife, Julia Alford Newell. A rigorous, patient, acute, and uncompromising critic and editor, she has, through her suggestions and editorial work, enhanced this book from beginning to end—and prevented a number of blunders. I am indebted to her beyond measure. She and I and our daughter, Sima, have traveled together a good deal in *Hamlet*.

Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec





The Soliloquies  
in *Hamlet*



# Introduction

The idea for this study of *Hamlet* evolved from an expeditious and experimental approach to the play that I tested several times in the classroom, where students and teacher alike “always hear / Time’s winged chariot hurrying near,” as they race through a number of plays in an undergraduate course in Shakespeare. After reviewing for my students the range of interpretations and issues that beset understandings of this most problematic of plays, and after pointing out that our examination of *Hamlet* would inevitably be incomplete when we moved on to the next play, I explained that we were going to carry out a critical experiment with *Hamlet*. The experiment consisted of trying to determine what view of the play seems most encouraged by a study restricted fairly rigorously to all of the soliloquies in their dramatic contexts. In the limited time we had available to deal with *Hamlet*, the soliloquies provided a focus while our concern with the contexts involved us with the play in its fuller dimensions. What soon became apparent and took me by surprise at this late date in the history of *Hamlet* criticism was something of central importance that has somehow gone unregarded by students of the play, something so obvious that it actually seems familiar and not possibly new, as soon as it is pointed out: the soliloquies in *Hamlet*, because there are so many of them, constitute collectively a major structural feature that needs to be examined in terms of Shakespeare’s conception of the prince (who has most of them) and the dramatic rationale which organizes these speeches within the larger design of the action. The purpose of this study is to conduct such an examination and to define the dramatic rationale, thereby clarifying the tragic idea that organizes the play.

Although the soliloquies obviously cannot be substituted for the whole drama and are not intrinsically more important than other segments of the action, the approach I have adopted seems nonetheless to have theoretical merit for several reasons. To begin with, the soliloquies figure in a pronounced formal aspect of *Hamlet* that can hardly be avoided in experiencing this play, either on the page or on the stage. For it is fair to say that anyone who reads or sees

the play becomes aware of an almost rhythmic pattern of dramatic moments produced by the soliloquies. These moments arouse heightened interest because there always seems to be an important interrelationship between the evolving action and the occurrence of soliloquies from point to point in the play.

Even if they agree on little else, most critics and other viewers and readers share a general perception of this feature of the dramaturgy of *Hamlet*—a broad alternation of action and soliloquy, of segments with two or more characters on stage followed by a character alone or speaking as though alone. (My distinction between action and soliloquy is more convenient than precise, since the soliloquies in *Hamlet* are actually integral with and inseparable from the action.) In the process of following the play and forming comprehensions, one senses that a soliloquy is able—or should be able—to provide special illumination of the action, though sometimes the interrelationship is elusive and hard to define. Nonetheless, as one becomes more and more familiar with *Hamlet*, one finds that each soliloquy occurs with a rightness and inevitability that seem to increase in meaning as part of the whole, despite the play's meandering looseness. Since the soliloquies are crucial in any reading of the tragedy, their function in its structural design warrants special critical attention. This major formalistic feature, which produces a universal experience of the soliloquies as especially important in the rhetoric of the drama, figures centrally in the theoretical basis for the study being undertaken here.

The general description just given of the alternating design of action and soliloquy needs to be refined in two respects. First, it should be noted that all of the soliloquies in *Hamlet* occur in the first two-thirds of the play, thereby raising an important question regarding the overall structural relation between that section and the last third of the play. G. K. Hunter has recognized this structural issue in speaking of a "gap [that] would seem to be left between the inner history of Hamlet's mind and the outer development of the action."<sup>1</sup> In this connection, it should also be noted that, because all of the soliloquies are concentrated in the first two-thirds of the play, they figure in the dramatic design of that section much more strongly than if the distribution of the same number of soliloquies extended into the other third of the play as well. Secondly, one should recognize that sometimes soliloquies occur in clusters that have striking dramatic and thematic interconnections. The best known instance, but certainly not the only one in the play, arises from the action that catches the conscience of the king. The cluster consists of Hamlet's "'Tis now the very witching

time of night" soliloquy, which is separated by only thirty-five lines from Claudius's "O, my offense is rank" soliloquy, which is followed directly by Hamlet's "Now might I do it" soliloquy.<sup>2</sup>

Because there are so many soliloquies in *Hamlet*, they not only figure prominently in the dramatic structure of the work but also provide important perspectives from which to consider Shakespeare's essential conception of the play. Indeed, in conjunction with their delineation of the structure, they may provide something like an abbreviation of that conception. The concerns, the conflicts, the consciousness, the lack or lapses of consciousness, the language, imagery, tones, attitudes, reasonings, and confusions of Claudius, Ophelia, and Hamlet in their soliloquies are of great importance in trying to arrive at a coherent view of both the prince and the play. Also of special interest, in terms of dramatic and thematic interconnections, are recurrences, variations, and amplifications of similar matters in more than one soliloquy, as well as contrasts, progressions, and other sequential interrelationships that can serve to define or emphasize an idea or point of view. In these speeches, which are not free from the developing action but which free a character from complex social, interpersonal, and other circumstantial qualifications in what the character says and does, Shakespeare has undoubtedly highlighted the themes and issues that guided his dramatic thought throughout the play.

By focusing on the soliloquies as a major structural system in the dramatic design of the play, this study takes an approach to understanding *Hamlet* that has not yet been explored, though the soliloquies often figure importantly, as they should, in studies of the play as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Such studies, however, often neglect the dramatic contexts of soliloquies and subsume these speeches within the comprehensive interpretation being offered. This procedure, which occurs in a variety of forms, may be seen, for example, in G. Wilson Knight's approach to the "To be or not to be" soliloquy in his essay, "*Hamlet* Reconsidered":

The soliloquy (III.i.56–88) at first seems reasonably clear, but difficulties multiply on close inspection. Commentators differ as to whether Hamlet's

To be, or not to be; that is the question  
refers to the proposed killing of Claudius or to the killing of himself. Hitherto I have supported the latter reading, but I now think that both are somehow included, or rather surveyed from a vantage not easy to define. Let us leave the opening until we have studied the remainder.



The thinking is enigmatic and its sequences baffling; and our analysis cannot avoid complexity. It will be more easily followed if we remember the root dualism of the play: that of (i) introspection, deathly melancholia, and a kind of half-willing passivity and (ii) strong government (the king), martial honour (Fortinbras) and lively normality (Leartes).<sup>4</sup>

Here Knight establishes the "root dualism of the play" in an attempt to clarify the meaning of the soliloquy a priori; dramatic considerations have been eclipsed by thematic ones. If "the thinking is enigmatic and its sequences baffling," the confusions may possibly come from trying to impose a comprehensive thematic formula from the outside instead of allowing the soliloquy to yield its thematic relevance, its illumination of Hamlet's character, and its meaning from within the play. A consideration of the dramatic context of the soliloquy—how the soliloquy possibly connects with and helps form the action developing at the point in the play where it occurs—is a logical and necessary step in any attempt to understand the passage and define the vantage from which Hamlet speaks or has his thoughts.

In contrast to approaches that often neglect contextual considerations and make soliloquies fit into a comprehensive view, the theoretical assumption here is that an analysis of the soliloquies in their dramatic contexts enables one to arrive at fresh structural considerations of the play's primary concerns, on which comprehensive understandings can be based. That is, the soliloquies as a structural system provide the underpinnings for an interpretation that is appropriate and balanced, one that is essential and dramatically comprehensive in its outline, even if it is not complete or exhaustive.

The strongest impression the soliloquies in *Hamlet* make collectively is that of an intense dramatization of the human mind as the innermost realm of consciousness, where the reality of the private self is distinguished from the public self, and where the reasoning faculty, looking before and after, finds and parses the terms of consciousness. The revelation of what is going on in the mind (and feelings) of a character is, of course, one of the basic functions of a soliloquy as a dramatic device, but Shakespeare, taking this function one step further in *Hamlet*, has used soliloquies with remarkable consistency to bring attention to the mind itself, especially to the mind as a uniquely human instrument of reflection and ratiocination. Using the soliloquies to project forceful images of

the mind, Shakespeare makes the mind itself and what happens to it a major focus of the tragedy. From the first soliloquy, with its reference to “a beast that wants discourse of reason,” to the last soliloquy, which also refers to a beast and celebrates “godlike reason,” the speeches highlight the human mind in various ways but particularly in its ability to think, to reason—and to be subverted by passion, which subjugates rationality, transforming it into what may be seen as a version of madness in the play. (The subject of madness in *Hamlet*, however it is understood, is itself a matter that refers one to and makes one conscious of the mind.) Under this condition, as some of the soliloquies reveal, emotion usurps the reasoning faculty; discourse of reason is displaced or subsumed by discourse of passion. Reason is seen pandering will.

In one way or another, through a wide range of expressive techniques, the soliloquies in *Hamlet* achieve a deep subjectivity, a profoundly interior mode of discourse. Sometimes a soliloquy reveals subconscious mental conflict in the subtext of the language of the soliloquist, conveying aspects of the character hidden from himself. As the action of the play develops stage by stage, showing the outer or public experience of the characters, it is the periodic revelation of a character’s mind in soliloquy that gives a sense of encountering the character’s truest self and of tracing his most essential consciousness at different stages, whether the interior discourse arises mainly from mental processes or emotional states, in varying combinations of these modalities of the mind: memory, intuition, afflictions of conscience, philosophical or theological reflections, efforts to reason objectively, passionate resolve, rage, frustration, guilt, desperation, murderous intent, and others. The mind of man in its lofty capacity to reason is what gives dramatic thrust to the question Hamlet considers in the “To be or not to be” soliloquy, which includes thought about thought, a subject that occurs again in his final soliloquy. Similarly, Claudius’s effort to reason is what gives poignancy to his futile attempt to confront Christian issues and repent in his guilt-ridden “O, my offense is rank” soliloquy. If one assumes that what the soliloquies achieve individually is related to their larger dramatic purpose collectively, then the consistent evocation of the human mind figures somehow in the tragic idea that shapes the play. This is a major critical issue that will need further consideration. Since *Hamlet* has most of the soliloquies, this issue should also have a bearing on the playwright’s specific conception of him as a man of great intelligence, a thinker, a scholar.<sup>5</sup>

While the soliloquies in *Hamlet* draw one into the mind of the

soliloquist, who is often engaged in some form of reasoning, it would be a mistake to think that a view of the prince based mainly on these speeches engenders an old-fashioned and simplistic view of Hamlet as intellectual and rational man *par excellence*. Such a view would be a distorted one for several reasons. To begin with, it fails to recognize the intensely emotional aspects of the character, feelings that invariably infuse his soliloquies, in conjunction with whatever his mind happens to be concerned with at the time, analytically, reflectively, or responsively as a result of spontaneous engagement, as in his reaction to the Player or Fortinbras. Furthermore, because Hamlet is a thinker, there has long been a tendency to idealize him in various ways, to see him as a passive (or immobilized) victim, and to disregard the fact that he reveals himself as eager to pursue revenge, with a capacity for demonic thought and cruelty, as well as for erratic, impulsive, and homicidal behavior.

It would be no less a mistake, however, to think that the inordinate intelligence that powers the mind of Hamlet is not at the dramatic center of the character and of Shakespeare's conception of his tragedy. Because his acuteness of mind seems always to have made a strong impression, from the earliest commentary to the present, Hamlet has acquired a critical history and reputation as a thinker, not necessarily as a philosopher or intellectual but as a man whose fine mind is very alive and responds richly to everything it encounters. He is a good thinker to some, a poor thinker to others. What is especially interesting, when one reviews the commentary, is the way this salient attribute of the character undergoes modulations that reflect intellectual and cultural history, the cast of mind of individual critics, and shifting emphases in critical theory and practice.

In 1770, for example, Henry MacKenzie, who published *The Man of Feeling* in 1771, subsumed Hamlet's mind into the period's espoused value of sensibility: "The basis of Hamlet's character seems to be an extreme sensibility of mind"—"a mind endowed with a delicacy of feeling that often shakes its fortitude, with sensibility that overpowers its strength."<sup>6</sup> Coleridge, who said, "I have a smack of Hamlet myself,"<sup>7</sup> saw in him a "great, enormous, intellectual activity, and a consequent proportionate aversion to real action."<sup>8</sup> Such a view of Hamlet, albeit simplistic and inaccurate, has been popular to this day; it has been expressed most succinctly by William Hazlitt: "His ruling passion is to think, not to act."<sup>9</sup> Modern critics have been no less aware than earlier ones of the great intelligence Shakespeare bestowed on Hamlet and



they, too, have appreciated it in various ways, sometimes adapting the earlier thought-versus-action formulation to new views of him, such as the familiar psychoanalytic and existential views, among others. John Holloway sees the prince's intelligence as a distinct component in the make-up of the character: "Hamlet displays an *intelligence* which is perhaps unsurpassed in drama for its fertility and intricacy."<sup>10</sup> This view has been reinforced by Frank Kermode in saying that "he has been called the most intelligent figure ever represented in literature."<sup>11</sup>

The recurrent recognition of Hamlet's intelligence for over two centuries, diverse as it has been, confirms that this pronounced attribute of the character is of singular importance and must be addressed critically in a manner that does justice to it as a major element in the play. Some fundamental questions need to be asked, starting with the one that is implicit in all of the commentary that has appreciated Hamlet's remarkable mind: what is the significance of Hamlet's extraordinary endowment of mind for an understanding of Shakespeare's conception of the play as a tragedy? That is, why did Shakespeare conceive the character with such a keen mind? Since Hamlet's soliloquies are strong reflectors of his intelligence, and since they are not only inseparable from the structure of the play but actually help delineate it, another question presents itself, following from the other two: what is the dramatic thought, the dramaturgical idea, governing the relationship between the dominant attribute of the character and the larger dramatic design? Somehow this possible relationship, which one reasonably expects to find, has eluded a precise formulation and clarification. Yet this critical issue, which Hamlet's soliloquies put in sharp focus, is a crucial matter in any view of the play as a unified and coherent work.

If it were possible to identify a meaningful congruency between Shakespeare's conception of the larger structure of the play and his creation of a hero who frequently displays his fine mind in soliloquy, such a fundamental clarification would go a long way in resolving many problems in understanding *Hamlet* as a revenge tragedy. And it would do this without necessarily nullifying the relevance of many matters that have been the concern of critics in appreciating various aspects of the work. One accepts that it is not enough to comprehend the basic framework of the drama without appreciating the details of construction and characterization, to say nothing of the poetics of meanings arising from the language and action of the play in its entirety. But in too many instances, such as Freudian interpretations, an aspect of *Hamlet* is mistaken

for something central; a particular facet of what is seen in Hamlet as a character is refracted into what is mistaken for a comprehensive view of the character and the play. If one is to appreciate the play as a unified system of aesthetic and dramatic energies, as a coherent work of art with organizing principles that somehow hold it all together in its own unique way, it is obviously not satisfactory to focus on what is merely one *aspect* of *Hamlet*, elaborately woven into the play as it may be, without fathoming it within its larger framework—the governing pattern that encompasses both character and total dramatic design. For what happens to Hamlet—the tragedy that befalls him—is integral with the total action of the play, from the injunctions of the Ghost at the beginning to the assumption of power by Fortinbras at the end—two figures linked in the larger design by morally questionable notions of honor.

Perhaps because of the demise of the soliloquy as a vital convention of drama, and because the act of explicating a complex soliloquy seems to convert it into an independent text, there is a tendency to treat soliloquies as set pieces apart from the dramatic context and the larger structure of a play.<sup>12</sup> This tendency, which contravenes generally accepted principles of dramatic criticism, seems to arise primarily from lapses in critical rigor; it is only coincidentally related to nondramatic uses of soliloquies in the origin and development of this type of speech in the history of drama.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the explanation, when the dramatic context of a soliloquy is neglected or overlooked in the work of such a thoroughly dramatic artist as Shakespeare, the speech is reduced to a nondramatic, static moment; its possible contribution to dramatic meaning is disregarded; and a wide range of significant interconnections may be lost sight of, often resulting in a faulty or incomplete understanding of the soliloquy itself. Indeed, as will be seen in certain problematic cases, there are times when the dramatic context gives the clearest focus to the soliloquy and determines how it can best be understood. Moreover, when there are a large number of soliloquies in a play, as in *Hamlet*, in all likelihood they have a structural function and a dramatic rationale that need to be seen as aspects of Shakespeare's dramaturgy.

These matters have not received the critical consideration they deserve in attempts to clarify Shakespeare's conception of *Hamlet*. For a number of reasons, therefore, it is useful to stress the importance of a critical principle that is too often honored more in theory than in practice in the case of a soliloquy. It is, quite simply,

that understandings of soliloquies in a play by Shakespeare should be formed as much as possible within the various relevant contexts of the play—dramatic, poetic, verbal, and structural or formal. Such a comprehensive contextual approach, as will be seen in the discussions to follow, enables one to understand more fully and more accurately not only what a soliloquy is saying about Hamlet the character but also what the soliloquy is saying about *Hamlet* the play.

There would be no need to stress this truism about the fundamental importance of contextual considerations if major violations of it did not persist, impeding the resolution of certain problems and perpetuating some unnecessary confusion. Again, the “To be or not to be” soliloquy provides a case in point. In 1963, in a fine little book on *Hamlet*, Kenneth Muir thought it important to point out the problem that has bedeviled discussions of this soliloquy and to stress the dramatic moment that provides the context of the speech: “The speech has suffered from being detached from its context: it is spoken, that is, between the time when Hamlet has laid his plot and the actual performance of the play.”<sup>14</sup> Yet some twenty years later, in the new edition of the Arden Shakespeare *Hamlet*, Harold Jenkins seems to think it is possible to render a “strict reading” of this speech without including a consideration of the dramatic context: “The argument . . . that dramatic effect demands interpretation of the speech in relation to its immediate context is specious.”<sup>15</sup> According to Jenkins, “any strict reading—one, that is, which adheres to the text without adding to it—must come close to” the noncontextual (and nondramatic) “general” reading he prefers.<sup>16</sup> In terms of critical theory, one must ask whether there can be a “strict reading” of a passage in a play if the dramatic context of the passage is not taken into account. I do not think so. The immediate context must be considered, even of a soliloquy, if only to appreciate why it happens to be relatively unimportant in a particular instance. The dramatic context is not something added to Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” speech, as Jenkins implies; nor is it something that can be taken away, without danger of misconstruing the text or reading it incompletely. A “strict reading” requires one to see the speech as a part of the action, not apart from it.

In venturing to discuss the soliloquies in *Hamlet* collectively, but with detailed attention to many of them individually, I have found it expeditious to uncouple the play from the boxcars of conflicting criticism behind it. While I have crossed swords with a



number of critics to clarify specific matters, I refer sparingly rather than abundantly to the many critics whose thoughts are so completely and complexly intermingled with my own that it would be futile to acknowledge properly or briefly my indebtedness to them, sometimes for the precise way they have enabled me to disagree with them. What has been uppermost in my mind is something Wolfgang Clemen says in his stimulating general essay on Shakespeare's soliloquies, delivered in 1964 as the presidential address of the Modern Humanities Research Association:

Shakespeare constantly discovers new possibilities inherent in the soliloquy; he reveals an extraordinary ingenuity in finding new ways of integrating the soliloquy into the play's organism, adjusting it to the speaker and to the situation as well as to the atmosphere, theme and movement of the play, linking it up with important developments and charging it with dramatic significance and effect.

This, then, should be our approach: to ask what Shakespeare can do with a soliloquy and what the soliloquy can do for the play, how he turns the soliloquy into a necessary part of the dramatic structure.<sup>17</sup>

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is not to attempt exhaustive explications of all the soliloquies in *Hamlet*, nor to trace every verbal strand in its poetic weavings through the fabric of the play, although I may not always have been able to resist the magic in the web. It is rather to be concerned with the soliloquies primarily in their dramatic contexts in the terms set forth by Clemen, especially to determine their role—individually, in groups, and collectively—in portraying Hamlet and in clarifying the larger structure and meaning of the play. Using a variety of analytical approaches, including a reading of Claudius's first soliloquy based on subtextual analysis, I am ultimately less concerned with advancing (or riding) an overall argument than with presenting and clarifying findings as they arise simultaneously from the poetics of language and action, which often have various kinds of contextual significance that need to be recognized and understood. Always trying to read closely and imaginatively, and keeping the play's continuum of action in mind, one should care only about how the readings and findings themselves hold up and hold together, not about how some clever argument using them holds together. At the same time, one cannot deny that views about the findings constitute implicitly a kind of argument and probably an interpretation of these findings. This occurs as a natural part of the process of trying to understand what one finds.

With regard to textual matters relating to the soliloquies, it

would prove disruptive to the main critical purpose and exposition of this study if I entered the fray that surrounds every textual issue and emendation pertaining to the speeches and the edition of *Hamlet* I have chosen. I have therefore refrained from unnecessary forays into textual matters, although there are several major textual questions concerning the soliloquies that should be recognized and that I have addressed. In Hamlet's first soliloquy, one concerns the well-known problem of "sallied" in Quarto Two versus "solid" in the Folio. In his "'Tis now the very witching time of night" soliloquy, one concerns the phrasing, "do such business as the bitter day" in Q2 versus "do such bitter business as the day" in F. Another concerns the opening line of Hamlet's soliloquy in the Prayer Scene: "do it pat" in F versus "do it, but" in Q2. Undoubtedly, the most consequential one concerns the absence of Hamlet's final soliloquy, "How all occasions do inform against me," from the Folio version of the play. These textual matters involve important issues of poetic, emotional, thematic, and aesthetic coherence in their respective dramatic contexts—especially the last one, which has a bearing on the basic tragic conception of the prince and the play.

Since the criticism of few works stimulates as great an adversarial challenge in a reader as *Hamlet* criticism does, especially when the soliloquies are involved, I end these introductory remarks with an invitation to what I hope will prove an intense and enjoyable intellectual fencing match. Even if one does not accept the view of the prince and the play arrived at here through a concentration on the soliloquies, a fresh examination of these speeches should be rewarding in itself and help clarify further one's own differing view, which must do justice to the soliloquies. For no one is likely to gainsay the critical wisdom inherent in the truism that *Hamlet* without the soliloquies would not be *Hamlet*—a truism that implies, in its aural double entendre, the crucial importance of these speeches in the make-up of the play and of its central character.

*En garde!*

# 1

## Images of the Mind

In explaining what came into Western poetry with the doubt and the discouragement audiences "hear" and "witness" in *Hamlet* and *Faust*, Matthew Arnold regarded their soliloquies as "the dialogue of the mind with itself."<sup>1</sup> Although individual soliloquies in Shakespeare's plays differ considerably and may have either complex functions or a relatively simple one (restricted, for example, to a revelation, a bit of narration or exposition, the self-introduction of a character), Arnold's view is quite apt as a generalization of the relation a soliloquy frequently has to a character, in addition to its dramaturgical relation to the play itself. His view is especially true for the soliloquies in *Hamlet*, combining as it does an awareness of the verbal linked to the visual. For from the first soliloquy to the last, one finds that a salient function of these speeches, individually and collectively, is to provide dramatic images or evocations of the mind as it engages in ratiocination, deals with memory, distress, and conflict, defines consciousness through thought and thereby takes possession of it—or a combination of these and other operations that make one aware of the mind per se.

As a result of this consistency of function, the soliloquies in *Hamlet* produce a major pattern of stage images in which one sees a character engaging in "the dialogue of the mind with itself," epitomized by Hamlet's "To be or not to be" question and the dialogism concerning whether or not "'tis nobler in the mind to suffer." Not surprisingly, the soliloquies in *Hamlet* have multiple functions, as is often the case with Shakespeare's use of his materials; but from the outset it is important to recognize their special role in rendering the elaborate pattern of this particular type of imagery, imagery that constitutes the play's verbal and visual projection of man as divinely made with large discourse and godlike reason but subject to having his mind overwhelmed by passion in one form or another, with irrevocable tragic consequences.



Of the twelve soliloquies in *Hamlet*, eight are spoken by Hamlet, one by Ophelia, one by Lucianus (in the play-within-the-play), and two by Claudius, who also has one revealing aside. The large number of soliloquies given to Hamlet is a matter that has its own dramatic significance, both in terms of Shakespeare's technique in rendering the character and in terms of the way Hamlet figures in the developing action of the play. One of the reasons for Hamlet's great complexity is that one sees him interacting with a larger number of characters than, probably, any other major figure in Shakespeare's plays. Different facets of the character emerge or are created in his various encounters—singly and in different social combinations—with Claudius, Gertrude, Horatio, the Ghost, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the Players, Ophelia, the Clown, Laertes, Osric. Since he acts out different aspects of himself as he deals with these people under changing circumstances, one should not be surprised that Hamlet appears so kaleidoscopic and discontinuous within the compressed confines of a play (albeit a long one), especially when the complexities are compounded by his melancholy, the “antic disposition” he puts on, and the variables arising from what happens to him from one moment to the next. Because Shakespeare shows Hamlet in relation to so many characters, the numerous soliloquies in which the prince reveals himself directly and candidly are of singular interest in trying to fathom dominant and meaningful attributes in the playwright's fundamental conception of him as a character.

In terms of the developing action of the play, and in conjunction with the images of the mind the soliloquies project, another major dramatic function of these speeches is to render Hamlet's sense of isolation and alienation in the world of Claudius's Denmark. Indeed, Claudius's soliloquies also produce an effect of secret isolation, as does Ophelia's in its own way. This function, emphasized by the very form of the soliloquy, by its essential nature as a speech spoken by a character alone, helps one understand further why Shakespeare has given Hamlet so many soliloquies, especially since his isolation becomes more acute and complicated for him after his encounter with the Ghost.

Since the dramatic action of the play ultimately completes itself in terms of the operation of fate or providence, Hamlet's alienation from the world of the court serves to establish his enigmatic role within the larger mysterious universe evoked in the play, starting with the appearance of the Ghost. Hamlet expresses a sense of this role more than once, perhaps most emphatically when he says: “The time is out of joint—O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to

set it right!" (1.5.188–89). Whether or not he is justified in presuming that he "was born to set it right" is a question in itself, as is his later assumption (or rationalization), after he kills Polonius, that "heaven hath pleas'd it so / To punish me with this, and this with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister" (3.4.173–75). However this may be, after his encounter with the Ghost, Hamlet's soliloquies in one way or another all involve his preoccupation with what seems to him his fated and unavoidable role as a revenger. Hence they function dramatically to reveal a variety of stages in his experience as a revenger. Together with Ophelia's and particularly Claudius's soliloquies, they help delineate the play's dramatic movement, which ends with a catastrophe seemingly governed by providence, certainly not by human will.

Each soliloquy in *Hamlet* reveals a character's private reaction to—his preoccupation with—something that has just taken place. As a result, those matters which Shakespeare has made discernible in the speech have special importance in giving meaning to what is happening. Conversely, what is happening—the larger context of events—gives meaning to the soliloquy. Right after the mousetrap play, for example, Claudius's secret intention to send Hamlet to his death in England determines the subtextual meanings latent in his first soliloquy. The subtextual reading is soon confirmed by Claudius's second soliloquy. It would be a mistake to understand this soliloquy simply as Claudius's reaction to Hamlet's killing of Polonius; rather, one should see in it the clarifying revelation of his deepest reaction to the threat he perceived in Hamlet as early as the Nunnery Scene and certainly after the prince, in putting on *The Murder of Gonzago*, taunted Claudius with knowledge of his crime.

The Court Scene, a tableau of monarchical order juxtaposed to the opening scene with its ghostly manifestation of disorder, provides the immediate dramatic context of the play's first soliloquy, "O that this too too sallied flesh would melt" (1.2.129–59). In contrast to the rhetorical artifice and the controlled, public character of the language spoken in Claudius's court, Hamlet's soliloquy is an intensely private, unregulated, welling up of utterances full of despair, disgust, anger, and the anguish of grief. Drawing us into his deeply troubled state of mind, Hamlet's thoughts proceed in subjective spasms, sometimes interfering with each other in a kind of competition to find articulation. Upon examination, the speech reveals more order and unity than one would expect to find because of the disjointed language in which it



is cast. The verbal profusion of the speech, conveying an oppressive fullness of thought and feeling, is the dramatic converse of Hamlet's disinclination to talk in the court scene, where four of his five speeches are one-line, laconic statements, some of them crackling with word play that effectively dissociates the prince from the ritualistic role of language at court. Much of what he says in the soliloquy seems to reveal what was passing through his mind while Claudius held court, including pointed reactions to the way he was lectured by Gertrude and the king.

The striking contrast in language and tone is part of the dramatic completion of the brief but strong initial impression given of Hamlet's feelings of conflict with Claudius, coolness toward his mother, and separateness from the court. Even before Hamlet has said a word, the stage picture has been carefully controlled by Shakespeare to show this dissociation, for in the dialogue preceding the soliloquy he specifies that Hamlet's costume is a "nighted color," which Hamlet refers to as "my inky cloak" (1.2.68, 77). Since Gertrude says to Hamlet, "cast thy nighted color off," it is clear that she and Claudius and the rest of the court wear colorful costumes that are in contrast to Hamlet's, whose appearance in solemn black projects an expressive anomaly within the symbolic tableau of order. This visual contrast, which parallels what is conveyed through the juxtaposition of the opening two scenes (with Hamlet's mourning garb linked symbolically to the Ghost of his dead father), is congruent with the ensuing linguistic contrast when Hamlet begins his soliloquy.

In addition to establishing Hamlet's sense of isolation in Claudius's Denmark, the first soliloquy elaborates the differences in attitudes toward mourning raised in the court scene and shows Hamlet's uninhibited feelings. Whereas Claudius had spoken artfully and glibly of "our dear brother's death" (1.2.1), and Gertrude, backed by Claudius, had argued that it was perverse for Hamlet to mourn so long because death is a recurring, natural event, the prince in his soliloquy expresses "that within which passes show" (1.2.85), elaborating the scene's earlier exposition of how the death of Old Hamlet has been experienced differently by three members of the immediate family—brother, wife, son. In the court scene, when Gertrude asked, "Why seems it so particular with thee?" Hamlet's answer had a sharp edge, implicitly critical but socially controlled; in the soliloquy, the hostility underlying his "seems, madam?" speech (1.2.76–86) flares up as a very harsh view of her.

In retrospect, the efforts of Gertrude and Claudius to comfort

Hamlet can be seen as mainly a self-serving desire to forget the dead king because what they say covers up Claudius's callousness and Gertrude's indifference, in contrast to the genuine grief felt by Hamlet. As the soliloquy reveals, the past means everything to him but nothing to those who, governed by their private passions and really thinking only about themselves, glibly rationalize in public "That we with wisest sorrow think on him [the dead King Hamlet] / Together with remembrance of ourselves" (1.2.6–7). Dramatically, the question of whether or not Hamlet's mourning is excessive turns out to be a false issue because it has been raised by those who have not mourned at all and reveal no sense of loss. In fact, Gertrude and Claudius, for all their show of concern, are devoid of any comprehension of the nature of mourning, though they strongly assert the opposite in the tonal certitude of their mouthings, which aggressively make claims to wisdom based on reason and superior understanding. Indeed, that Claudius is capable of his facile pronouncements about the "death of fathers" (1.2.104), including a completely impersonal reference to the death of his own father ("your father lost a father" [1.2.89]), suggests that his failure to comprehend Hamlet's mourning may come from a failure to have experienced grief at the loss of his own father. Such a failure would be consistent with the irony found in what is really a brazen, if unwitting, utterance of his own faults when he is lecturing Hamlet:

Fie, 'tis a fault to heaven,  
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,  
To reason most absurd, whose common theme  
Is death of fathers.

(1.2.101–4)

In any case, one is not inclined to conclude with Claudius and Gertrude that Hamlet's grief is excessive merely because it has lasted almost two months, hardly a long time in the common experience of grief as a very extended, ongoing process of imperceptible waning, with intense resurgences from time to time.

In strong contrast to the absence of any concrete recall of the dead king by Claudius and Gertrude in the court scene and the mere lip service of Claudius when he says, at the beginning of the scene, "Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death / The memory be green" (1.2.1–2), Hamlet's memory of the past is very vivid, acutely felt, spontaneous, and unavoidable, as when he sees his father in his mind's eye (1.2.183–85). This contrast has pro-

found significance in terms of the relation that memory has to the mind, to the dimensions of consciousness and being that memory gives to life. The soliloquy is infused with considerations of memory, directly and indirectly; at moments Hamlet's memory triggers an emotional recall of his father that is almost too much for him to bear, as when he exclaims, "Heaven and earth, / Must I remember?" (142–43). And the identity of memory with the mind is expressed emphatically in Hamlet's reference to both reason and an appalling shortness of memory when he says: "a beast that wants discourse of reason / Would have mourned longer" (150–51). While Hamlet is speaking only of his mother, earlier in the speech he had linked Claudius to the bestial image of a "satyr" (140), thereby allowing the king to figure indirectly in the scope of his indictment. Throughout the speech, Hamlet's mind is seething with memory even while it is ravaged by an awareness that "it"—life as he formerly knew it—has come to what "this" is (137): the new and sordid terms of life replacing what seems to everyone else, including his mother, to be a dead and buried and forgotten past.

Hamlet's reference to the uniquely human faculty of reason has forceful irony in relation to the court scene, especially to the style and tone of the proceedings that take place. As a feature of the formalities at court, it is obviously appropriate (indeed, one expects) that the idea of reason—the abstract value—should serve at least as an embellishment for the conventional idea of order symbolized by an assembled court. For a court and the ruler of a kingdom should epitomize right reason reinforcing Christian values. Accordingly, Shakespeare has embellished the stage tableau of Claudius's court with verbal ornaments of reason that have fooled more than one critic into admiring Claudius and finding him a proponent of the golden mean in contrived paradoxical phrasings like "defeated joy," "mirth in funeral," and "dirge in marriage" (1.2.10–12). As the newly selected king, Claudius asserts himself as a man of reason par excellence in dealing with each piece of court business. His formal language throughout the scene displays conspicuously and almost insistently the rhetorical structure of reasoned propositions, and he wants the *sententiae* that are part of his style to imply balanced wisdom deriving from reason: "In equal scale weighing delight and dole" (1.2.13). In turning to Laertes he says, "You cannot speak of reason to the Dane / And lose your voice"; and he chides Hamlet, in the passage quoted earlier, for behavior that is "To reason most absurd."

Although Claudius is regally self-assured in his speeches, dem-



onstrates great skill in the use of language, and deals effectively with a state matter like the Fortinbras problem, his reasoning is consistently much more shrewd than wise, tends to be flamboyant, and is fraught with questionable paradoxes and hidden ironies that show subtextual conflict and a lack of human sympathies beneath the public veneer. Hamlet's pointed reference to reason in his soliloquy—the turn of his thought in framing an expression that emphasizes that particular word—seems to be a delayed angry response to the smug and deliberate churning of reason in the speeches he had heard and personally endured during the court scene. Through circular dramatic irony that accrues meaning only in retrospect, Hamlet's first soliloquy challenges the hypocritical public concern with mourning and memory and reason in the world of Claudius's court.

Hamlet's acute melancholia caused by bereavement, his religious consciousness, his sense of a corrupt world, his classical learning, his penchant for making generalizations, his traumatic disappointment with his mother, his disillusionment with woman-kind, his sexual nausea, his idealization of his father, and his contempt for Claudius are among the more familiar matters that project from his first soliloquy into the subsequent action of the play. His intense mental activity, not only in this soliloquy but throughout the play, is a symptom of his melancholy as well as a reflection of his great intelligence. Since Hamlet's superior mind is of major importance in Shakespeare's conception of the prince, the hypercerebration caused by melancholy serves to draw attention to it, making Shakespeare's use of the malady of special interest as an ingenious technique in rendering the brilliance of the character.<sup>2</sup>

In the opening lines of the soliloquy, Hamlet's "too too sallied flesh" is emotionally paramount and the primary subject of his consciousness, giving impetus and intensity to the feelings he expresses. Whether or not Hamlet is to be seen as suicidal in his opening statements is questionable, though to raise the question runs counter to the most common understanding, which finds him suicidal. Significantly, Hamlet's unrealistic yearning to "resolve into a dew" is couched in gentle terms that imply not death in any literal sense but the ultimate evaporation of dew as a form of sublime spiritual release from coarse corporeal existence. That Hamlet refers to "self-slaughter" does not in itself make him literally suicidal but it clearly indicates the degree of pain from which there is no prospect of relief, a depression that colors his perception of the world as "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable" (1.2.133).

The speech is about the cause of the pain and the depression. The reference to suicide seems to be governed not by any real impulse for self-destruction but by a profound expressive need to articulate a terrible sense of himself as befouled, betrayed, disillusioned—the feelings he vents in the soliloquy from the opening to the very end. In any case, however one understands the opening, one sees Hamlet rejecting the notion of suicide because of religious scruples; he expresses an obedience to canon law that implies a faith in the “Everlasting.” This quasi-religious facet of the prince, if that is not too strong a term to use, is consistent with his intuitive, intellectual, and philosophical characteristics.

Dramatically, the movement of the soliloquy is regulated by Hamlet’s acute awareness of all the things registering simultaneously in his mind and in his feelings when he says: “That it should come to this.” His difficult verbal excursion to arrive at the articulation of what “this” is controls the painful fits and starts and intensities of his utterance. Everything preceding the statement serves as a kind of prelude to establish “this” as an enormity, something horrendous that aches in his consciousness. His pain is signaled sharply by the opening “O” groan and the “too too” intensifiers of “sallied” in his first statement; one is instantly drawn into the subjective realm of Hamlet’s utterance. At the outset, in a comprehensive prefatory judgment about the condition of the world—*his* world, the world of Denmark—he dismisses it as a world in repulsive disarray, “an unweeded garden / That grows to seed” (136), overwhelmed by the forces of wild fecundity. In saying that “Things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely” (136–37), he may well have his mother and Claudius in mind as versions of the “things,” since he is specifically preoccupied with them from the beginning; for him to regard them as “things” is consistent with his imaging them in bestial terms later in the soliloquy—imagery that expresses his feeling of alienation from them as creatures less than human. (Later in the play Hamlet will say: “The King is a thing” [4.2.28].) Also, as the court scene preceding the soliloquy makes clear, they “possess”—rule—the world of Denmark.

“That it should come to this” is at the painful center of Hamlet’s consciousness. Radiating from what “this” means to him are all the matters he mentions, as well as those implied as unspoken proliferations taking place in his active memory. Each comes alive in his mind with compelling intensity—each emanating from “this” as a shattering blow that has struck him at the core of his being. What throbs separately in the pain from the blow, aching

there with its own excruciating intensity as Hamlet puts things haltingly into words, is the "wicked speed" with which "this" happened. One feels the throb in the poignant recurrence of the time-word "month" in Hamlet's obsessive consternation and disbelief regarding the short period of time that brought "this" about: "But two months dead, nay, not so much, not two" (138); "within a month" (145); "a little month" (147); "Within a month" (153). These abrupt, compulsive mentionings of "a month" contribute to the disjointedness of Hamlet's expression even while, through their emotional repetition, they give it cohesiveness. And as the cohesion sets in with the central two repetitions that occur close together, one witnesses the process of Hamlet's having been able to endure the harrowing emotional journey of encountering all the matters that have been crystallizing into words (and crystallizing in his mind without words) as he has made his way painfully toward the grim articulation of "this."

"This," as given within the bounds of the soliloquy (and one does well to stay within the bounds of it at this very early point in the play), is his mother's incestuous marriage shortly after the death of his father. In the rhetorical movement of the speech (after Hamlet's painful deflection, "Let me not think on't" [146]), the articulation of what "this" is comes haltingly as part of an intensifying periodic construction—disrupted by the "beast" interjection—that helps render Hamlet's revulsion at his mother's sordid marriage, "with my uncle / My father's brother" (151–52), as he defines it climactically in its unsavory terms, able at last to state the horrible fact. Thus one sees a meaningful and unifying link between the end of the soliloquy, where Hamlet is deeply troubled by his mother's incest, and the beginning, where he is in revulsion against his "too too sallied flesh." For Hamlet, as Gertrude's offspring, feels himself to be a part of his mother by the same logic he later uses to say "man and wife is one flesh" (4.3.52).

It is worth noting that, in its adjectival function, "sallied" reminds one of its verbal form as a past participle serving as a modifier. That is, it reminds one that Hamlet feels that his flesh has been acted upon—has been sullied. Suggestively the modifier has a dramatic aspect: the condition did not exist prior to his mother's remarriage to his uncle; it is a condition that has been inflicted on him by her sexual misconduct. This verbal aspect of "sallied," emphasized by "too too" serving as intensifiers of what has been done to his flesh, is important in appreciating Hamlet's sense of himself as a passive victim of defilement, perpetrated by



someone he could never have imagined as capable of such an obscenity.

Despite the abundance of disjointed expression in the soliloquy, the speech has an underlying expressive cohesiveness, derived in part from the circular unity of Hamlet's emotion in feeling sullied by incest and in part from an oppositional interplay between the recurring notions of coarse, earthy materiality and divine spirituality. Hamlet, whose very being and world have been caught in a sickening sense of corporeality, constantly sets off his descriptions of his state of mind and the state of his world by evocations of the divine. This dichotomy not only gives unity to Hamlet's speech but also begins to clarify a major aspect of Shakespeare's characterization of the prince in a way that has a bearing on the overall dramatic tension and structure of the play.

The counterpointing between things divine and things earthly or profane is apparent from the opening sentence of the soliloquy, in which Hamlet expresses his anguished sense of being captive to his flesh. His desire for dissolution into dew, an impermanent substance, is expressive of his desire to escape from corporeality into a process suggestive of spiritual release. Immediately juxtaposed to this notion, and standing in contrast to "flesh," is his reference to the "Everlasting," the spiritual term of the duality. Paradoxically, in his feeling of aversion from the flesh, his body must seem to him to possess a state of permanence, closer to something everlasting than to the ephemeral nature of the dew he yearns to become. The duality continues with Hamlet's complaint regarding "this world," which begins with his anguished evocation of the "Everlasting" in "O God, God." In his despair, Hamlet feels that "all the uses of this world" are not worth caring about. His profound disgust with his flesh has become coordinate with his perception of the world as an "unweeded garden / That grows to seed" and is possessed entirely by "things rank and gross in nature" (135–36). A version of the duality is implicit in the garden metaphor, for a garden can be kept orderly and beautiful if the vegetative fertility of nature is controlled. On the other hand, uncontrolled fecundity as a force in nature is essentially the same as the "appetite" Hamlet mentions (144), with its own contextual duality as seemingly love but actually rampant lust, lust that has made Gertrude like a "beast" (150). Thus "things rank and gross in nature" foreshadows what comes next in the speech: the specific examples of sexually gross human nature that cause such revulsion and aversion from the flesh in Hamlet.

The comparison Hamlet makes of the dead king to Claudius, "Hyperion to a satyr" (140), continues the duality. The reference to the sun god evokes appropriately the celestial emblem of kingship; and the reference to the "satyr" initiates the major theme of lust as a repulsive passion to which humans may succumb like animals, despite the loftier human attributes of memory and reason. The essential difference between man and animal, part of a familiar but extremely important Elizabethan belief in hierarchical order (the great chain of being between "Heaven and earth" [142], to note the duality again in a phrase) is delineated in Hamlet's forceful interjection, "O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason / Would have mourned longer" (150–51). The interjection, with its references to "God" and "beast," provides the penultimate version of the soliloquy's unifying duality, a duality consistent with Shakespeare's portrayal of Hamlet as a man of intellect profoundly experiencing the conflict between spirit (the essence of intellect) and flesh.<sup>3</sup>

While Hamlet is sickened by his sullied flesh and his recognition that it was rank sexual passion that caused his mother "to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets" (156–57), his painful preoccupation with the enormity of her conduct seems to arise from his sense of it as a betrayal of his father and of himself by being a horrendous violation—a total defeat—of everything of spiritual value. This is the burden that seems unbearable to him, requiring the strength of a Hercules—the immediate point of Hamlet's sense of contrast between himself and the Greek demi-god, the concluding element in the duality that has been traced.<sup>4</sup>

Understandably, the range of Hamlet's feelings and attributes in this soliloquy, as recognized at the beginning of this section, engenders some of the different emphases one finds in discussions of his character and of how he deals with his problems—or fails to deal with them, as some would have it. In various ways through most of the play, these different aspects of Hamlet generate and account for much of the turbulence in him. The disturbance he reveals in his first soliloquy is compounded by the revenge passion that besets him after he learns about the death of his father from the Ghost. Hamlet finds a measure of release from his turmoil through the "antic disposition" he then adopts. He puts it on not so much as a purposeful strategy in pursuing revenge (or to find safety, as in Saxo and Belleforest) but mainly, it would seem, as the defensive cover he needs for the impulsive expression and anti-social behavior he knows he may display—a kind of therapeutic safety valve for his emotions—since he finds himself in an impossi-



ble social situation where, as he says emphatically in the last words of his soliloquy, "I must hold my tongue" (159). Indeed, his outpouring in the soliloquy shows a desperate need for expressive release in relation to the world of the court.

In the preceding section, certain explanations depend on "sallied" as the correct word in the soliloquy, especially the poetics of the circular unity of the link between Hamlet's "sallied" feeling at the beginning and his feelings about Gertrude's incest at the end. What arises unavoidably is the well-known textual question concerning "sallied" in the Second Quarto and "solid" in the Folio. The argument for "sallied" (a variant Elizabethan spelling of "sullied") is convincingly set forth by Fredson Bowers in "Hamlet's 'Sullied' or 'Solid' Flesh: a Bibliographical Case-History."<sup>5</sup> Editors of modern editions of *Hamlet*, however, have been quite divided in their preference, and the issue has been freshly stirred up by recent major editions. The new Arden edition gives "sallied"; the new Oxford and Cambridge editions give "solid."

The Oxford editors' choice of "solid" is governed by their conviction that F, in its departures from Q2, provides Shakespearian revisions, a conviction that, quartered, may have but one part wisdom and three parts faith.<sup>6</sup> After all, Shakespeare had retired to New Place in Stratford about 1610; and he died in 1616, seven years before the Folio was printed. As Bowers has pointed out, in what seems to be a balanced assessment of the textual status of *Hamlet*, the text "is complicated by what seems to be evidence of theatrical alterations, some of doubtful authority, perhaps mingled with some authorial revision."<sup>7</sup>

There is a neglected aspect of this textual problem that may justify yet another speculative exploration of it. Strictly speaking, what we have is essentially a *word* problem, whether the word occurs in a text or on a stage. Although the possibility of a pun or a double entendre involving "sallied" and "solid" has been generally recognized, this wordplay has not been examined in the context of the theater, where it is primarily an aural issue rather than a textual problem. For one should keep in mind that the word in question was meant in the first instance to be heard, not read. Therefore, if the potential of a word to produce a recognizable double meaning may in this instance be a useful clue to a resolution of the problem, the first consideration to be made is whether "solid" or "sallied" triggers a second meaning more readily in the particular verbal context.

If "solid" is taken to be the word, it immediately forms a self-

contained system of contrast or antithesis with "melt," "thaw," "resolve," and "dew." Producing a clear meaning that is tightly completed within the two lines, "solid" has no tie with the dramatic context of the soliloquy nor further resonances within the soliloquy itself. "Sallied," on the other hand, not having a lexical relation to the rhetorically strong "melt" series that follows, *requires* the meaning of its near-homonym, "solid," if the lexical antithesis is to materialize; consequently, it tends to engender a second meaning, especially if pronounced "sullied." The double entendre produced conveys both the cause of Hamlet's aversion to his flesh (it feels sullied) and his acute sense of being trapped in its solidity.

On the basis of what happens to a script during the process of staging a play, it may be useful to conjecture how "sallied" in Q2 could have evolved into the "solid" of the Folio. Since "sally" (related to *sale* in French) was a synonym for "sully" in Shakespeare's time, and since the two were essentially spelling variants of the same word (like the two pronunciations of "tomato" in the well-known song), an actor playing Hamlet might have preferred to pronounce "sallied" as "sullied" (if that was not his own normal pronunciation) in order to evoke the aural double entendre more readily. In itself "sullied" causes no lexical change but if a pronunciation cue for "sallied" was written into the promptbook, then the aimed-for "solid" could easily have been what was noted because of its meaningful connection with "melt" and "thaw." If both words were found in the copy-text for F (generally presumed to have been a promptbook), then "solid" represents the choice made by the compositor or whoever prepared the copy-text for the printer. However this may be, the word problem of "sallied" versus "solid" is not just a textual problem involving the printed texts of *Hamlet*. To consider it as such excludes the whole realm of Shakespeare's living theater.

Philip Edwards, the New Cambridge editor, prefers "solid" because, as he explains it, "the case of 'sullied' is tortuous" while "the case for 'solid' is simple."<sup>8</sup> Edwards's argument has the appeal of simplicity but it hardly nullifies either the possibility that the so-called tortuous argument may nonetheless be the valid one or the fact that extremely complex poetics (as in a poet's choice of one word over another—for example, "sallied" rather than "solid") may be apprehended instantaneously and appear simple but require lengthy explication to clarify. If one accepts the argument, as Edwards does, that the right word in a text might be based on determining which word has the more appropriate contextual meaning, one may well argue that the word producing the richer

poetics in the context may fairly be regarded as the one preferred by the poet—an editorial assumption exercised with remarkable ingenuity by A. E. Housman in his emendations of classical texts.

Whether Shakespeare approved of the change from “sallied” to “solid” is a question to which there is no sure answer. Critically, however, a stronger case can be made for “sallied” as being more in touch both with Hamlet’s perception of his place within the court—which provides the dramatic context of the soliloquy—and with his feelings, which bring about his anguished expression in the speech. Accordingly, Shakespeare’s original word choice may be more fully appreciated in terms of the dynamics of psycholinguistics, about which he knew more than a little though he had none of the jargon, not even the term itself.

First, the articulation by Hamlet of his sense of “sallied” flesh may well have led, spontaneously and heuristically through a perception of the potential double meaning, to a collateral emotional shift from “sallied” flesh to a selection of words that work with “solid” flesh on the second level. This shift augmented the meaning of the word he started out with, conveying his sense of entrapment in the lust-driven court and causing him to choose words like “melt” and “thaw” to express the intensity of his desire to escape. Secondly, the nature of spoken language is such that comprehension is almost always contextual. The audience itself, first hearing “sallied” and understanding what this word conveys about Hamlet’s position, converts the meaning to “solid” in the context of the ensuing “melt” series, as though the word needed for the antithesis may have been misheard initially. (Ironically, the Folio text of *Hamlet* may itself have fallen victim to this propensity to contextual hearing.) However, the primary meaning of “sallied,” which was established before meaning shifted to the secondary level of the double entendre, would be reinvoked by Hamlet’s reference to the incestuous marriage near the end of the soliloquy.

“Solid” may be simpler in its immediate connection to the “melt” antithesis, as Edwards recognizes, but it is self-limiting in meaning, whereas “sallied” in combination with “flesh” has the inclusive poetics of contextual significance radiating from the word like circles caused by a stone dropped in water. Edwards says that “it would hardly be surprising if Shakespeare heard ‘sullied’ as he wrote ‘solid.’”<sup>9</sup> I would say that precisely the converse is more likely to have taken place. He probably heard “solid” and evoked it in a delayed double entendre as he wrote “sallied,” teasing the second meaning out with the forceful “melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew.”<sup>10</sup>



In condemning Gertrude and Claudius for their sexual depravity and in identifying it with the lower, nonhuman levels of bestial "appetite" and the "rank and gross" vegetative force in nature, Hamlet dissociates himself from them and thereby affirms the values inherent in man's rational soul, as manifested in the uniquely human capacity for reason, memory, and intuition. This indirect affirmation, despite his depression and oppressive sense of futility, is implicit in the duality that gives a unifying pattern to Hamlet's thought and feeling in the soliloquy. For it is man's rational soul, his mind or intellect—the spiritual component that links man to the angels and gives him "discourse of reason"—which accounts for Hamlet's concluding intuitive sense that bad consequences must follow from the existing situation: "It is not, nor it cannot come to good" (158).

Hamlet's intuitive sense infuses his four-line second soliloquy right after he has been told about the Ghost:

My father's spirit—in arms! All is not well,  
I doubt some foul play. Would the night were come!  
Till then sit still, my soul. Foul deeds will rise,  
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.  
(1.2.254–57)

The inner pressure of Hamlet's free-floating suspicion of something "foul" achieves its dramatic release and completion when, upon hearing the Ghost say that Claudius murdered him, he exclaims: "O my prophetic soul! My Uncle?" (1.5.40–41). Thus one can trace the movement of Hamlet's intuitive sense through his first two soliloquies and into the ensuing action, including a link between Hamlet's "All is not well" and Marcellus's intuitive exclamation, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90). Interestingly, Marcellus's remark is punctuated directly by Horatio's "Heaven will direct it" (1.4.91), which evokes the realm of providence that ultimately has a crucial dramatic role in the outcome of the action.

The intuitive facet of Hamlet's character, as it figures in the larger design of the tragedy, sparks out at moments in scattered remarks throughout the play:

I prophesy he comes to tell me of the players  
(2.2.382)

I see a cherub that sees them  
(4.4.51)

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting  
That would not let me sleep.

(5.2.4–5)

It becomes active again with dramatic strength right before the fencing match when he feels something “ill” around his heart, some “gaingiving” or “augury” (5.2.212–24). Shakespeare’s utilization of Hamlet’s intuitive sense at the beginning and end of the play, including the instance with dramatic concentration in his second soliloquy, deserves to be noted as a muted but distinct contour in its overall design, related to the theme of the inscrutable operation of divine providence, which is also muted but distinctly traceable from the beginning of the play to the end. Though the Ghost cannot be identified with providence, in the opening scene he evokes a mysterious realm beyond the bounds of ordinary happenings. By creating this powerful effect, he implies the larger mystery of the universe, where heaven is ordinant in everything that occurs, where there is “special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (5.2.219–20) as surely as there is special providence in Hamlet’s chance encounter with a pirate ship late in the play. When Horatio has seen the Ghost and says that “in the gross and scope of my opinion / This bodes some strange eruption to our state” (1.1.71–72), his opinion resonates with the same intuition of his rational soul as Hamlet’s view at the end of his first soliloquy: “It is not nor it cannot come to good.”

The second soliloquy, which critics have generally failed to appreciate as a significant soliloquy in the dramatic design of the play and as a manifestation of Hamlet’s intuitive intellect in Shakespeare’s conception of the character, marks a dramatic shift in Hamlet’s situation compared to his static sense of helplessness and hopelessness in the first soliloquy. The four lines bristle with his restless soul’s intuitive anticipation of a meaningful but dreadful unknown. This circumstance alters immediately the terms of Hamlet’s confinement in what seemed to be the absolute stability of a sordid new order in Denmark. The report about the Ghost and Hamlet’s intuitive speculation regarding “foul play” and “foul deeds” are like the swinging open of doors in the darkness that surrounds him—a darkness where the Ghost, echoing the word “foul,” will sound and emphasize that word three times in three lines in telling Hamlet about “Murder most foul” (1.5.25–28). The opportunity to grope his way out into the mysterious darkness constitutes a dramatic alteration in Hamlet’s situation, one that is crucial in the movement of the play and in the development of



Hamlet as a character. Since he is not a suicidal victim of despair, he ventures forth.

In his third soliloquy ("O all you host of heaven!"—1.5.92–112), right after his encounter with the Ghost, Hamlet commits himself to revenge by expressing an absolute determination to remember the Ghost. Almost reeling from excitement and seeming at a loss adequately to swear the intensity or range of his resolution, he sweeps through the universe with invocations to heaven, earth, hell—terms that recur frequently in the play in ways that help render its cosmic scope. In contrast to his earlier wish for the dissolution of his flesh into a dew, he now enjoins his sinews ("sinows") to remain strong enough to support him because he is almost overwhelmed by what the Ghost has revealed. In miniature, this contrast concerning "flesh" and "sinows" (94) helps define the dramatic shift from Hamlet's passive depression in his first soliloquy to a spirit of excited determination in the present one.

Hamlet's opening exclamation in his third soliloquy has a meaningful but generally overlooked context in the genre of Elizabethan revenge tragedy, as W. Schrickx has pointed out:

What has not been sufficiently recognized is that the assumption and discharging of such a role [that of revenger] appears traditionally to have involved an invocation for aid to the heavenly powers ("O all you host of heaven!") or rather that the revenger has initially to acknowledge his submission to divine ordinance.<sup>11</sup>

This acknowledgement is, for all practical purposes, a way for the revenger to rationalize or to presume that his personal intention to get revenge, which he is passionately determined to pursue, is indubitably congruent with divine justice and will serve its purpose. In his presumptive sense of righteousness, as in Hamlet's case, the revenger is governed only by his passion-driven intentions and conveniently ignores all ethical considerations, including the familiar Biblical injunction, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."<sup>12</sup> He requires and can be satisfied only with immediate, concrete punishment for the offender. With justice so obviously on his side, and the need for justice so imperative, all other ethical matters are abstractions and remote, beyond the pale of passion.

Although Hamlet resents having been forced circumstantially

into what he regards as his unavoidable role, he seems to assume the congruence of the Ghost's call for vengeance with divine purpose when he says at the end of the scene: "The time is out of joint—O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" (1.5.188–89). Hamlet's fatalistic view of his role, which may well be more of a rationalization than a recognition of a proper responsibility, has often been mistakenly and simplistically understood as Shakespeare's or the play's endorsement of the Ghost's revenge motivation and of his injunction to Hamlet. The Ghost, however, inadvertently raises an important question regarding who is responsible for vengeance. The question arises from his clear contradiction in both telling Hamlet to take personal revenge on Claudius and at the same time admonishing him to leave Gertrude to heaven. Together with the Ghost's other instruction—that Hamlet pursue revenge but not "taint" his mind—this important question figures centrally in the tragic idea that organizes the play and gives a dramatic rationale to its system of soliloquies.

While an invocation to heaven is a conventional feature of the revenge play genre, Shakespeare injects a blatantly ironic variation on it by making Hamlet's determination to seek revenge so great that for a moment the prince seems to entertain the outrageous notion of even enlisting the support of hell if necessary—"And shall I couple hell?" (93). The tone and purpose of the question, and what it means to Hamlet, elude definite clarification, but the question engages a moral issue rhetorically and several matters come to mind as possibly figuring in it. Perceived as a verbal flourish, signaled by "And" as a kind of afterthought, it is as though Hamlet, trying to express the magnitude of the enormity he has just learned about, abruptly indulges an impulse to convey its scale by completing the outline of the realms of the universe. It also may be understood as an angry reference to the nature of the crime that has been perpetrated, a crime so heinous that even hell, despite its essence of evil, can be invoked hyperbolically as a force that might oppose such perfidy. On another level, the "And," introducing a critical question that springs to Hamlet's mind, may signal an abruptly spontaneous intuitive impulse by which he judges revenge morally, an intuitive judgment colored by his earlier consideration of the Ghost as possibly something "wicked" bringing "blasts from hell" (1.5.41–42). Hamlet's reference to hell can thus be seen as a spark of conflict in him between an uncritical acceptance of the Ghost as honest and the spontaneous questioning reaction of his intellect. On this level, in the more

familiar reading of the line, his asking this question is commonly thought to arise from the idea established earlier that the Ghost may be a "goblin damned."

Since Hamlet feels righteous in the passionate heat of his commitment to revenge, he immediately rejects his misgivings, critical or intuitive, with "O fie" (1.5.93), which simultaneously expresses his angry condemnation of the crime. Also contributing to the psycholinguistic expressive quality of "O fie" may be Hamlet's revulsion from the sexual notion of "couple"; such revulsion infused his first soliloquy and was undoubtedly reinforced by the Ghost's statement that "lust, though to a radiant angel link'd, / Will sate itself in a celestial bed" (1.5.55–56). In his passion-driven readiness to obey the Ghost's commandment, Hamlet snuffs out any qualm of skepticism with "O fie," but the issue reappears dramatically at the end of his next soliloquy, where Hamlet, once he turns to his "brains" (2.2.588), reasons that the Ghost may be a devil. At the present moment, however, he affirms his resolution to remember the Ghost and the revenge commandment: "Yes, by heaven!" (104), he avers emphatically, with "heaven" producing a tonal irony in the context of the recognizable ambiguities.

As a counterpoint to the conventional invocation of heaven, Shakespeare's ironic inclusion of a glancing reference to hell briefly associates Hamlet's impulses for revenge with the moral darkness of that region, a notion that finds a meaningful poetic connection later with the satanic image of Pyrrhus engaged in revenge, an image sketched by Hamlet himself in cuing the Player (2.2.452–64). This connection is sustained in Hamlet's fourth soliloquy, when, after the Player's speech, he says he is prompted to his revenge by "heaven and hell" (2.2.584). In this later soliloquy, however, the reference to hell is considerably more ironic since it is no longer in the form of an ambiguous question; instead it is used rhetorically and with strident irony to express Hamlet's sense of the absolute moral correctness of his vengeful attitude. The poetics of this moral perspective are especially important because Shakespeare's technique throughout the play is to show Hamlet victimized by his feelings without adequate reflection on the morality of revenge, though Shakespeare regularly introduces moral questions indirectly, starting with the Ghost's contradictions in calling for revenge. As Schrickx points out in the conclusion of his discussion of this soliloquy:

Those Elizabethan dramatists who practised the genre of the revenge tragedy deeply were aware of the religious and metaphysical implica-



tions of the hero's destiny, for the very simple reason that he was involved in taking the law into his own hands in solving the mystery of iniquity.<sup>13</sup>

After his opening exclamations, what unifies the third soliloquy is Hamlet's passionate resolution to devote his mind solely to a memory of the Ghost and to the pursuit of revenge. The soliloquy thus constitutes a major development in the action: the setting-in of an obsession for vengeance from which Hamlet will never completely free himself. The many repetitions of "all," "remember," and "memory," and his setting of a mnemonic "word" at the end of the speech (110), express the intensity with which he negates all things except his intention to remember the Ghost.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the magnitude of Hamlet's obsession at this moment is defined by what he says he will "wipe away" from his mind as "trivial fond records" (99): it is nothing less than his lifetime of liberal education, which this perennial student now dismisses as "baser matter" (104) compared to the revenge "commandment" (102) of the Ghost. When he vows that

thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain

(102-3)

it is hardly an exaggeration to say that Shakespeare has posed the matter in terms of a barbarous passion displacing all the values of humanistic Christian civilization, including the Bible, which was commonly referred to as "the book." The hendiadys, "book and volume" (book volume in the sense of the capacious volume of his mind that has been filled by innumerable books), draws emphatic attention to the tools of humane learning that Hamlet speaks of discarding. The alliteration linking "book" and "brain" works to evoke the mind that is to be emptied of everything that Hamlet the student has learned; and the double meaning of "volume" conveys that his mind, emptied of liberal learning, is now to be filled to capacity only with remembering the Ghost and his revenge commandment.

The Christian implications of the speech deserve separate emphasis because they figure unavoidably in the moral dimensions of the revenge theme, especially in relation to the pagan revenge ethic that the play also evokes, often in conjunction with Judaeo-Christian values. This combining of two conflicting value systems

constitutes an important dimension of Shakespeare's dramatic art in *Hamlet*, a dimension that cannot be ignored without distorting the play. While these matters are crucially important, Shakespeare constantly manages our perceptions of them indirectly through the poetics of language and action. For example, in the two lines quoted above, the word "commandment" is unavoidably associated with its use in the phrase "Ten Commandments" and brings to mind the two commandments that the Ghost put in irreconcilable conflict: "Thou shalt not kill" and "Thou shalt honour thy father." In this connection, the word "table," which Hamlet uses twice in his short speech (in the sense of a slate or tablet), is itself associated with the tablets on which these Biblical commandments were engraved as God's law. The pagan revenge ethic, invoked ironically by the supposedly Christian Ghost (as a derivation from Senecan drama, however, it has a pagan-Christian etiology), requires Hamlet to honor his father by killing his father's murderer; but, from the viewpoint of Biblical law, in so doing he would break one of God's fundamental commandments and thereby dishonor his father.

When Hamlet declares he will "wipe away" everything from the "table of . . . memory" except his commitment to revenge, that intention also implies the erasing of God's commandments that should have been permanently engraved on the tablet of his mind. More emphatically, in his resolution to live by "thy [the Ghost's] commandment all alone," Hamlet—wittingly or unwittingly—is not only discarding all the other commandments but is also committing himself to live by a new one: the pursuit of revenge. In the poetics of the particular cluster of the words he uses one can perceive that the pronoun "thy," in conjunction with "commandment" as God's law, plays ironically against the familiar Christian reference to God, as in "Thy will be done." The irony of Hamlet's resolution to pursue revenge—to slaughter someone—becomes mordant in relation to his scrupulous obedience to the Everlasting's "canon 'gainst self-slaughter," expressed in his first soliloquy. After Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost, God's laws have suddenly become expungeable for him as his passion to avenge his father makes him ready to erase all his former values. Shakespeare further hints at the fundamental moral issue—the displacement of God's commandments by the Ghost's—by insinuating the Latin etymology and French morphology of "adieu." The word is parsed iambically by the Ghost's ritualistic repetition of it—"Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me!" (1.5.91)—and by Hamlet's echoing repeti-



tion of it in setting his "word": "Adieu, adieu! Remember me" (111).

In contrast to his impulsive willingness to empty his mind of everything except the revenge commandment, Hamlet's sudden impulse to set down his aphoristic formulation like a student points up his inescapable identity as an intellectual and plays ironically against his just-expressed determination to abandon and eradicate that identity. The habit of using his fine mind is something from which he can never free himself because it comes not only from the spontaneous functioning of his prodigious intelligence but also from a lifetime of conditioning. Whether Hamlet actually pulls out a slate or notebook and writes, or engages in some business of memorization to enter the aphorism in the "book and volume" of his "brain," there is something grotesquely and wonderfully comic at this moment as, in an abrupt but stabilizing shift from his frenzy, he reverts to his ingrained habits as a student and man of intellect, right after renouncing everything associated with the growth of his mind. The full significance of this renunciation needs to be appreciated in relation to the special importance memory has for Hamlet, a theme touched on earlier in discussing the first soliloquy.

That Hamlet sees Claudius as a "smiling" villain suggests that at moments in the court scene Claudius makes the distinct impression of a man smiling confidently in his royal role. Shakespeare may have envisioned Claudius exiting from the scene with a smile when he says that Hamlet's agreeing to remain in Denmark, "Sits smiling to my heart" (1.2.124). Hamlet's aphorism that "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain" (108) relates to the play's many-faceted and complexly developed themes of the playing of roles (including roles performed by Players) and of appearances in relation to reality, an issue established at the outset of the play by the problematic nature of the Ghost.

Dramatically, Hamlet's third soliloquy establishes his state of mind after his encounter with the Ghost, the conventional symbol and spirit of revenge in Elizabethan revenge tragedy. The cause-and-effect relationship—the Ghost's injunction producing Hamlet's passion for revenge—is direct, clear, unequivocal. Shakespeare has written the soliloquy in language that makes the mind itself the subject of the speech. Implicit in the language of the soliloquy, in which "remember," "memory," "distracted globe," "table of my memory," "saws of books," "book and volume of my brain," are all terms and phrases that one way or another imply the

mind, is the play's important and elaborately orchestrated theme of the relation of reason or rational judgment to a passion for revenge (or indeed a passion for anything, since we also have the major cases of Claudius and Gertrude). Shakespeare had initiated this particular verbal strategy in the metaphoric language Hamlet uses to express his first eagerness to pursue revenge:

Haste me to know't, that I with wings as swift  
As meditation, or the thoughts of love,  
May sweep to my revenge.

(1.5.29–31)

Here, too, in this outburst, "know," "meditation," "thoughts" are all words that imply the mind (in expressions that ironically are the spiritual and emotional opposites of the raging hatred of revenge). The use of terms that designate or imply man's rational faculty—or the bestial absence of it—is virtually a habit of speech with Hamlet, an appropriate one for a character who is an incorrigible thinker; and they serve to make the reader or viewer aware of what Hamlet is consciously sacrificing in his pursuit of revenge.

Shakespeare also sets the dramatic context of the third soliloquy with several allusions to the potential of the mind for being overwhelmed, for succumbing to madness. For example, while waiting for the Ghost, Hamlet himself speaks about the "o'ergrowth of some complexion / Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason" (1.4.27–28). Then, when the Ghost appears and beckons Hamlet to follow it, Horatio, trying to dissuade Hamlet from following, warns him that it "might deprive your sovereignty of reason, / And draw you into madness" (1.4.73–74). The recurrence of the word "reason," linked with the notion of madness as something the Ghost might cause, is a signpost of dramatic direction, foreshadowing the play's predominant tragic idea of the mind overthrown by the uncontrolled passion for revenge.

The Ghost calls for what the play will reveal to be an unattainable equilibrium between irreconcilable opposites: reason and revenge. The passion that propels revenge will be seen to preclude the dispassion that must be the informing value of reason, encompassing, of course, right reason in the service of Christian faith. The "howsomever" in the Ghost's cautioning words is Shakespeare's way of pointing up the issue, of bringing attention to what Hamlet's third soliloquy immediately begins to show: that there may be no way "howsomever" that revenge can be pursued without the mind becoming tainted—without a version of Hamlet's

obsessive resolve to wipe away everything from his mind and turn it into a tabula rasa inscribed with only one commandment: revenge. At this still early point in the play, it is probably preferable to say that “howsomever” is Shakespeare’s way of raising the question that it will be the business of the play to explore in tracing Hamlet’s career as a revenger.

The Ghost’s call for revenge and Hamlet’s response to it in his third soliloquy have unavoidably raised the question: what is the view of revenge that one finds in *Hamlet* and how does the play render it? This question has eluded a conclusive answer partly because of the complex and indirect way Shakespeare handles revenge and partly because Claudius deserves to be punished while the means for it are not apparent in the play. There seems to be a technical relationship between these two matters, the latter serving to sharpen the focus on the revenger. This focus helps make clear that the devastating effect of the revenge passion has nothing to do with the justice of the revenger’s cause. That is his tragic circumstance, whether he is aware of it or not—and invariably he is not aware of it. In the abstract, under this condition, the ethic of revenge may seem entirely right and the revenger may even confuse his intended revenge with divine justice.

A major reason why the play’s view of revenge has remained indeterminate—and critically confused—seems to be that students of revenge in Elizabethan drama have failed to comprehend this issue in *Hamlet* sufficiently in the essential terms posited by the Ghost’s contradictions in calling for revenge. That is the necessary starting point because it is the Ghost, after all, who initiates the revenge tragedy. Linked to the significance of the Ghost’s inconsistencies is what happens to Hamlet as a result of accepting the Ghost’s command. For the play’s view of revenge is rendered not by explicit reflections on the ethics of revenge by Hamlet the thinker but rather by what *happens* to him, what he undergoes in becoming a revenger. Dramatically, the issue of justice for Claudius is a matter Shakespeare addresses with an elusive design that evokes and renders the process of providence. Up to the final movement of the action, this process is secondary to what the revenger does to himself by submitting to the revenge passion. The tragic conception of the play, and its unity, lie here, in the conjunction of providence and Hamlet’s self-victimization.

The Ghost’s inconsistencies give the issue of blood revenge both a Christian and a pagan ethical context. On the one hand, the Ghost calls for revenge against Claudius—pagan justice; on the



other hand, he asks that Gertrude be left to heaven—Christian justice. Each injunction is in conflict with the other. Although the call to revenge is the insistent message of the Ghost, it is issued in a society where Christian values clearly predominate as the moral and ethical orientation, a fact that may explain the contradictory injunctions and the Ghost's own recognition that murder is "most foul, as in the best it is" (1.5.27)—including presumably in revenge. In a variety of ways, from the opening scene to the end of the play, this Christian value orientation provides a general backdrop that the important providential theme plays against very subtly in the course of the action, until at the end providence seems recognizable as a mysterious moral force that has somehow been operative all along.

To be sure, the Ghost's inconsistency concerning how Claudius and Gertrude should each be punished has often been noted and is usually explained with a point about the Ghost's sentimental partiality regarding Gertrude or his parental fear that Hamlet, having been roused to vengeance, may lapse into matricide. Both are valid but incomplete perceptions. Although the presence of two different moral schemes—pagan and Christian—has also been recognized, this radical conflict in moral codes has not been adequately examined in terms of Shakespeare's thought and art in *Hamlet*. This matter, the mixing of disparate moralities in the play, will come into focus in the chapter on the soliloquies of the Prayer Scene and will be discussed further in the concluding chapter of this study.

Critics have also been generally deficient in their comprehension of the import of the Ghost's instruction to Hamlet not to "taint" his mind. Dramatically, immediately after his encounter with the Ghost, Hamlet's soliloquy begins to clarify the inconsistency inherent in the Ghost's injunction by showing that the passion for revenge ("breaking down the pales and forts of reason," in Hamlet's apt phrase) unavoidably taints the mind. What "taint" means as a condition of mind—or rather what Shakespeare aims at through the Ghost's warning—has generally gone undefined and unappreciated in its full significance. Considering that Shakespeare has cast Hamlet's soliloquy in terms that express the complete emptying of the mind, a scrapping of all its intellectual furnishings, one can see the speech as a prelude to what the play will show us: that, contrary to the Ghost's instruction, it is not possible for blood revenge to be harbored and pursued without the revenge attitude ravaging the mind of the revenger.<sup>15</sup>

Starting with Hamlet's third soliloquy, the "tainting" of Hamlet's

mind is an essential key to understanding the dramatic design of his tragedy. The nature of this tragedy is made clear by the confusion that besets him, the terms of which are traceable in his subsequent soliloquies. What Hamlet has at stake in his conflict—a free, untainted intellect that preserves humane values—constitutes implicitly Shakespeare's assessment of revenge as a passion that mangles the mind of the revenger. In the course of the play Shakespeare shows the revenge motivation to be so mind-consuming and so compelling by its very nature that it displaces all rationality and regard for any other values. This process is initiated in Hamlet's third soliloquy, and its concluding dramatic outcome will show that the Ghost's injunction, "But howsomever thou pursues this act / Taint not thy mind," is not only contradictory but a naive understatement of what the mental consequences are for the revenger.

As I have begun to show, the particular inconsistencies of the Ghost in posing the terms of the play's revenge issues are central to Shakespeare's thought in his handling of revenge. With this in mind, I return then to the question: what is the view of revenge found in *Hamlet* and how does the play render it? The answer indicated here so far will emerge more fully in the course of considering the rest of Hamlet's soliloquies but, to avoid addressing this important question in a critical vacuum, it will be useful to recognize some issues that have a bearing on it. A few of Robert Ornstein's remarks about revenge tragedy in *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* touch several critical problems relating to *Hamlet*. After remarking on the theatrical effectiveness of revenge tragedy, "how the revenge motive focuses diverse passions of love, hatred, and ambition, how it lends itself to mordant ironies of disguised intention, hidden intrigue and counterintrigue," Ornstein asserts that

. . . there is not one great tragedy of the period in which the ethical attitude towards blood revenge is a central moral issue. In *Hamlet*, the greatest revenge play of the age, the question is quite simply ignored, although Shakespeare has many opportunities to raise it. . . . We "accept" the ethic of revenge unquestioningly because Hamlet the noble idealist does so, and nothing that we can learn about Elizabethan opinions of revenge can alter that acceptance.<sup>16</sup>

Ornstein's assertion that the ethical question of revenge is ignored in *Hamlet* is completely misleading because it stresses a surface appearance as though that tells the whole story—some-



thing that has never been the case in understanding *Hamlet*. It fails to recognize the continual presence of "the question" below the surface. While the ethical attitude to blood revenge may *seem* to be ignored in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare has the prince and the play (for the most part) ignore the question not "quite simply," as Ornstein puts it, but quite complexly and very poetically, in language and action that imply its presence strongly.

This managed indirection is in touch with the question in many ways, starting with the Ghost's inconsistencies, followed in turn by Hamlet's "And shall I couple hell?" in the invocation of the soliloquy just discussed and by his impulsive readiness to "wipe away" the lifetime of his mind—and the life of his mind—to carry out his revenge commitment. The question informs innumerable matters throughout the play. It figures, for example, in Shakespeare's satanic description of "hellish" Pyrrhus recited, significantly, by Hamlet, the would-be revenger. One finds it in Hamlet's consideration "whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer . . . or to take arms" and in the stage image of Hamlet poised with sword drawn to kill Claudius while he is kneeling in an attempt to pray. In the plot of Claudius and Laertes to kill Hamlet, revenge is equated with the crime of murder. The fact that Shakespeare does not really ignore the central moral issue of the play but actually considers it endlessly in this indirect manner—consistent with the play's prevailing style of complexity, indirection, and multiplicity—surely has something to do with what makes *Hamlet* "the greatest revenge play of the age." Ultimately, the revenge question is linked to the theme of providence in the play, a theme inseparable from the central moral issue. For the modern reader or viewer the providential dimension in *Hamlet* is the most difficult one to trace accurately and to appreciate in artistic terms in the make-up of the play, though the increasing density it acquires in the final movement of the action is an indication of its great importance.

In saying that "we 'accept' the ethic of revenge unquestioningly because Hamlet the noble idealist does so," Ornstein may be basing his explanation more on hero worship than on principles of objective dramatic criticism. There is, of course, a long tradition of criticism based on identification with Hamlet (for example, Coleridge's, "I have a smack of Hamlet myself"); indeed, Patrick Cruttwell explains why we find that for many critics, "Hamlet = Me."<sup>17</sup> More than one critic, identifying with Hamlet the revenger, has accepted the ethic of revenge out of admiration for the prince, but it is critically less murky and closer to our experience of the play to say that what we accept is really Hamlet's acceptance of the ethic

of revenge, long before he is fully revealed as a “noble idealist” or otherwise. Shakespeare manages the dramatic effectiveness of the call to revenge in such a way as to render more vivid our experience of Hamlet’s frenzy and anguish as he seeks to carry out the Ghost’s injunction, making our eventual recognition of the corruption of the “noble idealist” more devastating. It is important to keep the perspective clear in order to see objectively what happens to *him* as distinct from *us*, though we must keep track of this also as part of our experience in the theater. In his essay “The Persuasiveness of Violence in Elizabethan Plays,” Maurice Charney has clarified how we “accept” revenge in *Hamlet* and other plays because of the theatrical effectiveness—“persuasiveness”—of violence, to which revenge is related.<sup>18</sup> Because his approach is essentially aesthetic and dramatic, it is a more convincing and serviceable critical formulation than Ornstein’s.

To feel empathy with Hamlet in his situation is not the same as accepting the ethic of blood revenge, although it may at some level remind us of our own vulnerability to being overwhelmed by a comparable passion. If we subscribe to the ethic of blood revenge or feel in any degree that we are susceptible to adopting it (hypothetical possibilities that must be stated objectively), then of course our empathy with Hamlet includes that as part of our dramatic involvement. This may have been the case with members of Shakespeare’s audience, despite civic and religious strictures outlawing and condemning personal revenge. If blood revenge is not an ethical value we hold, as is most probably the case, then we “accept” Hamlet’s acceptance of the ethic of revenge without surrendering our own rejection of it—not unlike the way we accept a villain’s declared commitment to villainy (for example, Iago’s or Richard III’s), though the revenge motive penetrates our psyche more insidiously than blatant villainy. This is how Shakespeare’s dramaturgy regulates the audience’s relation to the question of blood revenge as a moral issue, maintaining a perspective that enables us to see and feel what happens to Hamlet. Once we have become dramatically engaged, however, our subscription to the revenge attitude is then subjected to Shakespeare’s unremitting and devastating exposition of a passion for revenge seeking to fulfill itself, after a whole kingdom has been wrenched out of joint by another person’s uncontrolled passion—that of Claudius, the regicide, who is dramatically pitted against, and determined to prevail over, Hamlet the revenger.

Ornstein is quite right in stating that, in order to fathom Shakespeare’s view of revenge in *Hamlet*, there is no need to revert to

Elizabethan pronouncements about revenge in materials such as sermons, social tracts, and philosophical, religious, and moral discourses. These writings, often reflecting ideas in circulation (as do the plays themselves), may well have some relevance at times, but an approach that adopts them uncritically is likely to confuse the revenge issue rather than to provide illumination of what Shakespeare put into his play. For while playwrights undoubtedly made free use of what they found in such materials, as seen, for example, in the correlations between Hamlet's symptoms of melancholy and Timothy Bright's *Treatise of Melancholy*, they did not write their plays to corroborate these materials—nor to be corroborated by them. To depend on sermons and other Elizabethan social documents to determine our view of revenge in a play is to assume that the playwright uncritically adopted these ready-made, moralistic formulations. Such an assumption can lead to fallacious a priori conclusions in relation to what one actually finds in specific plays. Apart from the difficulty of integrating the different views found in these materials, such an assumption diverts attention from the playwright's own thought, which may have been quite original and not conditioned by views that were current, except as these views might have stimulated him (in ways not traceable) to his quite independent ideas.

Similarly, unquestioned assumptions about the nature of the revenge play genre may also lead to equally fallacious findings, deflecting one from critical appreciations of a playwright's originality and creativity in adapting certain features of this genre to his own artistic ends. Shakespeare's innovative techniques in working within the genre are of central importance in *Hamlet*, especially his handling of some conventions for his own tragic purposes. While the use of a Senecan ghost, for example, is a convention of the revenge play, an element that starts the dramatic plot boiling, a ghost that pronounces meaningful contradictions or inconsistencies in calling for revenge is part of the originality of Shakespeare's dramatic thought in employing the ghost convention. After Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost, Shakespeare's variation of the invocation to heaven—by including, "And shall I couple hell?"—is another example of an innovative adaptation, as is his reversal of the usual dramatic pattern of the death plot in the dénouement. In *Hamlet* it is not the revenger who lures his intended victim into a death trap in the form of a divertissement; it is Claudius who conceives and implements the plan that lures Hamlet, the would-be revenger, with Laertes playing an ancillary role in what is primarily Claudius's scheme, a murder plot in the



form of a fencing match. And instead of a play within the play serving as the revenger's passion-driven death plot for his victims at the end of the play, as is often the case, Shakespeare uses this device in the middle of his play as a rational plan by Hamlet to catch the conscience of the king, leading to a dramatically fresh posing of the revenge issue, after the Ghost's honesty has been demonstrated. Finally, this utilization of a rational scheme figures in Shakespeare's complex treatment of the convention of madness, which has many meaningful laminations in the play, including Hamlet's acute melancholia and the antic disposition he adds to it, the various components of Ophelia's madness as heard in her songs, and the notions of love-madness, lust-madness, power-madness, and revenge-madness, each with its facets and variations.

With matters like these in mind, including some others to be dealt with at the end of the next chapter, I concur with Maurice Charney's critical attitude in his prefatory description of the play in *Hamlet's Fictions*:

*Hamlet* is strikingly original. It is a revenge play with a difference. Although it is strongly grounded in the popular dramatic tradition, it is unusual in its intellectuality and its constant play of speculation and displacement. What I have called "fictions" is called by other names by other critics, but we are all trying to speak about the special creativity of the play.<sup>19</sup>



## 2

### Passion and Reason: A Dramatic Nexus

In its thematic significance, its form and function, and the changes in voicing and tone that animate its two sections, Hamlet's fourth soliloquy, "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I" (2.2.549–605), may be seen as a link between the emotional turmoil of Hamlet's preceding soliloquy, after his encounter with the Ghost, and the measured intellectuality of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, which comes soon after it. In the overall form of the speech one discerns a dramatic elaboration of something essential in Shakespeare's characterization of the prince in the previous soliloquy. There, signaled abruptly by "My tables," directly after he had resolved to discard everything from his "brain" except the Ghost's commandment, Hamlet reverted to an intellectual habit of note-jotting when his mind spontaneously formulated the aphorism about the smiling villain. Here, signaled abruptly by "About my brains," one sees a similar pattern: the frenzy of passion is followed by an impulse for disengagement when Hamlet reverts to his mind to formulate a plan to "catch the conscience of the king" and thereby check the story of the Ghost.

The two sections of this soliloquy stand in stark contrast to each other, bifurcating the speech in a way that defines and posits Hamlet's conflict. For he is consciously committed to revenge while experiencing a subconscious (and therefore unexamined) revulsion against its irrational motivating passion. The abrupt transition from the one section of the soliloquy to the other, which emphasizes the contrast between disorderly passion and a version of orderly reason in the respective sections, is unified by the theatrical performance that incites Hamlet in the first part and provides the basis for his rational scheme in the second. The language, imagery, and ideas of the theater, which figure extensively throughout *Hamlet*, are especially prominent in this soliloquy and connect the two contrasting halves that are so different in their tones. In a dramatic nexus of passion and reason, the two portions are linked by the various aspects of Hamlet's reaction to

the Player's speech, sometimes in theatrical terms that involve metadramatic questions and Pirandellesque laminations of confusion and meaning.

The immediate dramatic context of the "rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy is determined by Hamlet's involvement with the players. When they arrive, Hamlet asks for a "passionate speech" (2.2.432), as though valuing the emotional modality to which he is committed but which he has difficulty sustaining because his mind spontaneously generates a counterthrust, often to his bewilderment. The passionate speech he requests, the section of Aeneas's tale to Dido telling of Priam's slaughter, provides the clarifying context for the soliloquy. Indeed, in the first half of the soliloquy, Hamlet seems to vent some of the thoughts and feelings that flowed in his consciousness while he was listening to the Player. Because the soliloquy shows Hamlet deeply troubled by a sense of neglected duty, thinking he should already have killed Claudius (578–80), his very choice of Aeneas's tale to Dido may have allusive significance for him because Aeneas allowed nothing to interfere with his duty, including his relationship with Dido—a matter suggestive of a parallel to the breakdown in Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia. However this may be, the specific material Hamlet asks for, a speech where Aeneas "speaks of Priam's slaughter" (2.2.444), has relevance to Hamlet in several respects.

To begin with, before the Player's recitation, Shakespeare associates Hamlet the would-be revenger with the figure of Pyrrhus by having the prince recite the grotesque description of this revenger (2.2.450–64), a satanic description that is entirely Shakespeare's invention, not Virgil's. It is therefore significant that Shakespeare has selected material with a pagan revenger but deliberately rendered the description of Pyrrhus in Christian terms that condemn him through his "hellish" features which produce a "damned" light. The horrific description of this revenger, slayer of families, "trick'd [decorated] / with blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons," mocks the chivalric notion of family honor connoted by the term "heraldy" in the grim description. The pagan-Christian combination in the description is a deft touch consistent with the contradictions of the Ghost, who may himself be a "goblin damned."

In the mistake Hamlet makes when he first tries to cue the Player, he compares Pyrrhus to the "Hyrceanian beast" (2.2.450)—a tiger. It is a very meaningful mistake, one that reveals Hamlet's subconscious view of Pyrrhus as an avenger acting *mindlessly*

with bestial ferocity. I have stressed *mindlessly* because in two soliloquies, his first and last, Hamlet refers to a "beast" as lacking the loftiness of human reason. As for the Player's speech itself, it contains matters that relate to Hamlet's personal problems in three ways: it portrays a man carrying out vengeance for the murder of his father, it depicts the helpless and pathetic killing of a king referred to as a father, and it shows a queen frantic with grief over the death of her husband.

The relationship of these matters to Hamlet is not simple because they involve shifting perspectives that produce two sets of meaningful but conflicting analogues.<sup>1</sup> From one perspective, Hamlet's situation as a would-be revenger is analogous to that of Pyrrhus the avenger, who provides an image of a role model that the soliloquies show Hamlet aspiring to fulfill (or aspiring *not* to fulfill, without his realizing it, if one prefers to stress the notion of delay instead of progress).<sup>2</sup> But because the passage is narrated from Aeneas's point of view, all of one's sympathies are meant to be with "Old grandsire Priam" (2.2.464). Indeed, one's sympathies for Priam are like those evoked by the Ghost's account of how he was killed. Thus one is revolted by the horrific violence "hellish Pyrrhus" (2.2.463) perpetrates on "the milky head / of reverent Priam" (2.2.478–79). Through the Player's speech, at this relatively early point in the play, Shakespeare brings the audience—and Hamlet—face to face with a revenger engaged in the act of ferocious butchery that Hamlet will need to be capable of performing. Hamlet recognizes and accepts the aroused passion required when, feeling guilty and scolding himself in a rage, he says that "ere this / I should 'a' fatted all the region kites / With this slave's offal" (578–80).

The brutality of Pyrrhus reactivates all of Hamlet's anguish and anger. When he is eager for the Player to "Come to Hecuba" (2.2.501), it is as though he wishes to hear of the queen whose grief for her dead husband exemplifies what should have been seen in Gertrude. In the fuller terms of his implicit sense of comparison and contrast, if Hecuba is analagous to Gertrude, then Priam represents Old Hamlet and, from this perspective, Pyrrhus represents Claudius by the logic of the analogies. Ironically, Hamlet himself seems to link, or rather confuse, Pyrrhus's violence as a revenger with Claudius's violence as a murderer when he spews a stream of epithets at Claudius. Most of them—"bloody," "remorseless," "treacherous," "kindless"—apply equally well to Pyrrhus, whose murderous violence and terrifying appearance are



perfectly in keeping with them. Because Pyrrhus is a revenger, Hamlet's own desire for revenge is thus associated with Claudius's violence through Pyrrhus, the figure who represents both Hamlet and Claudius in two quite different analogues. When Hamlet refers in his soliloquy to "a dear father murdered" (583), "a king / Upon whose property and most dear life / A damn'd defeat was made" (569–71), the slaughter of Priam in the Player's speech has provided a fresh, immediate context for such statements, and we link Old Hamlet with Priam because both elderly men were helpless victims of their killers.

If Hamlet is like Pyrrhus the revenger, then Priam, from that perspective, is unavoidably an analogue for Claudius, against whom Hamlet seeks revenge. No more forceful condemnation of revenge is imaginable than the model presented through the violence of Pyrrhus in killing Priam. The abstract analogical equating of the two forms of violence—revenge and murder—at this point in the play is subsequently given a concrete dramatic context in the linking of Laertes's plan for revenge with Claudius's plan to murder Hamlet: both schemes are made equally perfidious and violent through their common use of poison. Ironically, although in his soliloquy Hamlet seems to transfer the violence of Pyrrhus to the violence of Claudius in killing Old Hamlet, he does not see these analogues which associate and equate the violence of revenge with the violence of murder, just as the Ghost did not see that revenge is a version of "murder most foul, / As in the best it is" (1.5.27).

Nor is Hamlet aware that he betrays a link between himself and Claudius by using the same words to refer to himself and the king, as when he calls himself a "peasant slave" (550) and subsequently refers to "this slave's [Claudius's] offal" (580) and when he calls Claudius a "kindless villain" (580) after having asked: "Who calls me villain?" (572). In the rhetoric of his histrionics, it is, ironically, Hamlet who calls himself a villain. That Shakespeare was interested in the poetics of these subtle connections may be seen further in Hamlet's degrading sense of himself as a "a whore," "a drab," "a stallion" (585–87) and Claudius's similarly degrading sense of himself expressed in his aside when he says, only fifty lines after Hamlet's soliloquy:

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,  
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it  
Than is my deed to my most painted word.

(3.1.50–52)



When Hamlet calls Claudius a “kindless villain” (that is, there is no other kind like him), he ironically echoes and refutes his very first words in the play, when he dissociated himself from Claudius: “A little more than kin, and *less* than *kind*” (1.2.65). Presumably Hamlet’s blinding passion obstructs perceptions and rational extrapolations of how the revenge passion is now making him more of Claudius’s kind rather than less. He seems to have the image of “hellish” Pyrrhus very much in mind and accepts that he will have to become like him, when he exclaims self-righteously (perhaps with rhetorical hyperbole in the heat of self-abuse) that he is prompted to his revenge by “heaven and hell” (584). Where previously, in the invocation to his third soliloquy, Hamlet had questioned whether he should “couple” hell with heaven, he now asserts the verbal coupling with complete abandon. The coupling occurs, appropriately, as an arrogant expression of the passion churning in Hamlet at this point in the soliloquy, where he abuses himself with sexual name-calling.

The two sets of conflicting analogues in the Player’s speech bear dramatically on what seems to be the central conflict that besieges Hamlet as he strives to carry out his commitment to revenge: the conflict in him between the compulsion of passion and the countervailing force of his intellect. Broadly, it is this conflict between passion and intellect that governs the organization of the “rogue and peasant slave” soliloquy: the passion incited by the Player’s recitation runs its turbulent course until it spends itself and Hamlet achieves rational stability at the point where he says, “About my brains!” (2.2.588), as though designating his precious antidote to the chaos of passion. Hamlet’s confused thought in the first half of the speech, in contrast to the rational plan of action he formulates in the second half, also provides a foreshadowing of the utter disarray of intellect that will epitomize his tragic condition in his (and the play’s) final soliloquy. The dramatic nexus of passion and reason found in this soliloquy is a germinal version of the tragic idea outlined by the soliloquies in *Hamlet* and encompassed by the fuller action of the play.

Hamlet’s emotional frenzy in the first half of the soliloquy is essentially a release of the pent-up rage incubating within the revenge obsession that took hold of his mind in his previous soliloquy. When he is alone, following the Player’s recitation, Hamlet thinks about how the actor, merely by imagining Hecuba’s sorrow—“But in a fiction, in a dream of passion” (552)—was moved to tears. This perception of the emotional energies released

by an activated imagination instantly kindles Hamlet's own sense of the enormity of what Claudius has perpetrated. Churning imaginatively, and apparently intensified by the vivid narration of Priam's slaughter, his disturbed thoughts about the murder of his father quickly arouse his emotions to a raging, hysterical hatred for the king. This outburst of passion also arises in part from Hamlet's enormous frustration because, in contrast to the verbal and emotional freedom just displayed in public by the Player, he "can say nothing" (569)—a confusing and emotionally stifling situation that makes him suddenly attack himself and wonder if he is a coward. (In his first soliloquy, one recalls, he had also said: "I must hold my tongue" [1.2.159].)

Hamlet's sense of himself as a coward is derived from a crude, simplistic judgment turning on whether or not he has yet taken any action against the man who murdered his father. His self-condemnation takes several bizarre forms, including histrionic imaginings of a series of demeaning insults that he absorbs like a coward because he feels he has done nothing to take revenge on Claudius:

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 the lungs? Who does me this?  
 Hah, 'swounds, I should take it; for it cannot be  
 But I am pigeon-liver'd, and lack gall  
 To make oppression bitter, or ere this  
 I should 'a' fatted all the region kites  
 With this slave's offal.

(571–80)

Hamlet's accusing himself of cowardice is a recurrent symptom of guilt in the dynamics of the revenge passion as one sees him experiencing it in the course of the play. Similar versions of this symptom, especially the notion of excessive thought as a symptom of fear, appear in his next soliloquy and in his final one. This form of self-abuse probably says more about the mentally corrosive nature of the revenge passion, and its resemblance to madness, than it does about Hamlet's actual behavior in his predicament, despite a critical tradition that has faulted him with delay, including delay viewed as cowardice arising from excessive thought about taking revenge. That is, the revenge obsession may make anyone feel guilty and self-abusive until the compelling passion is

gratified through vengeful action. Significantly, since a major attribute of Hamlet as a character is his great intelligence, it is quite right artistically and thematically that the specific notion of thought as a symptom of fear should be what troubles his mind in later soliloquies, even after he has just killed Polonius. It is precisely the kind of self-criticism that a man of intellect would heap on himself. Similarly, it is right that his self-abusive attitude at this moment is completely dispelled as soon as he formulates and undertakes a cogent course of action governed by his intellect. One must appreciate the essential way Shakespeare is making his characterization of Hamlet “work” dramatically.

It is interesting to find Hamlet confusing the relationship between life and the art of acting in his remarks about the Player’s recitation, especially since he later shows considerable understanding of this subject when he gives advice to the players before they perform *The Murder of Gonzago*. Since his sensible advice to them occurs in the context of his rational purposes in putting on the play, the confusion that besets Hamlet in his reaction to the Player’s speech may best be explained as arising from the turmoil generated in his mind by the Player’s performance. Such intellectual confusion in the heat of emotion is understandable; nevertheless, one should clarify the terms of his confusion and not simply perceive superficially that he is being swept along in the wild currents of his feelings, true as that perception is. Since the playwright has created a character who is a thinker, it behooves a reader or viewer to appreciate the terms of such a character’s confusion of thought for what the playwright reveals through it.

Thinking that the actor’s performance was emotionally excessive, Hamlet asks in tones of rhetorical derision:

What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,  
That he should weep for her? What would he do  
Had he the motive and the cue for passion  
That I have?

(559–62)

In the comparison he makes by posing these questions, Hamlet is equating and thereby confusing his personal life situation as a would-be revenger with the performing situation of the Player. This is the crux of the matter upon analysis, for the comparison is inherently fallacious in its juxtaposition of terms. Although one understands the intensely personal feelings Hamlet expresses



through the questions, his confusion in framing them as he does illuminates the problem he now has in performing the role of revenger—to phrase the matter with an appropriate theatrical suggestiveness consistent with his difficulty in getting into the part. His confusion in these arresting questions has several interesting facets. A clarification of them cannot avoid complexity.

Both of Hamlet's questions concern the art of acting but paradoxically Hamlet himself does not even recognize that this is his subject—a failure that results in the confusion he displays in what he says. His first question completely blurs the distinction that needs to be made between the Player as a performing artist and the Player as a private person. One can cut straight through Hamlet's confusion in the first question simply by asking a question of one's own: why should the Player not weep for Hecuba if, as an artist, that is his determination of what performing the role of Aeneas requires? In short, it is not the Player as a private person who weeps for Hecuba since she is nothing to him personally; it is the Player as a performing artist who weeps for her because of the way she figures in the role he is rendering. The Player's tears are an entirely appropriate part of his dramatic performance. Hamlet's confusion in his first question leads him into an equally confused consideration of the hypothetical performance that the Player would render of Hamlet as revenger if he had Hamlet's "motive and cue for passion," a fallacious linking or juxtaposition of the Player's art with Hamlet's life. To be sure, one can understand that Hamlet is preoccupied with his own predicament and has no room in his troubled consciousness to accommodate the tragic emotions of either Aeneas or Hecuba in addition to his own. Undoubtedly, part of the reason for his confusion is that his intense feelings about his own terrible situation interfere with a proper view and sympathetic reception of Hecuba's plight as evoked by the Player's emotional performance. We have all sat through a play with troubled feelings or things on our mind that caused such interference.

This clarification of Hamlet's confusion in the first question facilitates a clarification of his use of the word "function" ("his whole function suiting" [508]), which has a theatrical meaning that has gone unregarded. Editors provide a variety of glosses for "function," with a number of their notes deriving from the second definition for "function" given in the *OED*: "activity; action in general." (The new Arden edition, for example, gives "activity"; the Signet edition gives "action.") The reason some editors of *Hamlet* favor this definition is undoubtedly that the *OED* happens to provide, as an example of the usage, Hamlet's very lines about



the Player's "function." However, since Hamlet is talking specifically about the Player's performance, his use of "function" is more meaningfully and precisely in accord with the *OED*'s etymological definition of "function," given as, "action of performing," from the Latin words *fungi*—"to perform" and *function*—"performance." In providing an example for this etymological definition, which is the first one given, the *OED* cites the following lines from Samuel Daniels's *Civil Wars* (6.93), dated 1597: "His hand, his eye, his wits all present, wrought The function of the glorious Part he beares." Somehow the compilers of the *OED* failed to see that the lexical sense for "function" in the Daniels example is exactly the same in their *Hamlet* example: "Teares in his eyes . . . A broken voyce, and his whole Function suiting With Formes, to his Conceit." Furthermore, in the context, Hamlet's use of "suiting" conveys not only the notion of "making suitable" but also a theatrical notion of putting on the appropriate suit or costume—in this case, metaphorically dressing up the performance in suitable "forms" of emotional display. Since "function" in the theatrical sense of *performance* is clearly very relevant to what Hamlet is talking about, the etymological definition is more applicable.

In his second question, Hamlet's projection of his own situation onto the Player reveals how alien the role of revenger feels to him, a role requiring a performance effort that he sees as virtually parallel to the player's recitation performance about Hecuba in her frantic grief. In posing his second question, Hamlet betrays a split separating his own lower-keyed intellectual self from the role requiring the revenger's high pitch of passion, as though the revenger is a persona other than who Hamlet really is, a persona to be adopted and performed. For in his confusion Hamlet imagines his role of revenger as a part that the actor might play, inspired by Hamlet's "motive and cue for passion." While the question Hamlet asks facilitates his expressive release of great frustration and pent-up rage, it confuses several issues concerning the relation of life to art and vice versa.

Indeed, Shakespeare has given this whole matter—the Player's performance and Hamlet's confused and confusing questions about it—a clarifying context in the scene. At a time before his present troubles, one learns, Hamlet had heard the Player recite this very speech. In requesting to hear it again, he expresses his admiration for the material and, implicitly, the performance:

I heard thee speak me a speech once, but it was never acted, or if it was, not above once; for the play, I remember, pleas'd not the million,

'twas caviare to the general, but it was—as I receiv'd it, and others, whose judgments in such matters cried in top of mine—an excellent play, well digested in the scenes. . . . One speech in't I chiefly lov'd, 'twas Aeneas' tale to Dido, and thereabout of it especially when he speaks of Priam's slaughter.

(2.2.434–48)

Hamlet's views in the turbulent section of the soliloquy are hardly in accord with his assessments here, based on his memory of the material and of how the Player's performance of it was received by Hamlet and, significantly, by others whose critical judgments, Hamlet says, were better than his.

Understandably, the Player's recitation triggers strong personal reactions in Hamlet, producing his derisive and muddled questions. Making an invalid and invidious comparison between fiction and nonfiction, his second question confounds the essential difference between Hamlet's life experience of the real loss of his father, murdered by Claudius, and the actor's performance of *his imagined* version of Hecuba's fictional loss of Priam through the slaughter perpetrated by Pyrrhus. (Fictional matters, it hardly needs to be said, have their own kind of reality as constructs of the imagination.) Hamlet makes the mistake of assessing the actor's performed grief by the measure of his personal feelings, as though Hecuba's plight is less terrible than Hamlet's as a configuration of human experience. (If anything, when one compares the two situations, Hecuba's situation may be worse because she has just witnessed the slaughter of her husband with her eyes, and not learned about it almost two months after it occurred, as in Hamlet's case.) He also fails to comprehend that, if the actor undertook to play the role of Hamlet as revenger, he would, as he did in mastering the role of Aeneas and the material about Hecuba, "force his soul . . . to his own conceit" in order to enter into *his imagined* reality of Hamlet's situation, which would be the exact equivalent of "a fiction," "a dream of passion" for the purposes of performance. That is, he would take imaginative and creative possession of a personage and his predicament in order to act the part.

Believing that his own situation is charged with much greater emotion and significance than Hecuba's because it is real, not "a fiction," Hamlet reveals the intensity of his anguish by describing the hypothetical performance in terms that convey (with a satirical touch on Shakespeare's part) the ranting convention of verbal storms characteristic of a stage revenger, whose histrionic display would be larger than anything imaginable in life, especially as

represented by Hamlet before he gets all worked up. Raging with Hamlet's "motive and cue for passion," the actor, Hamlet says,

would drown the stage with tears  
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,  
Make mad the guilty, and appall the free,  
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed  
The very faculties of eyes and ears.

(562–66)

Ironically, from the point of view of the audience, Hamlet achieves a pitch in his speech that would match the passion of any stage revenger. His histrionics, however, arise from a bewildering real-life situation that he is trying to master, not from a faked or deliberately controlled performance, although Shakespeare may be satirizing the style of the stage revenger through Hamlet's attempt to become a real one. Like a mirror reflecting a mirror, Hamlet (himself being played by a stage actor) imagines himself being played by the Player and thereby (in that imagined view of himself) is able to give full expressive scope to his rage and grief and to see his feelings played back in terms larger than life, in the terms of a stage revenger—which is what he actually is in relation to the audience. The Pirandellian theatrical paradox deserves to be appreciated.<sup>3</sup>

In projecting his own passion onto the Player, when he confuses his would-be role as revenger with the hypothetical performance of himself acted in his imagination by the Player, Hamlet lapses into a fallacious equation in which the distinctions between life and art are broken down. Later, however, in a rational and unconfused discussion of the dramatic art, he recognizes the distinction when he tells the players that "the purpose of playing . . . is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (3.2.20–22). If Hamlet had been able to see the reflection from the Player's art, rather than projecting his own passion onto the Player and fusing it with his imagined notion of what the Player's performance of that passion would be (if Hamlet had looked at the reflection offered by the mirror instead of entering the mirror, so to speak), he might have perceived the horror of Pyrrhus's act of vengeance and the implicit equation of vengeance with murder.

What the preceding section underscores is the fact that the revenger is not a persona that finds an easy accommodation in Hamlet's personality. Without understanding why, he finds it diffi-



cult to function in the role. Nonetheless, he remains fully committed to revenge, though he clearly sees himself as turning in a poor performance so far, despite his "motive and cue for passion."

When his storm of passion is at its height, with the epithets he hurls at Claudius, Hamlet is unable to continue his hysterical outcry; he suddenly becomes conscious of his raving condition and seems to step back and look at himself. At this point, in Wolfgang Clemen's precise description of a particular use Shakespeare makes of soliloquy, one sees the "speaker being split into selves which are in conflict with one another."<sup>4</sup> Now, with the brief transition of Hamlet's contemptuous self-assessment (the six lines beginning, "Why, what an ass am I" [582–87]), the turbulence engendered in him by the Player's emotional recitation begins to subside. As though in revulsion against the turmoil of the passion-driven rant, his intellect asserts itself, gains control of the passion, and, quite dramatically, guides him to a rational plan of action against the king, a plan that will simultaneously be a test of the Ghost. The Ghost, after all, may really be the devil performing a role, to note another facet of the theme of acting in the play.

One cannot overstate the expressive and thematic significance of the dramatic shift from the rule of passion to the rule of reason that takes place in the speech. It is something that Shakespeare causes to arise from his essential conception of the character. To be sure, when Hamlet has recovered from his violent fit and his mind has taken possession of the revenger's cause, this intellectual *modus operandi* remains linked to his revenge motive by the logic of his emotion as well as by the logic of his scheme. One senses it in the way that the latter half of the soliloquy is no less controlled than the first half by Hamlet's stimulation from the theatrical performance of the Player. In the rational section of the speech, for example, the idea that "guilty creatures sitting at a play . . . have proclaim'd their malefactions" (589–92) recalls the remark, in the passionate section, of how an adequate dramatic performance of Hamlet's revenger's role would "Make mad the guilty." Nonetheless, despite its link with revenge, the plan Hamlet formulates has an independent rightness, an essential rationality, that is the basis of the stability which replaces his manic tantrum.

When Hamlet says "About my brains" and then clarifies his plan to present *The Murder of Gonzago*, he thinks he has formulated an action that proceeds from and is fully consistent with his revenge intention. This is undoubtedly so, foreshadowing the subjugation later of his reason by his passion for revenge, but at this particular moment the rationality of his scheme clearly has its own authority



and intrinsic validity because it allows objectively for the possibility that Claudius may be innocent of the murder. The plan makes convincing good sense as a first step: before killing Claudius, it is obviously important to be sure the Ghost has told the truth about him. But this matter of determining the truth, as will be seen, is actually something quite separate from the question of whether or not Hamlet should become a revenger if the truth turns out to be that Claudius is guilty. Hamlet, of course, remains committed to revenge, but Shakespeare puts the question in abeyance at this point in the developing action.

Thus the dramatic movement of the play suddenly becomes regulated by the plan produced by Hamlet's "brains." Whatever one's view of the revenge issue, whether or not one believes Hamlet should pursue revenge and whether or not one sees him delaying action, Shakespeare gives a reasonable person no choice but to find merit in Hamlet's decision to have the truth about Claudius based on "grounds more relative" than the Ghost's report alone. Indeed, this legal-sounding phrase, the culminating point in Hamlet's step-by-step clarification of his reasoning in formulating his plan, underscores the judicious rationality of the procedure, reassuring one's concern for justice. The phrase also figures in the larger pattern of legal language and notions of adjudication in the play, including several of the soliloquies. Such matters are found, for example, in the Ghost's disparate views of justice for Claudius and Gertrude, in Claudius's two soliloquies, in Hamlet's "Now might I do it" soliloquy, and ultimately in the design of providential justice that ends the play.

Hamlet's expressed awareness of the power of an aroused imagination, linked to his reaction to the Player's performance, gives him a sense of the validity of his scheme to try to expose Claudius by setting before him a dramatization of the horrendous crime reported by the Ghost. The scheme, which will "hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (3.2.22), satisfies his need for effective action, but is not propelled by a compulsive impetuosity of passion, as when Hamlet kills Polonius with a frenzied thrust of his sword into the arras. Indeed, Hamlet's rational scheme of action includes the remote possibility of some form of public justice, which would eliminate any need for private vengeance. For in conceiving the plan, Hamlet says:

I have heard  
That guilty creatures sitting at a play  
Have by the very cunning of the scene

Been strook so to the soul, that presently  
 They have proclaim'd their malefactions:  
 For murther, though it have no tongue, will speak  
 With most miraculous organ.

(588–94)

One side of Hamlet seems to yearn for a public confession by Claudius that will relieve Hamlet of his commitment to exact personal revenge while passion-driven by “a roused vengeance,” as Pyrrhus was. The rational aspect of the character includes (for reasons to be explained later) his sense of intuition about and faith in a process whereby “murther, though it have no tongue, will speak / With most miraculous organ” (593–94)—the same intuitive faith he expressed in his second soliloquy when he said, “Foul deeds will rise / Though all the world o’erwhelm them, to men’s eyes.” It should be noted, however, that there is a meaningful irony in the contrast between the *public* aspect of “guilty creatures” that “have proclaimed their malefactions” and the course of private revenge that Hamlet reserves as his alternative. Indeed, the unlikelihood of the former suggests the perverse, obsessional appeal of the latter to Hamlet, despite the rational basis of his scheme. The irony here is that, except in clarifying his plan to present the play, Hamlet never thinks in terms of achieving *public* revenge against Claudius as a regicide who has usurped the throne of Denmark. This seems to suggest the emotional self-victimization of the person who accepts the revenger’s role.

Through the king’s aside prior to the Play Scene, Shakespeare makes it clear to the audience that Claudius is guilty. With this clarification he prepares for the dramatic tension of the Play Scene by making the audience’s point of view the same as Hamlet’s:

I’ll have these players  
 Play something like the murther of my father  
 Before mine uncle. I’ll observe his looks,  
 I’ll tent him to the quick. If ’a do blench,  
 I know my course.

(2.2.594–98)

Commenting on these lines to clarify a purpose that soliloquies may have, Wolfgang Clemen points out that “the audience are told explicitly what to look out for in a later scene, and it is clear that one function of the soliloquy really is to prepare us for things to come.”<sup>5</sup>

With Hamlet's clarion couplet that ends the soliloquy, the play is given a strong dramatic thrust toward the planned action:

—the play's the thing  
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

(604–5)

There is a note of triumph in this couplet, as though Hamlet is celebrating the victory of his mind in formulating a suitable plan and in weathering the great emotional storm produced in him by the Player's speech and by a prejudiced assumption of the king's guilt. If Claudius blanches at *The Murder of Gonzago*, Hamlet knows his course—his original commitment to get revenge, a course that now seems governed by reason. His soliloquies after the Mousetrap Scene chart that course and help define his tragedy. In this regard, the logic of his proposition, "If 'a do blench / I know my course" (597–98), betrays the "taint" corrupting the noble substance of rationality guiding the Mousetrap scheme. As a quasi-logical proposition, which assumes that pursuing revenge necessarily must follow proof of Claudius's guilt, it is a paradigm in miniature of the subsequent complete subversion of Hamlet's rational faculty, which will be seen in a repulsive form in his "Now might I do it" soliloquy and in the tragic terms of the breakdown of his reasoning powers in his final soliloquy, "How all occasions do inform against me."

In *Hamlet's Fictions*, Maurice Charney is concerned in various ways with the theme of passion in *Hamlet*. He is particularly interested in passion as it is related to action, revenge, and thought. Since these are matters that figure centrally in the soliloquies, it is useful, in the context of this study, to specify precisely how his understandings of these matters both complement and are at variance with those set forth here.

In the opening chapter, called "Hamlet's Dream of Passion," Charney finds it "significant that 'passion' should be such a key word and key image in *Hamlet*." He points out that "it is used more frequently in this play than anywhere else in the canon."<sup>6</sup> What Charney does not note, however, is that "reason" is also a key word and key image in the play. Indeed, the frequency of "passion" is exceeded by the number of times the play uses "reason," for which "mind" often serves as a synonym. (Ophelia, in her soliloquy, speaks of Hamlet's "noble mind" and "sovereign reason.") In fact, the word "mind" itself is also used more often than "passion,"



helping to augment the play's major theme of rationality in opposition to passion—or rather passion in opposition to rationality. Although the word “reason” occurs a little more frequently in two other plays (*Troilus and Cressida* and *Twelfth Night*), according to Spevack's *Concordance*,<sup>7</sup> only in *Hamlet* is it used consistently to refer to and evoke the mind or the uniquely human faculty of reason, in contrast to the use of the word in other senses, such as “cause” or “explanation.”<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare's frequent use of both “passion” and “reason” in *Hamlet* arises from the importance of the dramatic idea of a conflict between them—between “blood and judgment” (3.2.59), “reason and blood” (4.4.58), to cite the recurrence also of synonyms for the basic terms, sometimes in phrasings that pair them in opposition.

When “passion” and its images in *Hamlet* are understood in terms of this central dramatic conflict (which encompasses the familiar Elizabethan notion of extreme passion as a form of madness), they sometimes take on radically different meanings from those offered by Charney's clarifications and conclusions. “All the ‘passion’ examples in *Hamlet* seem to make the same point: passion is dangerous but without passion no great deeds can occur. There is a close link between passion and the heroic,” says Charney.<sup>9</sup> “It looks as if Hamlet needs to understand passion and make his peace with it before he can take revenge.”<sup>10</sup> Invariably Charney's outlook on these matters manifests itself as a recurrent assumption that Hamlet's commitment to revenge is not merely understandable but desirable and right, something Hamlet needs to be capable of carrying out by overcoming impediments to it—mainly impediments to the necessary motivating passion, as though these impediments to making his peace with passion were somehow deficiencies in him. Thus, Charney perceives passion in the play as an essential motivator and as an enabler of action, including revenge; passion is something positive to be sought actively by Hamlet. This study, in sharp contrast to Charney's views, perceives passion as an irrational driver, as in the case of Claudius, and as a blind destroyer, as in Hamlet's killing of Polonius in the spirit of taking revenge on Claudius. It is a wild force best kept in check, or at least in balance, by reason.

Charney finds “a close link between passion and the heroic” presumably because the heroic requires deeds and “passion is necessary as a motive force for action.”<sup>11</sup> Conversely, Charney implies an opposition between the rational and the heroic when he describes Horatio's qualities as “essentially rational and unheroic.”<sup>12</sup> Although “rational” and “unheroic” may simply be coor-



dinate modifiers here, the phrasing suggests that Horatio is unheroic *because* he is rational. This interpretation seems confirmed by Charney's emphatic final sentence of the chapter concerning "Hamlet's dream of passion": "The passion seems to be trapped by 'thinking too precisely on th' event.'" <sup>13</sup> If the passion is trapped by "thinking," then the way to release it would be to eliminate the thinking—to undo the instrument of thought, the mind, the price Hamlet is impulsively willing to pay in the passionate soliloquy following his meeting with the Ghost. Charney seems to accept this as a necessary price when, directly after his description of Horatio as rational and unheroic, he observes, "This is not the path for the tragic protagonist, who must almost of necessity taint his mind by being passion's slave."<sup>14</sup> Despite Hamlet's strong commitment to revenge, and undoubtedly because of the passionate turmoil he has been living through as a result of that commitment, the prince seems wary of what it means to lapse into the severe imbalance of being passion's slave. With eloquent rationality he rejects that condition of helpless servitude, when he expresses his admiration for Horatio's balance. At that most lucid of moments just before the Play Scene, Hamlet recognizes that to become passion's slave, at the expense of the mind, is to become the plaything of Fortune. This consciousness in Hamlet, implying a struggle in him between passion and reason, "blood and judgment," explains his dramatically abrupt and impulsive expression of admiration for Horatio, in which he stresses that he values his friend's equilibrium:

blest are those  
Whose blood and judgment are so well co-meddled,  
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger  
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man  
That is not passion's slave.

(3.2.68–72)

Charney is not unaware of the toll taken on Hamlet as a result of his passionate commitment to revenge, for he notes with profound insight that "we are meant to feel Hamlet's anguish about actualizing his dream of passion."<sup>15</sup>

Charney's views of passion in *Hamlet* are much more complex and intricately set forth than these abbreviated versions of some of them can convey, but he seems to regard Hamlet's acceptance of the tainting of his mind as itself circumstantially heroic because it would free the trapped passion and, ending the "standstill in his

own well justified and passionate revenge," enable Hamlet "to take the revenge action justified by the Mousetrap play."<sup>16</sup> Thus Charney perceives Hamlet's intellect as an inhibitor of the passion essential to action. From Charney's perspective, in order to perform "great deeds" this inhibiting intellect must be suppressed. Despite the anguish, the "tainting" of the mind is to be desired, precisely to release the passion that would enable Hamlet the revenger to act forcefully. In this study, the intellect is also seen as an inhibitor of passion. In direct contrast to Charney's views, however, the overthrowing of the mind is perceived as a tragic consequence, not an enabler, of Hamlet's commitment to revenge. Indeed, as will be shown, the dramatic rationale of the soliloquies in *Hamlet* reveals that the defeat of his mind constitutes the essence of his tragedy.

Charney alludes to the paradox of the dramatic conflict between passion and rationality when he says in his concluding chapter: "He [Hamlet] is trying to work out the revenger's impossible dilemma of how to take action without becoming tainted."<sup>17</sup> This observation is in accord with Charney's complex awareness of "our ambivalent sense of the play,"<sup>18</sup> a sense surely determined in great measure by our ambivalence regarding revenge, which Charney (despite his endorsement of Hamlet's revenge commitment) recognizes is "an ambiguous and morally enigmatic topic."<sup>19</sup> The issue in *Hamlet* is not, as Charney thinks, that "we don't want our hero to be cruel, bloody, and unnatural, even when Shakespeare is at great pains to tell us that he is."<sup>20</sup> The issue, as Shakespeare dramatizes it and as Charney himself recognizes it in speaking of "the revenger's impossible dilemma," is whether our hero should allow himself to succumb to passion—to become a Pyrrhus—if it means, in effect, sacrificing his mind and becoming like a beast. That is what the split in Hamlet is essentially about after he meets the Ghost. For in *Hamlet* Shakespeare is primarily concerned with revenge not as a matter of what the revenger does to his victim but of what the revenger does to himself through his obsession with revenge.

In the emphasis Charney gives to the value of passion, part of his purpose is polemical. He wishes to counter what he regards as a nonheroic view of the prince with a heroic one: "In the theatrical tradition 'To be or not to be' has become Hamlet's most characteristic utterance," says Charney, "rather than the more vigorous and heroic 'Now could I drink hot blood.'"<sup>21</sup> By focusing on the latter soliloquy, which displays the prince as a man of passion rather than a man of intellect, Charney wants to emphasize

"Hamlet the Dane of the popular dramatic tradition rather than Hamlet the Contemplative of Romantic fancy."<sup>22</sup>

Quite rightly, Charney is impatient with a distorted romantic view that has had too much currency—Hamlet the hypersensitive soul or "noble idealist" whom some critics have extrapolated from the "To be" speech and somehow mistaken for the whole character. In trying to correct it, however, Charney lapses into a distortion of his own in his failure to take the full relevance of "reason" and "mind" adequately into account in his study of "passion." The critical problem raised by these two conflicting distortions is at the center of the present study. A critical resolution should manage to comprehend what is conveyed by—and about—Hamlet as seen in *both* the "To be or not to be" soliloquy and the "Now could I drink hot blood" speech. It is, after all, Shakespeare's dramatic thought that presents him in such harshly different portraits. The contrasting images of Hamlet projected from these two soliloquies may be seen as a distributed version of the dramatic nexus between reason and passion found in the "rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy. In between them occurs Ophelia's thematically significant soliloquy, with its opening line that defines the essential nature of Hamlet's tragedy: "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!"

### 3

## Discourse of Reason

In contrast to the emotional frenzy of his commitment to revenge in the "O all you host of heaven" soliloquy, and as a continuation dramatically of the way his "brains" had checked his turmoil and taken control in the latter half of the "rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy, Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy (3.1.55–87) is entirely motivated by reason untouched by passion. It is not, however, free of emotional influences that interfere with the rigorous logic to which Hamlet aspires in his considerations. In sequence, and through the proportions of their respective displays of passion and reason, the three speeches have a meaningful interrelationship in their delineation of the play's dramatic opposition of passion and reason. In the "To be or not to be" soliloquy Hamlet seems to be seeking a discipline of conduct governed by reason completely free of emotion. As he tries to deal philosophically with a crucial new problem that besets him, the speech reveals his intellect at work freely, without any irrational bias, although it is unavoidably colored by his unhappy sense of life. It is significant that Hamlet has no other speech between his previous soliloquy, where the tone of rational discourse established itself, and his entrance for the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, which continues that tone in a much deeper subjective key.

In its academic method and style the speech carries the stamp of Hamlet's identity as a student, formally posing a "question" or topic for debate. The form is significant because, in its resemblance to a strictly intellectual exercise, it highlights the mind engaged in the process of reasoning and implicitly affirms the value of rationality as the basis of action. The problem Hamlet is considering is real and weighty. Although he may or may not think it through satisfactorily in one's judgment, the very way he is using his mind—the discourse of reason one witnesses—is just as important dramatically as what he is thinking about. Perhaps the most essential general point to be appreciated about the speech is that it projects a sublime dramatic image of man "noble in reason"



(2.2.304) and seeking wisdom. It is this capacity and inclination of Hamlet to use his fine mind that is registered forcefully at this moment and that enters fundamentally into a comprehension of the tragedy which is the defeat of his mind by passion.

Our heightened sense of a person using his mind is part of the pleasure aroused by the universally popular opening line—and sustained by the rest of the speech—for somehow, with magic immediacy, it makes us undergo a lofty consciousness of our own capacity to think. Indeed, the chronic problem critics have had in trying to establish an acceptable single meaning for this most famous of lines suggests that its primary function may be not to have its own clear or definable meaning at the outset but rather to do what in fact it does: induce in us a profound empathy with the reasoning process itself, with the serious thought and deliberation taking place in Hamlet as he considers “the question.” Epitomizing a binary structure of thought very familiar to us from the way we often think, the line achieves its remarkable effect by using a highly abstract and indeterminate “or” proposition to evoke in us a vicarious experience of our own mind at work when we are engaged in important considerations involving choices between one thing or another, including matters that are to be or not to be. The approach to the line taken here respects this general effect. It is essentially an open-ended approach (that is, open to appropriate, clarifying feedback), not one that is reductive, definitive, or paraphrasal—procedures that have been tried in endless variations, always with questionable results that suggest the need for a different approach. Because the “To be or not to be” speech is the most problematic of the soliloquies in *Hamlet*, it requires the most detailed examination.

Discussions of Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy are almost as varied and divergent as interpretations of the play itself.<sup>1</sup> The deep subjectivity of the speech is part of the reason for this, but a failure to recognize the special dramatic significance of the stage image of a man thinking, his mind fully engaged in a process of ratiocination, has also been a major impediment to a comprehensive understanding of the soliloquy. This oversight is understandable because it is not at all unusual—on the contrary, it is quite natural—to find a character engaged in thought in a soliloquy. In the case of *Hamlet*, however, the image of the prince engaged deeply in thought is singularly significant, because it expresses one of the essential terms of the play’s central dramatic conflict between reason and passion. The special significance of this case

is inseparable from what has probably been the most recurrent major problem in approaches to the soliloquy: a failure to take into account the dramatic context of the speech, a tendency to overlook or minimize the relevance of the action surrounding it—an error that may then lead to incoherent or partial analysis of meaning.

There are, of course, reasons why critics have largely overlooked the dramatic context. The fact that the passage is a soliloquy is one of them, since this convention enabled a playwright to have a character reveal thoughts and feelings without necessarily having the speech connect with the immediate action. Because Hamlet's speech is deeply reflective and philosophical, it has sometimes been accepted as a soliloquy of this kind, one dramatically detached from the continuity of the play. Wolfgang Clemen is quite properly concerned with the context when he says, "We expect a continuation of the thoughts expressed in the last soliloquy, some further development of his plans"; but Clemen finds "an apparent lack of connections between the soliloquy and what precedes and follows it. . . . Everything is different from before and, nevertheless, or perhaps precisely for this reason, we are deeply moved."<sup>2</sup> Fifty years earlier, L. L. Schücking had also failed to comprehend the dramatic context, expressing himself in terms that would be restated in various ways up to the present:

Unlike the other soliloquies, this one shows no signs of belonging to the particular scene in which it appears. . . . Although . . . this soliloquy does not really fit naturally into its context, it accords remarkably well with the general psychological attitude of the Prince.<sup>3</sup>

Implicitly or explicitly, Hamlet's "general psychological attitude" is probably the most common basis for nondramatic readings of the speech. John Dover Wilson, for example, uses Hamlet's mood in his first soliloquy to explain his mood in the "To be" speech:

He is back again where he was when we first had sight of his inner self; back in the mood of the soliloquy which begins

Oh 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.

But he is no longer thinking of his own "sullied flesh," still less of the divine command . . . and the only thing that holds his arm from

striking home with "the bare bodkin" is the thought of "what dreams may come," "the dread of something after death."<sup>4</sup>

More recently, Philip Edwards has restated this view: "He is back in the depression of the first soliloquy."<sup>5</sup> And Harold Jenkins, addressing the question of context but thinking that contextual considerations give the speech a "particularity it does not claim," has preferred to read it as a general set piece without relevance to the developing action. "Unlike Hamlet's other soliloquies this one is not concerned with his personal predicament," Jenkins asserts without considering the possible strangeness of such an exception; "yet the view of life it expresses is not an impartial or objective one . . . but just such a view as one in Hamlet's dramatic predicament might hold."<sup>6</sup> The fallacy here is that it is not possible to make the distinction Jenkins has tried to make. In a play, the "personal predicament" of a character is identical with his "dramatic predicament"; they are one and the same. Like Dover Wilson, Jenkins also stresses that the "view of life" in the speech is determined largely by Hamlet as he appeared to us in his first soliloquy: "It is the view of one who began the play with a sense of 'all the uses of this world' as 'weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable'"; unlike Wilson, however, he finds it "impossible . . . to say that Hamlet ever contemplates suicide for himself."<sup>7</sup> Since Hamlet's task of revenge comes *after* his first soliloquy and modifies his behavior and circumstances, Dover Wilson, Jenkins, Edwards, and others adopt a dubious procedure in reading the "To be" soliloquy too strongly in terms of Hamlet's psychological outlook in his first soliloquy, as though what happens to him subsequently were irrelevant.

Abetting nondramatic views of the soliloquy is the history of the text. In the First Quarto of 1603 the soliloquy and the Nunnery Scene come directly after Polonius formulates his plan to "loose" Ophelia. In the Second Quarto of 1604–5 and in the First Folio of 1623, this material appears where we now have it and keep it. The seeming dramatic irrelevance of the soliloquy makes Schücking believe that its position in the first Quarto is better.<sup>8</sup> Harry Levin also mentions the history of the text in explaining his view that the soliloquy seems "detached" from the action. "Its tone is quietly meditative," he says, "and so detached that the whole episode has been misplaced in the First Quarto, where the Nunnery Scene precedes the Fishmonger Scene. But its obvious place is the still midpoint of the play."<sup>9</sup> Neither of these critics, in speaking of the textual history, adequately considers the basic question involved



here: what dramatic view of the material, since the faulty First Quarto was pirated, seems to have guided Shakespeare's location of the soliloquy in the authorized Second Quarto?

The dramatic environment of the "To be" soliloquy is hardly irrelevant, as will be seen, and it certainly is not "still," as Levin says. The "To be" speech is preceded by Polonius's preparation to use Ophelia to sound Hamlet, by the brief report of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Claudius, and by Hamlet's agitated soliloquy ending with his plan to catch the conscience of the king. It is followed by the commotion of the Nunnery Scene and by Hamlet's enthusiastic advice to the players prior to their performance. As a crucial reflection on the developing action, the soliloquy itself is also not "still." Intense thought about matters relevant to the dramatic moment constitutes the action taking place.

If we ask what development in the play has most recently involved Hamlet when he enters the deeply reflective mood of the "To be" soliloquy, we arrive at his decision, the day before, to use *The Murder of Gonzago* to try to catch the conscience of the king. Suppose that later, in his address to the players, we found Hamlet not telling them how to "speak the speech" but explaining that instead of *The Murder of Gonzago* they are to present *The Coward Prince* or some other play they have ready. How would we explain this hypothetical reversal? We would surely point to the "To be" soliloquy and say that here we find Hamlet reacting to the dangerous project he has undertaken and discovering why people sometimes fail to act. Even though the speech does not mention particular events or individuals, there would be no question in our minds about its dramatic relevance, for the speech would seem essential to an understanding of the hypothetical cancellation. The speech would not seem detached from the developing action, and the dramatic context—the continuum of action before and after the soliloquy—would help define the vantage from which Hamlet speaks or thinks to himself. The speech would make much less sense as a suicide deliberation than as a nonsuicidal disclosure of Hamlet's state of mind and emotion in reaction to his enterprise against Claudius. The soliloquy would certainly not make sense as a suicide deliberation to the exclusion of everything else, as Harry Levin, Laurence Olivier, and others have interpreted it.

But Hamlet says "speak the speech" and does not cancel *The Murder of Gonzago*. This fact in no way changes the dramatic context or the meaning of the soliloquy. Like the hypothetical cancellation, the decision to proceed with the enterprise of "great pitch and moment" is one of two possible resolutions of the central



problem explored in the soliloquy—the problem of action, which Hamlet could not comprehend until he was actually involved in it and it had produced a crisis. Just as the hypothetical cancellation would relate to the soliloquy, so Hamlet's proceeding with the play has its own relevance to the meaning of his speech and helps form its dramatic context. The interpretation that follows will test the assumption that the “To be” soliloquy, like all of Hamlet's other soliloquies, also reveals him reacting to what has most immediately affected him—in this instance, his first intended action against Claudius. While he does not mention particular events or individuals in the “To be” speech, what he says shows that he is grappling with a particular problem that is an outgrowth of a developing event, the presentation of the mousetrap play.

Precipitated overnight by his first move against Claudius, the “To be” speech suddenly reveals Hamlet in a crisis concerning action, a crisis complicated by a fear of death or, more accurately, by “a fear of being dead,” as C. S. Lewis puts it.<sup>10</sup> (The fear, the dread is of “something *after* death,” “when we have shuffled off this mortal coil” [77; 66].) Four main currents may be identified in the emotional flow of Hamlet's crisis: (1) the conflict of making an important decision, which is a problem of acting related to (2) the way life feels to Hamlet, (3) his quasi-philosophical view of life as a chance-afflicted, losing enterprise, and (4) his ambivalent feelings toward death, which is the danger on which his problem is counterpoised. Within these currents flow the meanings in Hamlet's speech, and even before one discovers that the soliloquy is not so simple as it seems, certain salient features make a strong impression and enter into any understanding that subsequently takes shape. These are features of language expressing currents (2) and (3) and reflecting Hamlet's troubled condition most directly. There is, for example, the profusion of words connected with the feeling that life is a terrible burden: “suffer,” “troubles,” “heart-ache,” “shocks,” “calamity,” “fardels,” “weary,” “bear,” and others. And there is the language expressing the quasi-philosophical foundation for these feelings, a view of life that sees it exposed to the chaos of malicious chance happenings: “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” “the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to,” “the whips and scorns of time.” These features make a distinct impression and under their influence we try to understand more clearly not only what Hamlet is saying but especially what his statements say about him.

The soliloquy has a subtle organic structure that helps to unify it poetically and give it the effect of a set piece, an effect also in large

measure determined by the steady rhetorical growth of the passage as Hamlet finds his thoughts. Although the structure makes use of the logic-chopping features of the soliloquy, it transcends them and produces the fluidity of his stream of thought.<sup>11</sup> The beginning and end sections, comprising five lines each (55–59; 83–87), are the most subjective portions of the speech, each section touching the issue of action in its own way. The absence in these sections both of first-person pronouns and of references to particular persons or events intensifies their subjectivity by producing the authentic quality of the very deepest current of personal thought, which flows without making conscious or specific designations such as “I” or “me,” “Claudius” or “the king.” Such concrete references are subsumed within the concentrated subjectivity of Hamlet’s thought.

What the subjective intensity is crucially about seems pointed up by the profusion of infinitives in the opening ten lines: “to be,” “to suffer,” “to take arms,” “to die,” “to sleep,” “to dream,” “to be wished,” “to say.” These recurring infinitives, by projecting their grammatical essence as verbs, posit Hamlet’s sense of crisis in the “To be or not to be” question, sustain the indeterminate meaning of its “or” proposition, and contribute to the larger rhetorical thrust that enables the “question” at the beginning of the soliloquy to make contact with the issue of action at the end. Shakespeare’s language in the subjective framing sections is perfectly right to help express the acuteness of Hamlet’s dilemma—a dramatically relevant crisis. Coincidentally, the language has the kind of subjective ambiguity that prevents Claudius and Polonius from being sure they understand what they overhear—another dramatically relevant matter, if it is assumed (it need not be) that they hear what Hamlet says.<sup>12</sup>

Between the beginning and end sections, Hamlet’s statements rise above strictly personal application, forming a kind of arch whose apogee is the impersonally phrased generalization beginning, “For who would bear the whips and scorns of time” (69). Although the reflections in the first part of the soliloquy derive specifically from Hamlet’s immediate concerns, when he introduces the pronouns “we” and “us” into his considerations, his statements take on a quality of inclusive generalization, a quality that then moves toward the “For who would bear” question which starts the second part of the soliloquy. In this second part, the phrase and idea—“the whips and scorns of time”—parallel the phrasing and idea of “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” in the opening lines. The parallelism defines the following relationship between the two parts: rather than pursue an action that

could lead to his death Hamlet may be willing to suffer the outrages of fortune for the same reason that people bear the injuries time brings rather than escape through self-inflicted death. Hamlet's generalization, signaled clearly by "For who would bear" (69) and cast in the impersonal third person, is an example growing out of the idea preceding it. The example (including its "bare bodkin") does not apply directly to Hamlet himself, except perhaps coincidentally in a point or two of the long enumeration that he makes.

The second example, parallel to the first, also begins with an impersonal "Who would . . . bear" question. It leads into an inclusive generalization, with the use again of "us" and "we." The return to Hamlet's personal concerns, which include "the dread of something after death" and how this "puzzles the will" (77, 79), is completed in the transition from the conclusion of the example, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all" (82) to the emphasized parallel recapitulation, "And thus the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" (83-84). Here, at the end of the speech, the concluding point about the abandonment of action returns to the issue of acting or not acting that began Hamlet's deliberation after the opening line.

Special emphasis needs to be given to the important return Hamlet makes at the end of the speech to an acute awareness of his own situation. The general example has given rise to the concluding point, but the purpose of the parallel recapitulation and amplification of the point is not to keep the example in focus but to shift the focus from the example to Hamlet's predicament. This turn in the speech, signaled strongly by "And thus," is carried forward by the shift from "conscience" at the level of the example to "thought" at the level of Hamlet's situation and is climaxed by the word that tells what Hamlet's dilemma is all about—"action." Between the beginning and end sections, the body of the soliloquy grows out of the thought about acting established at the beginning. But, as will be clarified later, the terms of consideration change. Whereas in the opening section the issue was to determine which course was "nobler," in the closing section the original comparative notion has been displaced. As a result of the thought he is engaged in, Hamlet abandons his original binary consideration and becomes preoccupied only with why people fail to act.

Hence "thought" in the conclusion does not merely parallel "conscience" but refers to all the thought activity that has occurred from the beginning. Indeed, there are phrases that express the very idea of thought occurring: "must give us pause" (must



make us stop and think) and “there’s the respect” (“respect” in the sense of a consideration, which is thought, or of a viewpoint, which implies it). Because “thought” embraces everything in the passage that develops from the opening line, it separates itself from “conscience,” which pertains mainly to the example that is only a portion of all the unfolding thought. The parallelism between “conscience” and “thought” defines separateness as part of their relationship. The full significance of thought as action—and about action—determines the essential dramatic mode of the speech.

The opening line of the soliloquy cannot be understood until one determines the issues that come within its scope. The sharp duality of “To be or not to be” leads immediately into a parallel duality and then, through implications and associations, other matters proliferate in Hamlet’s mind in a quasi-logical progression. Hence the whole soliloquy is suspended from the enigmatic opening line, and since Hamlet himself seems to discover his way step by step through his discourse rather than to traverse an intellectually or emotionally charted region, at the end of his speech more meaning has accrued in his key question than was there when he started out. Because the two statements parallel each other through the use of infinitives in binary “or” constructions, “To be or not to be” seems rhetorically intended as an abstraction of the supposedly concrete notion that follows. But one finds that the consideration

Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing, end them?

(56–59)

is also abstract to us because of its concentration of figurative language and because only one of the terms of Hamlet’s dilemma is specified concretely—“to suffer.” Furthermore, the subjective abstractness of “To be or not to be” is sustained and intensified by the indeterminate phrasal connection of “in the mind,” which is suspended in grammatical bivalence between “nobler” and “to suffer.” But to Hamlet, who is experiencing the dilemma and who employs the figurative expression and makes the parallelism, the whole “Whether ’tis nobler” consideration is apparently concrete because it brings the particular notion “To die” into his mind. To Hamlet, “to take arms,” which expresses figuratively a variety of



notions of “acting against” (“to fight,” “to oppose,” “to assault,” “to employ force,” “to use one’s arms,” as in swimming against “a sea of troubles”)—to Hamlet, “to take arms” could readily be a comprehensive metaphor for actions against Claudius, starting with the dangerous investigation he is about to conduct. This meaning of “to take arms” is the one most relevant to Hamlet in dramatic terms and it brings “to die” to his mind. At this point in the speech, whatever clarification the parallel duality of the “whether ’tis nobler” section has begun to bring to “To be or not to be” is complicated by the ensuing relevance of “To die,” and in this manner the opening line receives simultaneously a clarification and a complication of meaning.<sup>13</sup>

Because the whole “Whether ’tis nobler” consideration is not a simple one-to-one particularization of “To be or not to be,” as seems rhetorically suggested by the parallel binary relationship, it constitutes a major crux in the soliloquy. The critical problem is to clarify the “Whether ’tis nobler” statement with a minimum of exterior (albeit cogent) supposition and a maximum of dramatically interior explanation. Since the statement seems to have definite meaning for Hamlet, the ultimate task is to arrive at the particulars that he has in mind, if this is possible. The problem involved here has been well described by Samuel Johnson in his interpretation of the speech:

This celebrated soliloquy . . . bursting from a man distracted with contrariety of desires, and overwhelmed with the magnitude of his own purposes, is connected rather in the speaker’s mind, than on his tongue.<sup>14</sup>

Although Johnson has described the problem well and has a sense of the dramatic relevance of the passage, his own interpretation is troubled by a faulty method: he projects himself into Hamlet’s mind in an attempt to trace the movement and fill in the unexpressed connections of his thoughts. Hamlet, Johnson says,

meditates on his situation in this manner: *Before I can form any rational scheme of action under this pressure of distress*, it is necessary to decide, whether, *after our present state*, we are to be or not to be. That is the question, which, as it shall be answered, will determine, *whether ’tis nobler*, and more suitable to the dignity of reason, *to suffer the outrages of fortune patiently*, or to take arms against *them*, and by opposing end them, *though perhaps with the loss of life*.<sup>15</sup>

By wedging “after our present state” into his own “whether” construction, and by harnessing “whether” and “we are” onto

Hamlet's opening words, Johnson has seriously distorted Hamlet's expression and has diverted the reader away from what Hamlet actually says to Johnson's statements utilizing some of Hamlet's words and adding others. What is faulty in Johnson's method is that he attempts to fill in meaning rather than to arrive at it through an analysis of how the words work.

L. C. Knights makes a similar error by adopting Johnson's method. Knights believes that Johnson not only defined the problem correctly but also used the right procedure in trying to solve it. But he does not accept Johnson's interpretation and attempts to fill in differently:

Now I feel sure that Johnson is right in implicitly rejecting the idea of suicide at this point, and I think that the idea of immortality is indeed very close to the forefront of Hamlet's consciousness. But there is that in Johnson's phrasing which partially obscures the full implications of the crucial phrase. The primary thought is not whether 'after our present state' we are to be or not to be; it is the question of present being.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of analysing the language and structure of the passage to formulate the connections of thoughts in Hamlet's mind, both Johnson and Knights have tried instead to imagine what the connections might be. In adopting this method, both critics make the initial error of assuming that the opening line necessarily has a single fixed meaning that can be ascribed to it from the outset.

What both critics have failed to realize sufficiently is that the connections in Hamlet's mind are determined by all the implications of his expression in the "Whether 'tis nobler" consideration, implications that complicate the central issue confronting him: to act ("take arms") or not to act ("suffer"). In his present experience of life he is not sure which course is "nobler." He sees life fatalistically exposed to the outrages of hostile fortune, and within this tragic view of life he entertains the idea of the nobility of suffering. If to "take arms" against them would end the troubles bestowed by fortune, it would unquestionably be nobler to eliminate evil than to endure it. But Hamlet feels that he has a "sea of troubles," a figure that expresses his sense of the multitude and overwhelming magnitude of his problems. Who can hope to be victorious against the sea? Hence "by opposing end them" is clarified by "To die" and expresses Hamlet's sense of the futility of effective opposition and the probability of death as a result of taking arms. "To die" is the grim implication of acting, but his troubles feel so oppressive to him that he associates "To die" with

"to sleep" and would welcome such a tranquil release from the afflictions of life—"tis a consummation / Devoutly to be wished" (62–63). But because his death, which seems almost inevitable to him if he acts, would be another triumph for outrageous fortune, and because his death would not end the present evils, it may be nobler to suffer passively in defiance of outrageous fortune than to die in active but futile defiance.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, death itself may bring even greater woes. Whether Hamlet has accurately assessed his situation and the predicament of life is beside the point, since his feelings are real to him. His acute sense of danger and the great risk of death are certainly objective enough, for by opposing Claudius, the murderer who has inundated his life with troubles, Hamlet may well end those particular troubles by losing his life. As his thoughts progress in the soliloquy, the idea of the nobility of suffering is compromised (as, indeed, the idea of the nobility of dying in action is also compromised) by his discovery that thought—the very process of thought he is engaged in—may be a symptom of fear.

There is sufficient basis now to clarify the opening line of the soliloquy. The analysis up to this point has shown that thematically and rhetorically the structure of the speech is guided by Hamlet's dilemma concerning the problem of action. The examination of the opening section has shown that the meaning of "To be or not to be" is governed most immediately by the "Whether 'tis nobler" consideration and the "To die" ramification. The meanings and implications of the "Whether 'tis nobler" consideration have been seen as facets of the central question confronting Hamlet: to act or not to act, to oppose Claudius or to suffer. The meaning of "To be or not to be" is thus determined by the implications of the action against Claudius, an action that is just developing and that has yet to be fully executed. The implications may be seen to crystallize into questions that stratify "To be or not to be" with meaning: Is the play to be or not to be?—to act or not to act. Is Claudius to be or not to be?—can evil, which fortune apparently favors, possibly be conquered? Am I to be or not to be?—shall I choose to live and suffer or shall I choose probable death by going ahead with this business? In other words, the opening line is a highly subjective abstraction of the major implications Hamlet senses and finds in the dilemma of whether or not to proceed with the action conceived the previous day. It is less important to try to specify all the possible stratifications than to see how the statement functions ("in the mind" of Hamlet) as a complex symbolic abstraction.<sup>18</sup> It is very important, however, to point out that the one meaning



which cannot be included is the idea of suicide. "Take arms" and "opposing" cannot mean to act against Claudius if they are taken to mean to act against life by committing suicide; both are not "somehow included," as G. Wilson Knight thinks is possible (see citation in the Introduction). An examination of the soliloquy as a suicide deliberation will be helpful in dispelling that mistaken view and in clarifying some of the points of the present interpretation.<sup>19</sup>

Interpretations of the passage as a deliberation or meditation upon suicide turn out to be deficient in dramatic relevance and faulty in explaining Hamlet's behavior. Those who make such interpretations usually do not try to explain why Hamlet has suddenly forgotten about or lost interest in his action against Claudius, or why he has overnight had an abrupt relapse into the extremely morbid condition of reflecting on suicide, a state of mind that quickly disappears (even more inexplicably than it is thought to appear) in the Nunnery Scene, in Hamlet's lively advice to the players, and in the Mousetrap Scene. Such behavior may be faithful to the extreme emotional fluctuations of disturbed people, but in the structure of *Hamlet* it is dramatically incoherent and incongruent.

In view of Hamlet's relatively good spirits the day before and his resolve to proceed to catch the conscience of the king, there is no reason to accept the arbitrary notion of an abrupt relapse as a basis for suicide interpretations of his speech. Since it is a very dangerous action that Hamlet has undertaken, in a corrupt world where evil seems to triumph and where he finds no place to seek justice, it makes more dramatic sense to see him beset by a crisis and despair concerning the efficacy of action. Suicide interpretations close the lines to meanings that are dramatically more pertinent and more legitimate because unforced. These interpretations have three general characteristics: (1) an oversimplified view of the speech as a whole and a reduction of the opening line to mean "To live or not to live"—shall I not kill myself or shall I? (2) a failure to see that the "For who" section develops as a generalization and is not a personal suicidal reflection; and (3) a basic misunderstanding of the intense weariness of life that Hamlet expresses in his speech.<sup>20</sup>

Hamlet's life-weariness, which underlies his problem of acting, materializes into a distinct death-wish in conjunction with his feeling that to pursue his investigation of Claudius probably means "To die." The section of the soliloquy from "To die, to sleep" until the repetition of these words (59–63) comprises the expression of



the wish, which arises from the "To die" implication of acting. It seems awkward and strained to read "to take arms against a sea of troubles" (58) as an allusion to suicide rather than as a notion of futile opposition; nor does such a reading seem stylistically consistent with the more lyrical language Hamlet uses to articulate his death-wish—phrases such as, "by a sleep to say we end / The heart-ache" and "a consummation / Devoutly to be wished" (60–63). It is significant that Hamlet expresses his death-wish by the gentle term "sleep" as an escape from his problems, a notion not unlike the wish to "resolve into a dew" expressed in his first soliloquy.

Here, as in the first soliloquy, it is necessary to distinguish between a death-wish, which is essentially a passive despair, and the active contemplation of suicide, which requires a direct assault on one's life. The two may resemble each other in the painful feeling each involves, but for the fullest and dramatically most pertinent understanding of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy it is extremely important to distinguish between a death-wish as a limited expression within the speech and the contemplation of suicide as its central concern. As a yearning for relief from a painful predicament, the one fits coherently into place in the total structure of the speech; the other turns reductive generality into a steamroller that crushes poetry, dramatic relevance, and the finest patterns of thought, feeling, and language. If one fails to consider the total structure of the soliloquy as a guide to its meaning, one encounters problems like those besetting G. Wilson Knight's interpretation. On the one hand he says that "the central thought is suicide,"<sup>21</sup> and on the other he says of the last three lines of the speech that "no one can conceivably suppose that suicide is here intended."<sup>22</sup> Surely one would expect the central concern to have something to do with the strong climactic ending of the speech.

The awkwardness of trying to understand these concluding lines in the context of a meditation on suicide is not entirely without significance, for this awkwardness forces the shift of the concluding point from the level of the general example, which has to do with suicide, to the level of Hamlet's specific situation, which does not. Harley Granville-Barker is aware of the pattern of the subjective movement in the last five lines (83–87), for he notes, "Only towards the end of the soliloquy, does its thought turn a point or so inward—to regain touch with the main trend of the action."<sup>23</sup> While it would be very awkward to conceive of suicide as a developing enterprise that has a moving current and fulfills ultimate ends of "great pitch and moment," such language ex-



that includes "conscience" (as reflection) looking back to "in the mind to suffer" and "resolution," in the next line, relating to the earlier "take arms." Just as "conscience" leads us to "bear those ills we have," so "the pale cast of thought" leads away from "enterprises of great pitch and moment." These two elements ("bear" / "enterprise") are precisely coordinate with the alternatives of his original consideration: "to suffer" or "to take arms". However, in the course of his intellectual excursion to answer the question he poses at the outset, there is a meaningful shift or alteration away from the terms of the question he starts out with. He abandons his original consideration that accepts "to suffer" (a Christian virtue) as one of two noble courses open to him. John Middleton Murry perceived this shift as an "evasion":

I cannot resist the thought that Hamlet's evasion of the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer . . . or to take arms? was deliberate on Shakespeare's part. By which I mean that Shakespeare meant the question to come before Hamlet's mind, and meant that his mind should slide away from it.<sup>24</sup>

What Middleton Murry failed to realize is that, although the terms of consideration change, Hamlet has pursued his central concern with action to the end in his own discursive way to arrive at a definite, though implicit, conclusion. He started out in the opening section to determine what the "nobler" mode of conduct would be, but during the course of his considerations a compelling new factor entered his awareness and recast the central question. That new factor was the perception by Hamlet of the kind of significance that thought itself might have—the very thought in which he was engaged. In the closing section this new factor enables Hamlet to arrive at an answer to the most immediate dramatic issue of action troubling him: whether or not to proceed with the dangerous dramatization of Claudius's crime. The answer he arrives at is clear: not to act is cowardly.

What Hamlet may have been evading, however, at the beginning of the "To be" soliloquy is a forthright recognition of his own fear of acting—an issue separate from and perhaps initially obscured by his philosophical considerations regarding the futility of action in an unjust world dominated by outrageous fortune. By the time he discovers that thought may be a symptom of fear, he has seen more deeply into the mystery of human personality and behavior.<sup>25</sup> For the mystery of human personality is inextricably related to the mystery of the meaning of human behavior, which is



governed by—and points to—the deepest currents of personality, as his mother's behavior has already revealed to him. This is why, in conjunction with the heroic image of man thinking projected by the "To be" speech, the problem of action that Hamlet explores in it registers so profoundly as a fundamental confrontation of the mystery of personality—and of life—which seeks to have the mystery relieved and meaning affirmed by significant action. Suicide is the negation of the significance of action as a possible resolution of the sometimes very painful mystery, which threatens to become overwhelming. Hamlet's soliloquy shows him not contemplating suicide, but wrestling with the painful complexities of his experience of life and trying to determine the course of action that will be the most noble resolution of those complexities, which cumulatively are almost too much for him.

In the course of his thoughts he gains insight into how a terrible dilemma "puzzles the will"—renders us unable to exercise will actively and decisively—"And makes us rather bear those ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of" (80–81). Such insight into how a passive, unwilled endurance may result from an acute dilemma enables him to recognize that thinking may be fear in disguise. Like a double mirror, "Puzzles the will" reflects back to the questions puzzling Hamlet when he starts his deliberations and reflects forward to the approaching concluding point of the soliloquy. In its brilliant double reflection the phrase helps to integrate the structure. Its special effect is rhetorically determined because the phrase ends a periodic construction. When "puzzles the will" finally comes in toward the end of the generalization, its distinct periodic quality sets the phrase off and brings emphatic attention to its own content, which clearly transcends the generalization alone and readily applies to Hamlet as well. In its reflection forward, the phrase anticipates the approaching turn toward the concluding point, with the recapitulation that will shift over almost completely to Hamlet's situation. There is surely no doubt that Hamlet's dilemma puzzles his will and the soliloquy as a whole reflects that condition in him as he thinks his problem through to a resolution. One can see psycholinguistic determinism in Hamlet's use of this phrase (and others) without putting a "bare bodkin" in his hands or against his breast.<sup>26</sup>

Ironically, Hamlet's important insight about thought as a symptom of fear enables him to solve his immediate crisis by reviving the resolution to act that had spontaneously emerged the previous day. Hence in the Nunnery Scene Hamlet warns, "Those that are



married already (all but one), shall live," and Claudius, who is listening, detects "some danger" (148, 176). And when Hamlet gives instructions to the players, there is a tone of decisive resolve in his telling them: "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue" (3.2.1–2). In conceiving and proceeding with his planned action, he achieves an essentially rational resolution of a major personal crisis, even though it is a temporary balance because he harbors a revenge intention as his next step if he obtains the results he expects from the Mousetrap scheme. He never again faces a similar crisis, largely because after the Play Scene Hamlet the revenger, freshly incited, is beyond the control of dispassionate rationality.

The tone of the "To be" soliloquy is rational, dispassionate, contemplative. The speech stands in stark contrast to the frantic quality of the "O all you hosts of heaven" soliloquy, the uncontrolled frenzy of the first part of the "rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy, and the subjugation of rationality to passion in Hamlet's subsequent soliloquies. The "To be" speech is distinct in being cast in an intensely intellectual mode of discourse, resembling an academic exercise, in which Hamlet transposes his immediate concerns into abstract and general considerations. It is to be noted that, despite his apparently dispassionate calm, his mind is already tainted by the insidious revenger's passion. That Hamlet habitually engages in and values thought but repeatedly denigrates it may be symptomatic of an ineradicable "taint." The same may be said of his implicit conclusion that thought itself, as an inhibitor of action, is fundamentally a manifestation of cowardice. While Hamlet is right in his insight that thought may be a symptom of fear and may interfere with or prevent action, one questions the all-inclusive nature of his generalization that conscience makes cowards of us all. And one also questions the implication that somehow it might be better to act without thinking than not to act—a notion his precipitate killing of Polonius refutes. Thus, his unqualified conclusion that not to act is cowardly—implying that Christian patience and suffering are ignoble—is a symptom of the pagan revenger's attitude to which his mind may have become subservient, even in its finest moment.

## 4

### Discourse of Passion

If the “To be or not to be” soliloquy displays a mind intensely engaged in orderly thought and reflection, a mind in control of itself, Ophelia’s soliloquy only sixty-two lines later (3.1.150–60) gives sustained expression to the idea of “a noble mind . . . o’erthrown” (150), out of control in the total disorder of madness—“Blasted with ecstasy” (160), in Ophelia’s words. The image of the deranged mind described in Ophelia’s soliloquy has congruences with Hamlet’s two soliloquies preceding the “To be” speech but it stands in complete contrast to the image of the reasoning and meditative mind projected from the “To be” speech itself. The contrast points to and is part of the play’s central concern with reason and the mind in various ways, especially the relation of reason to passion, or reason to madness, and of passion, reason, and madness to murder, lust, and revenge—themes that inform most of the soliloquies and arise from and give shape to much of the play’s action.

In addition to its immediate dramatic significance in relation to Ophelia, the soliloquy also figures meaningfully in the dramatic rationale of the soliloquies. Because it is virtually juxtaposed with the attractive stage picture of Hamlet quite sanely engaged in careful thought in the “To be” soliloquy, Ophelia’s speech, with its image of the mind deranged, helps bring into focus the operating tragic idea of the play: what happens to the mind of Hamlet the revenger. Ophelia’s concluding cry of despair is the key to appreciating the double dramatic function of the speech in its context. That piercing cry—“O, woe is me / T’ have seen what I have seen, see what I see” (160–61)—requires one to comprehend imaginatively *exactly* what Ophelia is talking about: the *mind* as the basis of Hamlet’s having been so splendidly human.

Ophelia’s description of Hamlet is often referred to for the idealized cameo portrait it gives of the prince before the onset of his “heart-ache” and “shocks,” but what usually goes unnoticed is the way Shakespeare, defining and stressing the basis of Hamlet’s

tragedy, has framed the description between the idea of “a noble mind” in the opening line (150) and “noble and most sovereign reason” toward the end of the speech (157). He concludes the soliloquy by casting Ophelia’s cry in terms of her acute consciousness of Hamlet’s mind—how she has seen Hamlet functioning with a sound mind in previous times and how she sees the condition of his mind now. Orienting us to the idea of “a noble mind . . . o’erthrown,” Shakespeare could not have directed us more emphatically to the importance of thinking specifically about Hamlet’s *mind* and what is happening to it than by imaging it first as it functions with godlike reason in the “To be” soliloquy, where Hamlet’s “scholar’s” identity is evoked, and then imaging it in the totally shattered condition Ophelia describes.

In addition to the contrasting images of Hamlet’s mind rendered by two soliloquies in close dramatic sequence, there is, of course, the contrast that is self-contained in Ophelia’s alone, the contrast that is so excruciating to her. She has seen and appreciated an epitome of human beauty in the “unmatch’d form” (3.1.159) of Hamlet; indeed, he is “the mould of form” (153), to note the repetition of “form” as an indication of Shakespeare’s interest in rendering the whole human image in her short speech. And it was his “noble mind” that vitalized this Renaissance prince as courtier, soldier, scholar (and lover); the themes of mind and reason take on particular significance in Ophelia’s recognition of Hamlet the “scholar,” a person whose primary occupation is making use of the intellect. Now, reacting to his turbulent and violent behavior and accepting her father’s view that he is mad, she is devastated by what she sees as a tragic change that has taken place in his mind. The contrast Ophelia bewails in personal terms is parallel to the broader dramatic contrast between the image of the orderly and dispassionate mind seen in the “To be” speech and the image of the mind dominated by passion to be seen in Hamlet’s subsequent soliloquies. The speech thus provides a bridging idea that foreshadows, in Hamlet’s case, the state of rationality overthrown, just as it foreshadows with mordant irony Ophelia’s own eventual madness.

Ophelia’s soliloquy is her shaken reaction to Hamlet’s ferocious verbal assault on her that she unwittingly brought on herself but which she seems incapable of comprehending. Just as her original obedience to Polonius (to stop keeping company with Hamlet) apparently gave Hamlet the idea of how he could use that situation to create a misleading explanation for the antic disposition he



decided to put on, once again her obedience to Polonius produces a frightful encounter with the prince. The parallel is worth noting because, in the larger dramatic context, the second episode seems to shed light on the first, and vice versa; in the time scheme of the play they occur on successive days. According to Ophelia's report, Hamlet had come to her the day before with his clothing in disarray and had behaved crazily, but without saying a word or abusing her in any way. Understandably she was "affrighted" (2.1.72), but one is inclined to be amused by her report (in the way one is amused by Romeo's posturing as an unhappy lover) because one knows that Polonius's theory of love-madness in no way accounts for Hamlet's conduct. His behavior, as she describes it, has exquisite poignancy because it uses the guise of unhappiness in love (which, ironically, is probably genuine) to obscure much grimmer matters, those grim matters which figure in the variables of Ophelia's second encounter with Hamlet's antic disposition.

Hamlet has been sent for by Claudius and Polonius (this important fact, stated in 3.1.30, is often forgotten), but instead of finding them at the appointed place he finds Ophelia there in a posture of devotion, a dramatic image of false piety that will recur when he comes upon Claudius kneeling in prayer. With abrupt deliberateness, Ophelia begins to make explanations of why she is returning some gifts to Hamlet, acting as though he were responsible for their breakup by telling him that "to the noble mind / Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind" (3.1.99–100). Soon suspecting that those who have sent for him are probably watching and listening unseen (he is indeed "Th' observed of all observers" [154]), Hamlet turns on Ophelia with disgust and unleashes pent-up anger in a great rage meant to look and sound like madness, though Claudius will not be convinced. Heaping on her his harsh view of womankind, he harangues the bewildered girl with an authentic but perhaps deliberately exaggerated vehemence that leaves her emotionally shattered from the verbal onslaught.

It is Hamlet's apparent madness that Ophelia bewails in her soliloquy, in language that has unintended glints of irony in several places. Since she had demurely ascribed a "noble mind" to herself, yet will later go insane, in retrospect there is irony in the recurrence of the phrase when she expresses her belief that Hamlet's "noble mind" is the mind "o'erthrown" (150); for her ignoble role in the Nunnery Scene produces a horrific experience that may be seen dramatically (rather than clinically) as a trauma contributing to her subsequent madness. The possibly fragile condition of Ophelia's mind is suggested by the stylistic inappropriateness of



the elaborate trope she attempts in language that is not fully in control and smacks of the artificiality of the court. Her parallel series, "courtier's soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword" (151), not only sounds strained and contrived as an utterance of what she must really feel and need to express at that moment; it also reveals some confusion because the terms, as arranged in two parallel series, cannot be correlated with much meaning, unless one reverses the word order of "soldier's, scholar's" or changes the position of "sword" to make it coordinate with "soldier's." Her emotional intensity may very well account for the confusion (if one rules out a compositor's error) but it does not account for an artificial style that calls as much attention to itself as to what is being said. Her inappropriate, but sustained, use of a courtly style somehow suggests that she is a weak, innocent victim of the court's corruption.

In speaking of "Th' expectation and rose of the fair state" (152), Ophelia may possibly be alluding to Hamlet's popularity with the people of Denmark or to Claudius's announcement (in his "fair" state) that Hamlet is "the most immediate to our throne" (1.2.109). But her words seem also to echo Laertes's language in explaining why Ophelia cannot expect to have an enduring or serious relationship with Hamlet. The echo is a composite of Laertes's stilted court language, his flower references, and the thrust of his argument in a statement like "on his choice depends / The safety and health of this whole state" (1.3.20–21), with "safety and health" providing an instance of their father's prolix phrasing, rampant too in Ophelia's own speech in this crisis. Even when she describes Hamlet most admiringly, as when she calls him "The glass of fashion and the mould of form" (153), Ophelia's phrasing recalls Polonius's penchant for binary verbosity (for example, "hear and see the matter," "origin and commencement of his grief" [3.1.23, 177]), as do many of her other phrases: "deject and wretched," "noble and most sovereign reason," "bells jangled . . . and harsh," "form and stature."

Ophelia's style of expression is significant in the dramatic context because here, as one watches her reaction to Hamlet's extremely brutal treatment of her, a major function of the speech is to reveal Ophelia in her most intensely personal idiom as a character. In her soliloquy, however, rather than displaying any adequate voice of selfhood, Ophelia speaks with her brother's and particularly her father's voice in a court style that cannot convey the real depth of her distress. Her complete dependence on these supports, as revealed by her abject obedience to Polonius, helps

one understand why she should seek escape from pain in madness when she loses Polonius and is stranded in Claudius's world, significantly at a time when Laertes is away and Hamlet has been shipped to England. "I do not know, my lord, what I should think" (1.3.104) epitomizes her pathetically innocent personality. Unable to exercise any will of her own, she is a victim of the will of others. Her total domination by men defines her inability to achieve selfhood as a woman.

In saying that she "suck'd the honey of his music vows" (156), Ophelia reveals her deepest residual wish to find happiness in love with Hamlet, even though she does not have the resources of personality to oppose the will of her father and to seek means to obtain what she wants. Hence her madness later is also a complex expression of love for Hamlet; it is a going toward him in madness in a hopeless gesture of atonement for betraying him, thus fulfilling poetically and ironically Polonius's theory of love-madness. Ophelia's concluding wail in the soliloquy, with its haunting, hysterical repetitions of "see"—"O woe is me / t' have seen what I have seen, see what I see!" (160–51)—probably refers not only to the contrasting images of his mind that she sees but also to her perceptions of Hamlet and herself in the happy, hopeful past as contrasted with the tragic, hopeless present. But the distraught cry also suggests an acute sense of personal vulnerability consistent with her moving and profound utterance in madness: "Lord, we know what we are but know not what we may be" (4.5.43–44). In this connection, her music metaphors in the soliloquy can be seen as ironic and poetic foreshadowings of the snatches of songs Ophelia will sing in her madness, songs that will allude, in the artistic design of her derangement, to death, bereavement, and burial (the loss of her father); a "true-love" as pilgrim or traveler (Hamlet, one assumes); and the betrayal of a girl by a lover (recalling the warnings Ophelia received from Laertes and Polonius).

Finally, the immediate dramatic context of the soliloquy includes the total insensitivity of Polonius and Claudius to Ophelia's ordeal, which now enables Claudius to make the observation that "what he [Hamlet] spake, though it lacked form a little, / Was not like madness (3.1.164–65). Since we are in a position to know that Claudius's view of Hamlet is much closer to the truth than Ophelia's, we may wonder if Ophelia's belief that Hamlet is mad arises not only from Polonius's diagnosis but also from a possible need to avoid seeing how her disingenuous conduct has provoked Hamlet's verbal attack on her, an attack that must have just

destroyed any lingering hope she may have had of restoring her former relationship with him. Because her compliant conduct has been forced on her by the court, through the agency of Polonius, she may be seen at this early point in the play as the first—and the most innocent—victim of Claudius's Denmark, caught in the hidden vortex of his defensive maneuvers.

More generally, the dramatic conjunction of Hamlet's rationality in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, his wild behavior in the Nunnery Scene, Ophelia's distraught reaction to it in her soliloquy, and Claudius's opinion of Hamlet's behavior (a total of only 133 lines) bears on the enduring question of Hamlet's mental condition and on the larger significance of madness and pretense in the play. For if Hamlet's putting on an "antic disposition" is, among other things, a commentary on the supposedly sane world of Claudius's court, then Ophelia's mental breakdown, when it comes, underscores madness as a refuge from that world, which has forced Hamlet to appear mad to her to begin with. Furthermore, if Hamlet is sane in pretending to be mad, then conversely there may be a kind of madness in the way the court assumes that it is sane, starting with Claudius's "mirth in funeral . . . and dirge in marriage" (1.2.12) and his and Gertrude's efforts to coax Hamlet from the experience of a grief that should normally also be theirs but is not, although through their pious rationalizations they pretend that it is. Literally enthroned on pretense is the king, who pretends to have legitimacy in his role. It might be noted that Hamlet's decision to put on an "antic disposition" coincides with his commitment to revenge, so that on one level the idea of madness is from the outset associated with that particular passion. Indeed, when Hamlet thrusts his sword into the arras in an outburst of passion, he seems to exaggerate the "antic disposition" to cover his act of vengeance, exclaiming, "How now? A rat? (3.4.23). If, however, Shakespeare is in this instance using the idea of madness to characterize this wild act of passion, one also finds that Hamlet's pretending to be mad is indistinguishable from what seems to be the impulsive real madness of his act—his vengeful thrust, which releases the increasing and suddenly uncontrollable pressure of his pent-up rage.

Dramatically, the theme of Ophelia's soliloquy stands as a prelude to the renewal of Hamlet's self-destructive obsession with revenge after the basically rational "mousetrap" play provides him with the fact of Claudius's guilt, verifying the Ghost's report. Ophelia's assessment—that Hamlet's noble mind is "o'erthrown"—will ironically prove to be correct, as Hamlet's mind becomes



subservient to the revenge passion. With its music metaphors, her soliloquy is also a prelude to the destruction of Ophelia's own mind by the forces of madness that fragment it pathetically into bits of song.

The next soliloquy in *Hamlet*, Lucianus's speech in the play-within-the-play (3.2.55–60), is one that has been overlooked even more often than Hamlet's "My father's spirit—in arms!" speech, after he learns about the Ghost. It has probably not been recognized as a soliloquy because the court audience is on stage but the dramaturgy of *The Murder of Gonzago* and the larger theatrical context readily clarify the essential nature of the speech. For the court audience has the same relation to the "mousetrap" play that the theater audience has to Shakespeare's play; indeed, the stylized features of *The Murder of Gonzago*, with its dumb show and highly mannered language, function to set it off sharply as a play that is separate from the court audience. Within that play, the content of Lucianus's speech defines the character's sense of being unheard and unseen, in contrast to the preceding conversation between the Player King and the Player Queen; and what he says may even be regarded as his private thoughts spoken aloud solely for the audience to hear, in keeping with a convention of soliloquies in Elizabethan drama. In the context of *Hamlet*, with its system of soliloquies as an artistic feature in the structure of the action, both Lucianus and his soliloquy have significance in terms of two important themes in the play.

To begin with, Lucianus, like Pyrrhus, functions dramatically as a double analogue for both Claudius and Hamlet, augmenting the dramatic function of this major binary relationship in the play. From Hamlet's perspective, the crime of Lucianus is analogous to that of Claudius, who is taunted by Hamlet to see his own crime reflected in the murder of Gonzago: "A poisons him i' th' garden for his estate" (3.2.255). From its perspective, however, the court audience, witnessing Hamlet's strange and aggressive conduct vis-à-vis the king, could construe Hamlet's special interest in Lucianus's behavior as a reflection of potential or incipient violence in the prince, especially after he has made a point of explaining: "This is one Lucianus, nephew to the king" (3.2.239). This nephew-uncle relationship cannot have been lost on Claudius, who would see in the action of Lucianus not only the image of his own crime but also Hamlet's knowledge of it and his vengeful intention.

Secondly, the structure of Lucianus's soliloquy—and of course



the structure of his thought in it—has a meaningful parallel to the rhetorical structure of Claudius's second soliloquy ("And England, if my love thou hold'st at aught—"). To be sure, the idioms of the two speakers are quite different, facilitating different levels of theatrical illusion (or reality) for the on-stage and off-stage audiences, but their basic rhetorical styles and the motivations governing them are the same in the two speeches. Indeed, with their similar congestion of concerns set forth as prefatory elements, the two soliloquies are essentially versions of each other's structure for in Lucianus's speech as in Claudius's the prevailing organization is a convoluted periodic sentence with laminations of qualifiers and explanations building toward an emphatic expression of the speaker's will. Despite strained syntax in the artificial style of some of the phrasing, the speaker in each soliloquy is preoccupied with having his homicidal will fulfilled. In Lucianus's speech, this is seen in the intensely posed logic linking the matters he outlines elaborately in preparation for stating—in the last line—the point of what he wants and expects "immediately":

Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing,  
 Confederate season, else no creature seeing,  
 Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,  
 With Hecat's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,  
 Thy natural magic and dire property  
 On wholesome life usurps immediately.

*Pours the poison in his ears*

(3.2.255–60)

Editors vary in their choice of "usurps" or "usurp," the former found in Q2 (and Q1), the latter in F, but this does not affect the periodic structure of the sentence. In the full dramatic design of *Hamlet* the significance of this periodic sentence as an expression of will arises from its relation to the Player King's affirmation of providential governance in his observation that "wills and fates . . . contrary run" and that "our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own" (3.2.211–13). While we never learn what ultimately happens to Lucianus, the action of *Hamlet* is very much concerned with what ultimately happens to his analogues—and especially with *how* it happens to them, through the operation of a providential process. These matters will be fully considered in discussing the subsequent soliloquies of Hamlet and Claudius and the overall structure of the play.

Finally, one need do little more than notice that even though Lucianus's short speech is exaggeratedly sinister in tone, burlesquing the style of a stage murderer, many words in it have considerable resonance in the poetics of the play's language, including the soliloquies: "black," "rank," "weeds," "property," "life," "infected," and others. The Ghost, for example, had described the poison's effect on "wholesome blood" (1.5.70). Does the abundance of words with such strong emotional valence for Hamlet suggest that perhaps he wrote the lines containing them? One might also appreciate that when the verb finally comes into Lucianus's periodic sentence and triggers meaning, it comes with a highly charged double sense, referring not only to a usurpation of life but also—and unavoidably because it is a forceful political term—to a usurpation of the crown. In generating such a strong sense that it has more than one meaning, "usurps" perhaps refers also to a violation of the marriage sacrament and the well being of the body politic, if these may be thought of as encompassed by the phrase "wholesome life." These multiple meanings are in poetic harmony with Old Hamlet's complaint that he was "Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd" (1.5.75).

After the mousetrap play has confirmed Hamlet's suspicion of Claudius, Hamlet's short soliloquy (3.2.387–99) ending the play scene reveals his readiness to kill with bestial fury. With its ominous nighttime atmospherics, the soliloquy has some of the characteristics of a conventional murderer's speech, like those heard a little earlier in connection with *The Murder of Gonzago*: "The croaking raven doth bellow for revenge" (3.2.254), Hamlet had said, wanting to hasten the performance and unnerve Claudius; and Lucianus had followed immediately with references to "thoughts black," "midnight weeds," and "Hecate's ban" (3.2.255–58).<sup>1</sup> The juxtaposition of these remarks by Hamlet and by Lucianus figures in the poetics of the theme equating revenge with murder, especially since Lucianus, as explained in discussing his soliloquy, functions as a binary analogue for Claudius and Hamlet. Thus it is appropriate that in the soliloquy Shakespeare makes Hamlet the revenger sound like a stage murderer, preparing tonally for his next two soliloquies and the killing of Polonius, an act soon to be carried out by mistake but in the wildly murderous spirit of wreaking vengeance.

Shakespeare's dramaturgy in setting up this soliloquy suggests that he wanted to provide a fresh view of Hamlet taking on the role of revenger with premeditation and with a resurgence of blood-

thirsty passion he is barely able to control. Since Horatio, Rosenkrantz, and Guildenstern are still with Hamlet after Polonius has summoned him to speak with his mother, Shakespeare clears the stage by having the prince say forthrightly: "Leave me, friends" (3.2.287). Hamlet perceives the night itself as congruent with his impulse to kill:

'Tis now the very witching time of night,  
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out  
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood  
And do such business as the bitter day  
Would quake to look on.

(387–91)

Through the juxtaposition of these two opening statements, linked by the recurrence of "now," Shakespeare associates the evil emanations of hell in the first half with Hamlet's readiness for vengeance expressed in the second. This tense readiness to act violently becomes immediately a threat to his mother, as signaled ominously by the linking repetition of "now," when he says, "Soft, now to my mother" (391).

The association of hell with Hamlet's commitment to revenge is the dominant effect produced by the opening section of the soliloquy. Within this effect flow complex poetic currents, some of which need to be traced because they help clarify the movement and development of the play at this juncture. The image of "churchyards yawn," suggestive of the previous appearance of the Ghost, links the Ghost with hell and perhaps foreshadows the reappearance of the Ghost when Hamlet is with his mother. This image also evokes Horatio's description, after he has seen the Ghost, of how "The graves stood tenantless" and the "sheeted dead" were seen in the streets before Julius Caesar was killed (1.1.113–16). The reference to "hell" in this soliloquy recalls the question Hamlet posed in making his original commitment to revenge: "And shall I couple hell?" This question raised the possibility that the Ghost might be a "goblin damned," not "a spirit of health" (1.5.40). Ironically, while the mousetrap play has proven that the Ghost, on the basis of his report, is "honest" and not "a devil," the act of revenge that the Ghost called for, and that Hamlet is now ready to carry out, remains associated with hell and the sinister qualities of "the witching time of night." The moral implication of this linkage is significant, as is the linkage between "witching" here and the reference to "Hecat" in Lucianus's soliloquy.



Hamlet's mentioning "hell" and "night" in connection with his readiness for vengeance is also in touch with the satanic description of the "hellish" Pyrrhus, whom he associates with the night:

The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms,  
Black as his purpose, did the night resemble  
(2.2.252–53)

This association of Hamlet with Pyrrhus, the "Hyrceanian beast," is emphasized by Hamlet's distinctly bestial image of drinking hot blood. The ferocity he expresses is also linked to pagan practice, as one may gather from Maurice Charney's comments on this matter:

The hot blood Hamlet is speaking about is presumably the blood of a newly killed enemy, whom you humiliate beyond death by ritually partaking of his life-blood, still warm and bubbling—an outrage he is powerless to prevent.<sup>2</sup>

So passionate is Hamlet's commitment to a bloody revenge that, in apparent defiance, he disregards Christian constraints or punishment, saying he will "do such business as the *bitter day* / Would quake to look on" (390–91).<sup>3</sup> In the context of the soliloquy and the play, this version of the text, found in Q2, is more strongly expressive than the widely used version in F: "do such *bitter business* as the day / Would quake to look on." Charney has argued persuasively for Q2's reading:

It is curious that even such strong partisans of Quarto 2 as Parrott and Craig, Wilson, and Hubler reject "And do such business as the bitter day" without any comment, or with only the most perfunctory explanation, such as Parrott and Craig's claim that it is a "common printer's error of transposition" (p. 164). If the "bitter day" is Doomsday, then the phrase is particularly appropriate for Hamlet's dire imprecations in this soliloquy. At the "very witching time of night," "churchyards yawn" . . . and graves yield up the spirits of their dead, as they will do on the Day of Judgment. Hamlet means that he could now do such bloody "business" as even Doomsday would quake with fear to look upon.<sup>4</sup>

Although the F version offers a somewhat sharper antithesis between day and night, Q2's "bitter day," meaning Doomsday or Judgment Day, is far richer in its poetics and more congruent with the imagery of the soliloquy. Charney's argument for the superiority of Q2's line can be strengthened by several other points involving poetic effects and meaning.



In the ferocity of his revenge passion Hamlet appears blind to the relevance of Doomsday for himself, oblivious to the possible consequences in Christian terms of his intended murder. Indeed he almost seems to be in defiance of divine judgment, identifying himself with the world of "hell," "night," and "contagion." Ironically Claudius, in his soliloquy only thirty-five lines after Hamlet's—and probably occurring simultaneously with Hamlet's—is preoccupied with this very matter of ultimate judgment "above." Fully aware of the meaning of his act, but unable to repent, in the end Claudius consciously succumbs to his passion's disregard for heaven's ultimate Day of Judgment. These poetics not only have their splendidly reciprocal ironies, but they are part of the play's larger dramatic equation of murder and revenge, an equation that has seen Claudius equated with Hamlet through the double terms of both Pyrrhus and Lucianus as binary analogues for the prince and the king. All of these meanings, which are not possible in F's line, justify the conclusion that what is in Q2 is not there by chance or a compositor's error but as an act of deliberate composition by Shakespeare.

If one uses Q2's "bitter day" as Charney understands it, one is also given another version of the conflict between pagan and Christian ethics in the play, with Hamlet's pagan "business," including the drinking of blood, posed in meaningful opposition to the Christian Day of Judgment. In the pattern that originates in and develops from the Ghost's contradiction, the pagan-Christian configuration here prefigures the highly dramatic version found in the ensuing stage image of Claudius on his knees, trying to pray, while Hamlet, with drawn sword, assesses his opportunity for revenge.

What the "witching time of night" soliloquy underscores is the play's continuing major concern with the essential nature of revenge and with Hamlet's experience in pursuing it. Having seen in the "O all you host of heaven" soliloquy how a sudden, almost instinctive desire for revenge hardens into an obsession that threatens to obliterate rationality and having been led in the "rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy to an appreciation of Hamlet's equally instinctive recourse to reason in deciding to test the Ghost and catch the conscience of the king, in the present soliloquy one perceives that, even if Hamlet now carried out revenge because Claudius is guilty, such vengeance remains exactly what one previously saw it to be: a bestial act of violence.

Hamlet's deliberate submission to the role of a brutal killer gives one a new and more appalling perception of vengeance as a mind-

consuming passion. In his consciousness of a perhaps uncontrollable readiness for murderous violence, he reverts self-consciously—and characteristically—to analogical and analytical thoughts in hopes of achieving an adequate measure of control over his feelings. His doing so is a variant of the pattern seen in the “rogue and peasant slave” soliloquy. So intense is his inner rage for revenge that he is fearful his mother may fall victim to it:

O heart, lose not thy nature! let not ever  
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom,  
(393–94)

His allusion to Nero, who murdered his mother and who is thought to have been insane, associates Hamlet’s violent disposition with potential matricide and madness. Trying to create self control by thinking about and defining his problem, Hamlet resolves:

I will speak daggers to her, but use none.  
My tongue and soul in this by hypocrites—  
(396–97)

But the logic underlying what Hamlet says suggests an ominous subtext. For in saying that his soul contradicts his tongue, making each hypocritical in relation to the other, Hamlet betrays that the matricidal soul of Nero may indeed have entered his bosom. It is hardly reassuring, therefore, that in the concluding couplet of his speech he appeals to his soul not to follow through on the violent language he knows he will use:

How in my words somever she be shent,  
To give them seals never my soul consent!  
(398–99)

Hamlet’s distributed use of “howsomever”—“how” and “somever”—suggests that he is trying to control his matricidal feelings by thinking of the Ghost, who used “howsomever” in expressing his injunction. With a sense of his emotional instability, he refers to his soul as though it may exercise violent autonomy beyond his control.

Fredson Bowers notes that “in the second part of the soliloquy, under the palpably thin pretext of talking to himself about his future intentions, Hamlet steps out of the dramatic framework to warn the audience not to misinterpret his actions in the scene that is being anticipated”—the scene with his mother.<sup>5</sup> Bowers argues

that the “grand design” of the play required Shakespeare to make an artistic sacrifice “of action dramatically (which is to say, objectively) presented” so that in the Closet Scene it would be perfectly clear to the audience that Hamlet is guided strictly by the Ghost’s injunctions.<sup>6</sup> This view of the function of the soliloquy does not seem to be consistent with the emotional and dramatic energies at work both in the speech and in Hamlet’s scene with his mother, where the passionate thrust that kills Polonius shunts off some of Hamlet’s pent-up and growing rage toward Gertrude. The critical crux of the matter is that Bowers’s view of the speech requires one to believe that Hamlet is not really worried about his ability to control his emotions in the forthcoming interview with his mother, even though it is a meeting that has developed unexpectedly precisely when he feels he could “drink hot blood.”

Maurice Charney, without referring to Bowers’s essay, has addressed this particular critical issue much more cogently in terms of the dramatic dynamics of the developing action:

It is quite wrong . . . to disregard the soliloquy in Act III, Scene ii as a kind of expository prologue to the Closet Scene. . . . Hamlet is expressing his forbidden wishes in order to master his own anxieties. . . . Hamlet intends to ‘shend’ his mother in the Closet scene even though he vows never to let his soul consent to kill her. In this context of persistent denial, the matricidal theme is given emphasis. . . . The point is that Hamlet’s homicidal mood, announced in the soliloquy of Act III, Scene ii and demonstrated in the Prayer Scene, reaches its climax at the beginning of the Closet Scene, where there is an active possibility that Hamlet may murder his mother.<sup>7</sup>

Hamlet’s concern about possibly killing his mother recalls the Ghost’s specific injunction, which provides the larger dramatic context for this worry as expressed in the soliloquy:

But howsomever thou pursues this act,  
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive  
Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven.

(1.5.84–86)

The Ghost’s inconsistency, in telling Hamlet to take revenge on Claudius but to leave Gertrude to heaven, is virtually restated in the Closet Scene, when the Ghost appears to Hamlet and says:

Do not forget! This visitation  
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.



But look, amazement on thy mother sits,  
O, step between her and her fighting soul.

(3.4.110–13)

In his dramatically surprising reappearance, the Ghost seems conjured up by the growing crescendo of Hamlet's menacing passion, suggesting a relationship between the revenger's fury and the spirit of revenge symbolized by the Ghost in its conventional role. Again the Ghost is adamant in wanting Hamlet to take revenge on Claudius, and again one sees the contrast of his almost sentimental concern for Gertrude. By giving the Ghost only one short speech in his only other appearance, a speech that again posits his double attitude, Shakespeare seems to highlight the contradictory moral values in what the Ghost wants. Thus the second appearance of the Ghost is a dramatically striking follow-up to what is conveyed by the juxtaposed soliloquies and the stage imagery in the immediately preceding Prayer Scene. Having established the theme of conflicting moralities early in the play, the Ghost in its final dramatic function provides an essential restatement of the irreconcilable Christian-pagan moral duality imaged by Claudius on his knees trying to pray while Hamlet, his sword drawn, contemplated revenge. As the Ghost reveals, Hamlet's father's mind was tainted by the un-Christian revenge attitude and one sees how the older generation taints the mind of the younger, expecting it to seek blood for blood. In the Prayer Scene, when Hamlet speaks of himself as his father's "sole son," he unwittingly lapses into an expressively appropriate double entendre that says, in effect, he is akin to his father's vengeful soul.

Because Hamlet's soliloquies delineate his experience as a revenger after his first encounter with the Ghost, it will be useful to consider Hamlet's second encounter a little more fully, especially since an important aspect of this scene sheds light on Hamlet's last soliloquy, where, as will be seen, he has lost all capability of "looking before and after" in a clear, logical discourse of reason. In the structure of the play, it is poetically right and quite meaningful that the Ghost, in its conventional symbolic function in revenge tragedy, should appear just after Hamlet commits a murder in the spirit of taking vengeance and when his rabid passion seems to be endangering Gertrude.

Consistent with the Elizabethan belief that a ghost might be visible to one person but not to another who was also in its presence, a generally accepted interpretation holds that in the Closet Scene Gertrude is unable to see or hear the Ghost because she is guilty of an adulterous and incestuous profanation of the marriage



sacrament. What has not been duly appreciated is that Gertrude's inability to see the Ghost mirrors the blindness of both Hamlet and the Ghost vis-à-vis their motivating passions. Like the Ghost, Hamlet perceives himself as being "tardy" in pursuing revenge, his purpose supposedly "almost blunted" (3.4.107, 111), but this complaint is not consistent with what has just been seen in the play: Hamlet ready to "drink hot blood" and with a purpose not at all blunted but rather as sharp as the sword he was about to use on Claudius in the Prayer Scene and did use in his impassioned thrust into the arras, mistaking Polonius for the king. At this dramatic moment, however, one may ask why the Ghost does not see or care about what his son has just done to Polonius, whose body is lying there on the floor. Neither the Ghost nor Hamlet is affected by the horrific mistake, as though it counts for nothing in relation to the one thing that does matter to them. To be sure, later in the scene, after he has calmed down, Hamlet does reflect on what he has done, saying, "For this same lord, / I do repent" (3.4.72–73), but his view of himself as "scourge and minister" (3.4.73–75) seems as much a rationalization for continuing to pursue revenge as an appropriate definition of his role (he cannot speak for heaven). The significant point here, as will be seen, is the same one that will arise from Hamlet's final soliloquy: nothing satisfies the passion for revenge, or seems consequential in relation to it, except revenge itself. As a form of mental aberration, the passion for vengeance blinds a person to everything except its nonfulfillment, as long as that lasts. It is dramatically and expressively quite right that Shakespeare, through Gertrude's inability to see and hear the Ghost, injects the idea of madness into Hamlet's communion with the Ghost, whose spirit of revenge has overthrown Hamlet's mind and in a sense made him mad.

I will speak daggers to her, but use none.  
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites—

Shakespeare's formulation of Hamlet's conflict as seen in these lines is repeated soon afterwards in his formulation of Claudius's conflict in the king's soliloquy in the next scene, a conflict summarized in the couplet,

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;  
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.  
(3.3.97–98)

These two versions of a similarly expressed problem—one involving impulses for matricidal vengeance, the other impulses for repentance—are congruent with and may arise from the underlying dramatic thought that has made Pyrrhus and Lucianus binary analogues for both Hamlet and Claudius. That line of thought, part of a pattern of poetic equivalences suggesting a parallel between the prince and the king, is now bringing the two protagonists together at a crucial dramatic moment when each confronts himself in soliloquy and each succumbs irrevocably to his governing passion.

Furthermore, at this time each protagonist is seen preoccupied in different ways with moral and theological issues, often expressed in disease metaphors, including pathology of the soul. In the context of Hamlet's murderous attitude in the first half of the short soliloquy, the recurrence of the word "soul" three times in the last six lines hints at Hamlet's personal disregard now for "the bitter day," in contrast to his concern with "something after death" in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy—a matter that troubled him not only there but also in the "rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy, where he had feared that the devil "Abuses me to damn me" (2.2.603). As a verbal motif, these various references to the "soul" prepare dramatically for Claudius's anguished concern with his "limed soul" (3.3.68) in his first soliloquy; similarly, Claudius's theological reflections subsequently have an ironic parallel with the specific nature of Hamlet's vengeful concern not to kill the king when he is "in the purging of his soul" but to "trip him" so "that his soul may be . . . damn'd" (3.3.85, 93–94). The verbal "soul" motif and its ideational equivalents in five consecutive soliloquies forcefully convey Shakespeare's engagement with the moral dimensions of his subject, including the rendering of Hamlet's case in terms of ironic moral obliquity caused by his revenge obsession.

Claudius's first soliloquy is often misread as an intensified elaboration of the pang of guilt he had revealed earlier in response to Polonius's remark that, "with devotion's image / And pious action we do sugar o'er / The devil himself" (3.1.47–49). In an aside, in which he is conscious of his skillful use of language to hide his crime, Claudius had said:

O, 'tis 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!

(3.1.49–54)

Ironically and appropriately, what Claudius acts out in the Prayer Scene is a dramatic image of what Polonius had said and of what Claudius had acknowledged about his chicanery with language. The purpose of Claudius's aside, which resembles a soliloquy, is to eliminate any possible doubt about his guilt before the presentation of the mousetrap play. It thus creates suspense for the audience during the Play Scene by subduing the issue of whether or not the Ghost is honest and intensifying the dramatic question of whether or not Claudius will betray himself. The aside's disclosure of his troubled conscience also prepares for and lends authenticity to the more acute attack of conscience in his first soliloquy. Despite the guilt feelings he has, Claudius continues with his defensive investigation of Hamlet in the Nunnery Scene and, concluding that Hamlet is dangerous, decides to ship him to England.

The sinister defensive pattern of the king's behavior here, it should be noted, is repeated following his disturbed reaction to *The Murder of Gonzago* and Hamlet's baiting antics in presenting it. Because the death of Hamlet is not mentioned in connection with Claudius's initial intention to send Hamlet to England (Shakespeare does not give him a soliloquy or an aside to clarify what is privately on his mind after the Nunnery Scene), one is not disposed to assume that Claudius intends to have Hamlet killed in England at this time. But he is clearly suspicious of Hamlet, expressed as "something" he senses in Hamlet's "heart" and in his "brains" (to note terms relating to passion and mind in 3.1.176–77); and one may conclude that he is determined not to be endangered, whatever is required, even the death of Hamlet, though he says nothing about it.

Claudius's first soliloquy (3.3.36–72) is the most concentratedly Christian passage in *Hamlet*, from his recognition at the outset that his offense "Hath the primal eldest curse upon't, / A brother's murther" (37–38) to the couplet that concludes his troubled awareness of his inability to be truly repentant and thereby to qualify for divine mercy. His first words give what seems to be an echoed repetition of Lucianus's use of "rank" in describing his poison as "mixture rank, of midnight weeds" (3.2.257), words that themselves remind one of Hamlet's first soliloquy and his sense of the world as an "unweeded garden" possessed by "things rank and



gross in nature" (1.2.135–36)—suggestively the post-Edenic, Cain-and-Abel world, to which Claudius alludes. Claudius's judgment that his "offense is rank" (36) expresses the stench of decay but also recalls Hamlet's use of "rank" to convey his sense of a powerful, fecund force of corruption in general and sexual grossness in particular, a passion linked to the murder. Claudius's further judgment that "it smells to heaven" (36) conveys ironically his sense of the magnitude of his offense and counterpoints ironically the instances when he refers to heaven glibly and with hypocritical confidence, as in telling Hamlet that his grief is "a fault to heaven" (1.2.101) or in describing the ritual of firing a cannon to heaven to salute the king's drinking—arrogant descriptions that evoke the Elizabethan doctrine of an interrelationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm. Claudius's full consciousness of his fallen condition, his imaginative intensity in expressing it, and his distressing inability to extricate himself from it win sympathy because he is struggling with his guilt, trying desperately to repent, and judging himself honestly within the Christian moral framework that is meaningful to him and that he comprehends in fairly deep, uncompromising terms.

Of special interest in this regard are those sections where Claudius's intellectual considerations are rigorously objective, free from an ego-centered profusion of first-person pronouns, as in the impersonal lines beginning, "May one be pardoned and retain th' offense?" (56–66). This toughly reasoned section, moving from the particular to the general in a way that resembles Hamlet's mind at work, arises from the following matters the king had just cast in personal terms:

O, what form of prayer  
Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murther'?  
That cannot be, since I am still possess'd  
Of those effects for which I did the murther—  
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.

(51–55)

Because Claudius will not relinquish what he has gained from his crime, the juxtaposition of his strong possessive sense of what he has gained ("My crown, *mine own* ambition, and *my* queen") with his soundly reasoned catechism of divine justice suggests the passion that has overwhelmed his mind. Hence, "still possess'd of" is open to understandings that Claudius is ironically unaware of: he is "still possess'd of those effects" in the sense that he is still



possessed *by* them and cannot free himself from them (or more precisely, free himself so as not to have to have them), a condition that also suggests “possess’d of” as a kind of madness or hold on the mind.

While the impact of the mousetrap play, triggered by Hamlet’s baiting behavior, provides the immediate explanation for his acute attack of conscience, the full dramatic context of Claudius’s conflict in the soliloquy includes his precautionary decision (at the end of the Nunnery Scene) to send Hamlet to England and his subsequent revelation (in his second soliloquy, late that night) of his scheme to have Hamlet executed there. At the end of the Nunnery Scene, there is no reason to think that Claudius’s “quick determination” to send Hamlet “with speed to England” (3.1.170–71) was altered by Polonius’s plan to eavesdrop on a conversation between Hamlet and his mother. When the king says, “It shall be so” (3.1.189), he is most probably affirming Polonius’s statement about confining Hamlet (3.1.178–79), although Polonius may think Claudius is making his decision contingent on what Polonius finds out. Sometime between the Nunnery Scene and the Closet Scene Hamlet appears to have learned that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to escort him to England, and it is clear that Claudius has informed Gertrude of his intention, which she knows about when Hamlet mentions it in the Closet Scene (3.4.200–201).

The death of Hamlet may not have been part of the original plan—the play is silent about this matter—but once Claudius realizes that Hamlet knows of his crime and has heard Hamlet mention revenge (“the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge”), the prince’s death is undoubtedly what the king has already decided upon when, expressing great fear for his own safety, he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to “prepare you. / I your commission will forthwith dispatch, / And he to England shall along with you” (3.3.2–4). With urgent decisiveness, he gives them these instructions at the opening of the Prayer Scene, shortly before his soliloquy, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern show no surprise at receiving them. Hamlet’s school friends could have found Hamlet and informed him of the travel orders as he was on his way to see his mother after the Prayer Scene, an encounter involving a lapse of time that helps account for Hamlet’s thinking the king was behind the arras. And Hamlet has either learned that there are “letters seal’d” or is simply making a logical assumption that there will have to be such letters to explain why he has been sent to England.

Whether or not the death of Hamlet figured in Claudius's original self-protective plan, once he realizes that Hamlet knows about his crime and is motivated to seek revenge, the "commission" must refer to the letter ordering the execution of Hamlet. That is, when the scene opens, Claudius has decided to send Hamlet to his death so that Hamlet cannot kill him. It is interesting to note that Shakespeare counterpoints Claudius's fear of what may suddenly spring from Hamlet's "brows" (3.3.7) with Rosencrantz's view, seconding Guildenstern's, that the king has a special responsibility to protect himself "With all the strength and armour of the mind" (3.3.7–12). This incidental antithesis points up the mind ("brows") of the revenger in relation to the mind of the murderer, who is intent on outwitting and neutralizing the revenger.

Claudius's determination to protect himself, clearly established at the very opening of the scene, has not been properly taken into account as part of the dramatic context of the soliloquy. It is crucially important. What has also been overlooked in Claudius's conflict is the effect on him of his secret purpose—his murderous intent—in sending Hamlet away, though Hamlet himself easily guesses that his two schoolfellows are meant to "marshal me to knavery," bearing the "mandate" in the "letters seal'd" Hamlet refers to (3.4.201–205). In dramatic terms, therefore, the fullest subtext of some of Claudius's lines in the soliloquy, and of his conflict in general, apparently now involves the emotional strain of having another murder in mind, to silence Hamlet and thereby protect both his life and, in his words, "those effects for which I did the murther" (52). As part of the developing action, the soliloquy is not then a simple elaboration of the guilty conscience he revealed in his "painted word" aside. It does not show a case of static spiritual *angst*—the usual view of it—but a dramatic conflict that ends in a defeat of conscience and, concomitantly, in the triumph of Claudius's sinister intention, which Hamlet's killing of Polonius soon validates for him.

Hamlet's aggressive action, which precipitates the crisis of conscience that besets Claudius, must unavoidably have an immediate reaction from the king, who suddenly finds himself faced with two choices: either he must repent, whatever the earthly consequences, or he must rid himself of Hamlet, most securely by his death. In dramatic terms, the implication of not repenting is to take effective action against Hamlet without delay—and the climactic point of the scene is that Claudius is not repentant. At the opening of the scene, the orders Claudius gives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, soon to be followed by the arrest and sending away

of Hamlet after he kills Polonius, constitute part of his *public* reaction; his first soliloquy reveals the earliest stage of his *private* reaction, soon to be completed in his second soliloquy. The two choices he has define the conflict in Claudius at the deepest level of his utterances in his first soliloquy, although characteristically he himself seems unaware that he is engaged in a game of verbal self-deceit, avoiding recognition both that he does not really intend to repent and that, despite his spiritual anguish, he is harboring a commitment to the choice he has set in motion with his orders to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: a plan to murder Hamlet.

In general terms, as Shakespeare renders it in the soliloquy, Claudius's self-deception consists of his drifting toward another murder while dwelling with acute distress on a concern with repentance, a concern that ironically includes his forceful, objective recognition that "above / There is no shuffling" (60–61), as though at some level within him he has a sense of the relevance of the term to himself at that very moment. The earliest symptoms of his shuffling occur when he says:

Pray can I not,  
Though inclination be as sharp as will,  
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,

(38–40)

One notes, first, an inconsistency in what certain words are saying: "inclination" expresses at most a bias or tendency, something quite mild compared to what "sharp as will" conveys; and "inclination" is hardly "strong intent," another fallacious equivalence Claudius gives it. The comparative notion of "stronger guilt" defeating "strong intent" suggests at first that Claudius feels he is too guilty to be forgiven, until one reflects that this notion of despair cannot be real because he fully and eloquently recognizes the abundance and availability of God's mercy. Since Claudius is clearly not a victim of despair, one may also reflect that the stronger his sense of guilt, the more likely, it would seem, that repentance should take place, not be defeated. (This principle, one recalls incidentally, was the basis of Hamlet's idea to catch the conscience of the king [2.2.584–88].) Even as he puts it into words, Claudius's comparative notion is faulty and invalid as an explanation of why his inclination to pray is defeated—and it has ominous significance below the surface of his words. For in speaking of a "stronger guilt" the king seems to be judging himself and feeling or anticipating *greater* guilt because of his continuing



determination now, even after recognizing the sordidness of his crime, to keep his gains. In conjunction with this new determination, at the deepest, most private level of his discourse, the comparative “stronger guilt” also includes the notion of the *additional* guilt Claudius knows he must incur by the murder of Hamlet, if he stays on that course in reaction to Hamlet’s knowledge of his crime. The dramatic question that arises, in terms of Claudius’s conflict in the soliloquy, is whether he will continue his drift toward “stronger” guilt or whether he will be able to repent.

This subtextual reading is pertinent to resolving a problem that Harold Jenkins has noted in his comments on Claudius’s next lines:

And, like a man to double business bound,  
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,  
And both neglect.

(41–43)

After recognizing that “bound” can be understood not only “as in ‘bound’ for a destination” but also as “the past ppl. of bind,” Jenkins observes that “the analogy . . . seems less than perfect: the choice is not between *two* courses but between pursuing or refraining from *one*” (that is, repentance).<sup>8</sup> If, however, Claudius is contemplating the death of Hamlet while his conscience recoils from the predicament he now finds himself in after one murder, then his choice is indeed between *two* courses—repentance and another crime—and the analogy is quite perfect as an expression of his deepest conflict. Nonetheless, in contrast to an authentic crisis of action that “puzzles the will” in Hamlet’s “To be” soliloquy, there may be an element of self-deception in Claudius’s sense of conflict if, despite the words he gives to it, he is really bound only on the course—or to the business—of eliminating Hamlet.

Consistent with this subtextual clarification of the analogy, Claudius’s next lines are also cast in terms of possibly finding additional blood on his hand:

What if this cursed hand  
Were thicker than itself with brother’s blood,  
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens  
To wash it white as snow?

(43–46)

Most immediately, by posing hypothetically an even worse version of the terrible plight he finds himself in, Claudius is reassuring



himself that there is enough mercy in heaven to cleanse him. But the very hypothetical consideration he makes betrays a desperate sense of drifting more deeply into moral depravity. Since Claudius is quite aware that he already has a “cursed hand” (with “the primal eldest curse upon’t”), his use of the subjunctive “were” seems to be in connection with something not yet a fact (a condition of “stronger guilt”) but that he may now be contemplating: *more* of his brother’s blood—in the form of Hamlet’s—which would certainly make his “cursed hand / . . . thicker . . . with brother’s blood” than it presently is. (In the more minute poetics of the speech, the comparative forms “stronger” and “thicker” suggest a link in their grim significance; and this link connects in turn with the only other comparative element in the speech—Claudius’s acknowledgment that his “limed soul” is becoming “more engag’d” [68–69].) Mutely and unwittingly, broached implicitly through the rhetorical form of his question taken as a whole, what Claudius says seems to include the unspeakable, something he could not possibly allow to crystallize into clear consciousness or explicit utterance: the horrendous hypothetical notion that it might be possible to be simultaneously repentant for *two* murders rather than one.

Despite his elusive verbal shuffling, which in its own way figures in the sharpness of his conflict, it is his tone of yearning for a release from guilt and a return to innocence that is dominant in Claudius’s preoccupation with repentance, as seen in his references to the “sweet” heavens, from which he feels so estranged. This tone is especially clear in his next lines, which are linked rhetorically to the question he has just asked, developing his answer to it in the form of parallel questions:

Whereto serves mercy  
But to confront the visage of offense?  
And what’s in prayer but this twofold force,  
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,  
Or pardoned being down?

(46–50)

Because these questions do not include a personal reference, are cast as objective-sounding generalizations, and relate only to the second part of the earlier (“cursed hand”) question, they seem almost impersonal within his highly subjective considerations—a contrast that highlights the full significance for Claudius of repenting. With their rhetorical parallelism to the “cursed hand”

question, they clarify further the issues involved in the distress Claudius is experiencing in the soliloquy.

Claudius's concern with the "twofold force" of prayer is certainly not academic. It is best understood as a confirmation of his recognition that, "like a man to double business bound," if he does not repent, he is headed toward another crime, the murder of Hamlet. Since the play certainly does not invite one to imagine that Claudius prayed to try to forestall murdering his brother, the first term in the "twofold force" of prayer pertains quite precisely to the thoughts he harbors of killing Hamlet before Hamlet has a chance to kill him. Although his reflections are concerned on one level with an impulse to repent for his first crime (to be "pardoned being down"), the binary and comparative terms of his considerations reflect the conflict that besets him because he is already in the process of carrying out another crime meant to conceal the first one.

Since the truth formulated by his questions is intrinsically sound, and since Claudius is experiencing genuine spiritual conflict in relation to it, his tone of yearning to partake of this sublime, cleansing truth remains clear and moving. In the experience of this conflict, Claudius's fine appreciation of the function of mercy and the "twofold force" of prayer produces in him a sudden revulsion against his condition, a revulsion that makes him start abruptly and desperately toward the truth of his eloquent questions. "Then I'll look up. / My fault is past" (50–51), he declares impulsively, before facing the fact that one cannot "be pardon'd and retain th' offense" (56). One marvels at Shakespeare's subtle management of complex tone throughout the soliloquy, conveying simultaneously both the awesome depth of Claudius's spiritual corruption and the conflicting comments and meanings in the language he uses—earnestly and eloquently but with an underlying ambivalence—in a painful but futile effort to achieve successful prayer.

The truth that is suddenly so appealing to Claudius has arisen from the intense reasoning that shapes his questions, whose rational propositions reinforce each other through parallel structures joined by "and" and pointed up by the repetition of "but." This strong, dispassionate rationality, aroused and running its independent course in Claudius's mind, governs the ensuing lines, in which he recognizes the objective, uncompromising nature of divine justice (56–64). Thematically, this section has kinship with Hamlet's considerations of "the dread of something after death" in the "To be" soliloquy. "Pardon'd" and "offense," words that sum-

marize the king's conflict, are part of a cluster of legal-sounding terms—"corrupt," "justice," "law," "action," "evidence"—that highlight the reasoning process quite appropriately and help evoke the rigorous rationality of divine justice. When he states that "above . . . the action lies / In his true nature" (60–62), the verb "lies" takes on a double *entendre* with respect to Claudius himself. The true nature of Claudius's actions is such that it gives the lie to his gestures of repentance.

And when he realizes that "above" we are "compell'd / Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults / To give in evidence" (63–65), his figurative use of "teeth" and "forehead" (forms of metonymy) conveys his awareness of the range of "faults" he will have to admit and be accountable for. "Teeth" stands for those offenses that have been perpetrated, specifically Claudius's murder of his brother; "forehead" stands for those offenses that are still in the mind, specifically his plot to kill Hamlet. In its metonymic signification of a perpetrated offense, specifically Claudius's act of murder, "teeth" is appropriate because the use of teeth to kill a victim is associated with the violence of a predatory beast. The terms also have poetic links with the "twofold force" of prayer in relation to offenses contemplated (in the realm fronted by the forehead) but forestalled by prayer and to offenses committed, for which one prays to be "pardon'd being down." "Teeth" and "forehead," it might finally be noted, also correlate precisely with "words" and "thoughts" in Claudius's concluding couplet, "teeth" as a speech organ in the making of words and "forehead" as related to the mind, where thoughts take place.

Claudius's "wretched state" (68) occurs not simply because he "cannot repent" (66) for his first crime but also because his "bosom black as death" (67) is now leading him to an attempt on Hamlet's life. His description of his bosom (metaphorically, the repository of intentions) as "black" links him to Lucianus with "thoughts black" (3.2.255) and to Pyrrhus with "black complexion" and "sable arms" / Black as his purpose" (2.2.452–55). His "limed soul . . . struggling to be free" (68) does not become "more engag'd" (69) simply because he cannot repent for one murder but because he feels helplessly entangled in committing another. Claudius's final effort to pray is very moving as he restates his conflict by acknowledging his "heart with strings of steel" while imploring that it "be soft as sinews of the new-born babe" (70–71). (Of poetic interest here because of its Christian significance, the only other reference to a new-born babe in the play is to the "Saviour's birth" [1.1.159].) His final effort, however, continues to



be compromised by his unconscious shuffling; for when he tells his “stubborn knees” to bow, he acts as though the knees were resisting his real will when actually they represent it in their resistance to bend in prayer. Nonetheless, in forcing himself down on his knees to pray, his spiritual anguish seems genuine and one cannot be absolutely certain his efforts will prove futile. The prevailing tone, despite the elusive but consistent shuffling perceptible in what he says, suggests contrition (or rather the possibility of it), and the audience has been impressed by Claudius’s ability to define his condition in pointed theological terms. Dramatically, the stage image of the king kneeling in prayer establishes itself as an emblem of the Christian concerns surveyed within the soliloquy—and within the play as a whole. Quite purposefully, in relation to the next dramatic development, Shakespeare does not provide the final clarification of Claudius’s condition until the king’s concluding couplet when the scene ends.

This withholding of the final clarification, sustained and intensified dramatically during Hamlet’s mistaken view of Claudius on his knees, is possible dramaturgically because there is a dimension to a character that is not fully or explicitly revealed by his or her words in a soliloquy, though paradoxically it is hinted at by those words. This dimension is present like a shadow that seems hidden from the character but is sensed by the audience. It is that shadow of Claudius’s fuller—and darker—self, which lurks in the subtext of his soliloquy and plays ironically—albeit subliminally—against the surface appearance of his guilt and inclination to repent. In the context of this ambiguity, his appearance beguiles the audience initially and wins from it, on his behalf, a humanly generous feeling akin to compassion. Dramatically, one responds to the tenor of penitence in the words Claudius utters. Despite what else one may sense, one does not respond to the hidden self that is experiencing the deeper conflict enunciated in the subtext of his utterance.<sup>9</sup> That hidden self, the meanest side of Claudius, will assert itself and speak out clearly in his next soliloquy.

The full emblematic and thematic significance of Claudius kneeling in prayer becomes clear with the entry of Hamlet, who completes the extremely important stage picture. In a brilliant stroke of dramaturgy, Shakespeare sets up a tensely dramatic juxtaposition of soliloquy with soliloquy and of soliloquy (3.3.73–96) with stage image that gives the sharpest possible focus to the two disparate moralities on exhibit in the play, with Hamlet caught between them, as seen from his opening lines. Resuming the



brutal tone established by his previous soliloquy, the lines are cast in coarse and common speech that contrasts sharply with Hamlet's more normal idiom and even with the relatively finer expressive qualities of the "witching time of night" soliloquy, perhaps because there his cruel tone also includes a concern with controlling his violence. His tough language here conveys a progressive deepening of his brutalization as a revenger:

Now might I do it, but now 'a is a-praying;  
And now I'll do't—and so 'a goes to heaven,  
And so am I reveng'd. That would be scann'd:

(73–75)

The mean-minded callousness of Hamlet's vengeful considerations in this soliloquy stands in harsh contrast to the penitential tone just established by Claudius's soliloquy, a contrast also sustained visually by the dramatic image of the helpless king on his knees while Hamlet, sword drawn and with blasphemous arrogance, engages in a qualitative analysis of what constitutes genuine revenge. On the one hand, Claudius has just been seen sympathetically in his attempt to extricate himself from the passion that makes him feel like a "limed soul"; on the other hand, Hamlet is seen violating the spirit of Christian penitence (albeit it is merely an appearance) and luxuriating in the passion for revenge that is seething in him.

The opening line of the speech involves a textual issue that deserves fresh consideration in the context of the dramatic stage image wrought so carefully by the playwright. For the stage image, in conjunction with some matters of language and expression, is especially relevant in this instance to an editorial determination of what the most *dramatic* version of the text is, apart from the larger debate concerning *Hamlet* texts.

In Quarto Two, the first line of the soliloquy reads: "now might I do it, but now 'a is a-praying." In the First Folio, the line reads: "Now might I do it pat, now he is praying." Folio's half-line ending with "pat" is favored by editors, even when their basic copy-text is Q2, as may be seen in the hybrid version of the line given by G. Blakemore Evans in *The Riverside Shakespeare*: "Now might I do it pat, now 'a is a-praying."

In the opening three lines quoted above, I have preferred Q2's reading of the first line because it is expressively more dramatic than either F's or the hybrid version.<sup>10</sup> To begin with, no sense of conflict is conveyed by F's line, in which "do it pat" says simply:

*now might I do it opportunely or conveniently* (to cite common glosses for “pat”) *because now he is praying and does not see me*. Since the stage image itself expresses visually everything that “pat” says (how easy it would be to kill Claudius at that moment), the word “pat” is actually redundant in relation to what is seen. What is seen, it should not be forgotten, is as much a part of the language of the stage as what is heard—and the stage picture is quite forceful at this moment. Dramatically, and without any need for words to affirm the matter, the audience comprehends what Hamlet sees at the very moment he enters and sees it—an easy opportunity to kill the king. If Hamlet, for example, were to draw his sword in silence at this moment (when he draws it is not specified), the audience would fully understand why he does this and dramatic tension would build. “Pat” contributes nothing in dramatic terms. Conversely, nothing meaningful is lost without “pat,” except the zesty slang note of the word, which Q2’s reading provides in “now ’a is a-praying,” with its contemptuous “a” for “he.” This meaningful note is missing from F’s version of the half-line but that note in Q2’s version engenders tonal augmentation and consistency when “a” recurs in the parallel half-line: “And so ’a goes to heaven.”

By comparison, much is gained if Q2’s line with “do it, but” forms the text. To begin with, the opening line establishes immediately the conflict in Hamlet that is developed in the next two lines. This dramatic focus is kept sharp because “it” at the very end of the first half-line recurs pointedly again at the very end of the parallel half-line: “And now I’ll do’t.” If the opening half-line is F’s “Now might I do it pat,” the focus at the end is on “pat,” not sharply on “it,” weakening the ensuing recurrence of “it” in “And now I’ll do’t.” “It,” however, refers to the act of crucial concern to Hamlet, as seen in the next parallel half line: “And so am I reveng’d.” Since “pat” blurs the focus a bit, it is worth noting that there is a dramatic progression in terms of the focus on “it”: (1) the recognition of an opportunity—“Now might I do it”; (2) a decision to act—“And now I’ll do’t”; (3) a conclusion about the significance of “it”—“And so am I reveng’d.” This progression acquires emotional momentum with the recurrence of “and” at the beginning of three successive half-lines; and it is intensified dramatically by the concomitant conflict in Hamlet about doing “it” “now,” a conflict that is most dramatic when initiated in the opening line with “but now ’a is a-praying.”

Furthermore, in the dramatic context “but now ’a is a-praying” conveys at least two distinct meanings of the conflict expressed by

“but”: (1) *now might I do it but I balk at killing him at the very moment he is repentant*, and (2) *now might I do it but it would not be satisfactory as revenge because now he is praying and would go to heaven*. The conflict in Hamlet is stronger and its nuances are more varied and ironical when the conflict is established in the first line and sustained contrapuntally in the oppositional half line segments of three lines instead of two. The range of expressive possibilities in performing the conflict in six half lines rather than four is quite large, as a performance exploration of them readily reveals. If the conflict begins in the opening line, as in Q2’s text, it becomes all the more intense in the next two lines, inviting a clearer, more sharply posed, and more energetic performance of the conflict at this moment. For example, if the conflict is expressed in the first line, Hamlet’s “And now I’ll do it” comes dramatically as an abrupt, impulsive decision to go ahead despite the king’s repentant posture, as though killing him suddenly becomes more important than his going to heaven—an attitude that is just as abruptly checked by the equally spontaneous reflection that points up the conflict in the last half line: “That would be scanned.”

Paradoxically, the colorful line G. B. Evans and others have compounded of “Now might I do it pat” from F and “now ’a is a-praying” from Q2 *reads* better than the line in either Q2 or F. While it is a trifle livelier than the two versions in strictly *literary* terms, it is inferior to Q2 in *dramatic* terms because it does not express conflict, on which drama is predicated. It is instructive to see so clearly an instance when literary language and dramatic language do not have exactly the same values or interests. My editorial assumption in this case is that since stage imagery is an important component of the language of theater, it may be very relevant to a textual question. And my critical assumption is that in a play the *dramatic* justly takes precedence over the *literary*, especially when there is no question regarding the authority of Shakespeare’s text.

It is ironical that at the very moment when Hamlet has no unresolved problems or qualms about killing the king, when a repulsive callousness of tone has come into his speech, and when the recurrent “now” again intensifies the expression of Hamlet’s readiness to kill (“now” in each of its occurrences becomes more complex in tone when the reading is “but now ’a is a-praying”), Claudius has just been seen expressing his conflict in language that bears a resemblance to Hamlet’s intellectuality in some of his soliloquies—a subtle stylistic modulation that helps link these characters within the play’s murder-revenge equation. (Indeed, in



the fuller poetics of this equation one might also note the link of “do it” in Claudius’ reference to his murder intention when he exclaims in his second soliloquy: “Do it, England” [4.3.65].) Having drawn his sword, Hamlet “now” starts to close in for the kill but the spontaneous activity of his mind abruptly checks him: “That would be scann’d,” he says (75), and proceeds to analyze the situation as he sees it:

A villain kills my father, and for that  
I, his sole son, do this same villain send  
To heaven.  
Why this is hire and salary, not revenge.

(76–79)

In considering the things “That would be scann’d,” Hamlet thinks in the terms of classical pagan revenge: he assumes and accepts uncritically the obligation to exact revenge, and he recognizes a singular responsibility as the “sole son.” Remarkably, Hamlet sees no contradiction in values in the antithesis between “heaven” and “revenge” that the playwright has him posit several times in the soliloquy, as well as a variant based on “sword” in relation to “salvation” (88, 92). Nor does he recognize that, in uttering “sole,” he unwittingly sounds the word “soul,” the very subject of his thoughts, compounding his failure to consider how his own soul will stand in relation to heaven. If one takes Hamlet at his word, as the readiness to kill in his previous soliloquy indicates one should and as his subsequent murder of Polonius confirms that one should, Hamlet is deflected from killing Claudius at this moment only because his mind suddenly tells him that what appears like revenge is really “hire and salary.”

With a brilliant irony that is perfectly consistent with the character, Shakespeare makes Hamlet’s intellectuality an impediment to his taking of sudden revenge, for reasons that have little if anything to do with simplistic popular notions that Hamlet prefers thought to action or that he is a man who cannot make up his mind (to recall the epigraph of Laurence Olivier’s film). For as one hears Hamlet make his analysis and reach his conclusion in this soliloquy, one witnesses the horror of the rational faculty’s having been made subservient to passion, something also just seen in a different set of terms in Claudius’s conflict in the preceding soliloquy, although Shakespeare has tinged the case of Claudius with a subtextual ambiguity for the sake of a dramatic moment of clarification later, in the king’s second soliloquy.

Needless to say, there is something almost ludicrous and cer-



tainly bizarre in Hamlet's postponing an anti-Christian act of pagan revenge because his Christian belief tells him that Claudius appears to be "in purging of his soul" and is therefore "fit and seasoned for his passage" (85–86). The grotesque contradiction of values is amplified when Hamlet says, in a personification of his weapon that makes its ability to "know" an extension of his mind: "Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent" (88), a time when "he [Claudius] is about some act / That has no relish of salvation in't" (91–92). What is seen in this juxtaposition of conflicting moralities, established on stage as a powerful composite dramatic image of Hamlet poised with sword and Claudius kneeling in prayer, is a perversion of Hamlet's Christian belief (which right reason should sustain) by his passion for revenge, an aberration consistent with the dark power of passion just exhibited in Claudius's soliloquy. In Hamlet's case, what is so horrendous is that his subverted intellect generates such vengeful pride that he not only preempts for himself vengeance, which the Lord says is His, but also intends to preempt God's exclusive power to judge a human soul after death—a matter that has its immediate dramatic context in Claudius's concern with divine judgment in his soliloquy, a concern sustained dramatically in the stage image of the king kneeling in prayer as Hamlet speaks.

In a Christian context, the desire to damn Claudius eternally is a far more terrible revenge than taking his life. The dramatic context of such horrific revenge includes the earlier note of passionate defiance when Hamlet says he is ready to "do such business as the bitter day / Would quake to look on." By way of ironic contrast, the larger poetic-dramatic context of Hamlet's attitude in his soliloquy includes Laertes's readiness, for the sake of revenge, "to cut his [Hamlet's] throat in the church" (4.7.126) and Claudius's agreement that "No place indeed should murth'ring sanctuarize" (4.7.127), with its grimly ironic double entendre, since Claudius is unaware that Hamlet refrained from killing him in the Prayer Scene. After Hamlet leaves, one learns, in a dramatic and ironic shattering of appearance by reality, which dispels any uncertainty created by the image of Claudius on his knees, that he did not succeed in repenting while trying to pray. Claudius's strongly climactic couplet is essentially a delayed aphorism that functions dramatically (in relation to the two juxtaposed soliloquies which precede it) to epitomize the subjugation of the mind by passion:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:  
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.

The stage image of Hamlet poised with sword has its own dramatic context that deserves to be clarified because the whole stage picture has been shaped so definitely by implicit stage directions ("bow stubborn knees," "now 'a is a-praying," "up, sword") to help display the passionate irrationality of revenge. The image of Hamlet here is part of a pattern that begins in the Player's speech with the cinematic "freeze" of Pyrrhus, whose sword suddenly "seem'd i' th' air to stick" (2.2.389) as he was about to strike Priam, who is down. The effect of this "freeze" image of Pyrrhus is identical to that of Hamlet with his sword raised and ready for use on Claudius who is down: both images win sympathy for a helpless victim and provide a clear, sustained perception of a person consumed with a passion for vengeance.<sup>11</sup> How the mind is completely overwhelmed by such a passion is conveyed by the other stage images in this pattern, images that in their own way are versions of Pyrrhus's resuming the use of his sword with vengeful fury. First, there is Hamlet's impulsive thrust that kills Polonius behind the arras, a furious act of passion unregulated by knowledge or judgment, the very kind of act Hamlet had sought to avoid in conceiving the mousetrap play as a way to obtain "grounds / More relative" (2.2.603–4) than the testimony of the Ghost alone. Finally, there is Laertes's vengeful thrust (despite a qualm of conscience) that wounds Hamlet with the poisoned sword.<sup>12</sup>

## 5

### The Mind O'erthrown: Reason Pandering Will

Claudius's second soliloquy (4.3.58–68) discloses his secret plan for Hamlet's death in England, after he realizes that Hamlet knows about his crime and would have killed him had he been behind the arras (4.1.13). In contrast to his forceful recognition of guilt in his first soliloquy, Claudius does not show the slightest concern with matters of conscience in the second one, revealing instead a brazen insensibility that includes duplicity to Gertrude concerning her son. From the time of his failure to repent right up to the end of the play, the king acts out the spiritual degeneration of the "limed soul" that becomes "more engaged" in "struggling to be free" (3.3.68–69). His situation presents an example of the Elizabethan idea of the chain of sin, seen in a more elaborate form in the case of Macbeth, who also becomes progressively more hardened as he moves from one crime to another. An ironic aspect of Claudius's current struggle, as expressed at the end of the second soliloquy, is his expectation that he will find "joys" (68) after the death of Hamlet, though the murder of Hamlet can only worsen his spiritual condition and make his relationship with Gertrude even more sordid.

As a development in the action, Claudius's plan for Hamlet's death transcends its immediate context of cause and effect and finds its fullest dramatic significance in terms of a metaphysical concept that seems to govern the larger dramatic design and organization of the play. His scheme is among those actions in the play which are deflected from their intended courses in ways that often redound on those who undertake them and which suggest that an inscrutable providential process is always working itself out, often in what appear to be "chance" happenings. "Over and over in *Hamlet*, chance turns into a larger design, randomness becomes retribution," says John Holloway, recognizing the pattern of providence evoked in the play.<sup>1</sup> Forces are at work that ul-

timately shape the events on the stage as a reflection of those forces constantly shaping the events of life. This is perhaps the deepest sense in which, as Hamlet says, "the purpose of playing . . . is . . . to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature." Since this matter of metaphysics provides the larger dramatic context for Shakespeare's conception of Claudius's soliloquy as an expression of his will, it needs to be clarified before examining the speech.

The mysterious metaphysical principle governing events is articulated several times in the play, acquiring dramatic density in the final movement of the action with Hamlet's various expressions of his intuitive sense of a providential process. In the larger design of *Hamlet*, it is the Player King who first brings the providential theme explicitly into the play in *The Murder of Gonzago*:

Our wills and fates do so contrary run  
That our devices still are overthrown,  
Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.  
(3.2.210–13)

Claudius, ironically and brazenly, expresses a variant of this providential notion (and thus helps give it presence in the last third of the play) when he says to the rebellious Laertes:

There's such divinity doth hedge a king  
That treason can but peep to what it would,  
Acts little of his will.  
(4.5.124–26)

With his reference to "divinity" and "will," paralleling the Player King's "fates" and "wills," part of the irony in what Claudius says lies in the fact that he is a regicide and thus in a sense is also a player king. Although the notion he expresses did not prevent King Hamlet from being murdered, the idea nonetheless seems to remain valid for the play because Claudius ultimately does not prevail in his will to live on and find "joys" as king. Indeed, in terms of the metaphysical principle governing events, the broadest concept of the action of *Hamlet* may be seen as the will of Claudius pitted against heaven or providence. This situation provides the larger context of the theme of revenge in the play.

The strong rhetorical and expressive design of Claudius's second soliloquy emphasizes this key notion of *will* in the king's desperate desire to be rid of Hamlet permanently. As with a similar expression of will in Lucianus's soliloquy, which is a rhetorical com-



panion piece expressing a version of Claudius's first murder, the speech begins with a long, laminated periodic construction that extends for eight of the soliloquy's eleven lines:

And, England, if my love thou hold'st at aught—  
 As my great power thereof may give thee sense,  
 Since yet thy cicatrice looks raw and red  
 After the Danish sword, and thy free awe  
 Pays homage to us—thou mayst not coldly set  
 Our sovereign process, which imports at full,  
 In letters congruing to that effect,  
 The present death of Hamlet. Do it, England,  
 For like the hectic in my blood he rages,  
 And thou must cure me. Till I know 'tis done,  
 How e'er my haps, my joys were ne're begun.

(4.3.58–68)

As the opening sentence progresses, the expressive build-up and thrust of the convoluted main construction—and of the equally convoluted section within it between dashes—is of Claudius's eagerness to believe that what he wants must occur because of his "great power" over England. In the cynical ironies of his expression, especially in his reflective interjection between the dashes, a willful bully shows through Claudius's artful but threatening language, which acquires a menacing quality just because it strains to be rhetorically crafted while spoken in the private discourse of a soliloquy. Here as throughout the play, Claudius's style in the use of language is the essence of the man. In the first line, "love" is a sardonic euphemism for the withholding of aggression in some form, a disruption of the peace that Claudius could willfully decide upon through his "great power thereof," something that England had better have the good "sense" to keep in mind, along with the smarting "sense" of a battle scar that is still ("yet") "raw and red." Presumably this "cicatrice" is a synecdoche for a defeat of the English by the "Danish sword," though whether it was Claudius's victory or Old Hamlet's is not made clear. "Raw and red," evoking a still hot wound, plays against "coldly set" and gives emphasis to Claudius's expression of his will: "thou mayst not coldly set / Our sovereign process."

Claudius constructs his expression with legal-sounding language to convince himself that his will is certain to be carried out. Since he is a regicide who is now undertaking another murder to maintain himself illegally on the throne, and since he described the rationality of divine justice in legal terms in his first soliloquy (a higher "sovereign process"), there is considerable irony in the

terminology he uses to order the murder of Hamlet: "power thereof," "mayst not . . . set," "sovereign process," "imports at full," "letters congruing to that effect." There is personal urgency, a desperate undertone, in his effort to utter certitude about the planned event. When the periodic element finally completes the interlocking logic of the proliferating qualifiers, it establishes itself with abrupt clarity and force: "The present death of Hamlet." Ending in the middle of a line on the unstressed syllable of an incomplete iambic foot, the point of the utterance is immediately reinforced with a desperate imperative: "Do it, England." By completing the line, the clear and emphatic three-word statement counterpoints and complements the sudden clarity introduced by the periodic element, with the strong stress on "Do" completing the iamb and thereby helping further to relate the very short, direct statement to the contrasting, convoluted long one. The rhetorical design has thus been carefully wrought as a means of rendering the notion of Claudius's forceful will—of his wanting something very much and expecting to have it. Although he has enunciated all of the reasons why he can expect his will to be fulfilled in England, to the king's surprise and astonishment, Hamlet returns to Denmark on a pirate ship encountered and boarded by Hamlet by "chance," while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continue on their fated journey, "mortis'd and adjoin'd" (3.3.20) to the wheel of Claudius's fortune.

Toward the end of the soliloquy, in his outcry to England, Claudius sees himself suffering desperately from "the hectic raging" in his blood, the fever represented metaphorically by Hamlet, who is not only a threat to his life and crown but also a hated reminder of his crime. Claudius's use of a disease metaphor is part of a pattern in which he is seen or sees himself as a person who is seriously ill. Within the larger range of disease imagery in the play, this particular metaphoric pattern begins in the last line of Hamlet's "Now might I do it" soliloquy, where Hamlet sees Claudius as terminally ill: "this physic but prolongs thy sickly days" (3.2.96). Because the observation arises from the image of Claudius on his knees and therefore from the spiritual conflict in him, the idea of a sickness of soul establishes itself quite naturally and subsequently informs Claudius's use of disease metaphors. Preceding the explicit outcry in his soliloquy, and foreshadowing it, there are two major instances, in each of which Claudius unwittingly betrays a sense of himself as a person who is sick. Together with Hamlet's observation, they provide a clarifying context for Claudius's outcry at the end of his soliloquy.

The first instance occurs when he is justifying to Gertrude his

decision to send Hamlet away, after she has informed him that Hamlet has killed Polonius:

so much was our love  
We would not understand what was most fit,  
But like the owner of a foul disease,  
To keep it from divulging, let it feed  
Even on the pith of life.

(4.1.19–23)

After his failure to repent in the Prayer Scene, Claudius may be seen here as talking about Hamlet but simultaneously telling about himself through the dramatic irony implicit at a subtextual level. Commenting on the need to send Hamlet away as what is “most fit,” Claudius suggests to Gertrude that they have dealt with Hamlet like someone with a foul disease who tries to keep it a secret, even while he is being destroyed by it. In the most private terms of what he says, at a level that Claudius himself seems unaware of, Hamlet is the foul disease that Claudius is the owner of (in the sense that he considers Hamlet to be in his power) and, with the secretiveness of the “owner of a foul disease,” he intends to keep Hamlet from divulging what he knows by sending him to his death in England. On this subtextual level, Claudius is simultaneously referring to his secret murder as a “foul disease” that he cannot divulge even though it is corroding his life. In his remarks to Gertrude, Claudius makes a shrewd, strategic use of the royal “our” and “we” to convey to her his personal “love” for Hamlet, knowing that she will include herself in the plural pronouns and thus will “understand” the necessity of sending Hamlet away.

When Claudius waits for Hamlet to be brought to him to be told that for his safety he must leave the country immediately, he once again uses a disease metaphor to express himself, this time publicly:

Diseases desperate grown  
By desperate appliance are relieved  
Or not at all.

(4.3.9–11)

In this instance, his public reference is to Hamlet as the person with a disease—his madness—that has grown to a desperate condition with the killing of Polonius. With Hamlet’s discovery of his secret, Claudius is also desperate, so that on a private level he is referring to his own diseased condition—virtually thinking about



himself out loud. The desperate remedy he mentions means one thing publicly (sending Hamlet to England) and something else privately (killing him). Since his plan for "the present death of Hamlet" is meant to keep his original crime a secret, the second soliloquy clarifies the import of these metaphoric expressions, for the planned murder of Hamlet is Claudius's "desperate appliance" "to keep it [his first murder] from divulging." Unable to repent, he has grown desperate in his diseased condition. Indeed, the fever "rages" in his blood, an expression that is consistent with the passion that causes it. To suggest the comprehensive significance of these disease figures in the context of the play as a whole, it might be noted that Francis Fergusson, who regards *Hamlet* as ritualistic drama in which "religious, cultural, and moral values . . . are at stake," sees the action aptly as a process of identifying and destroying the hidden disease that is poisoning Denmark.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, having recognized an impressive intellectual display in Claudius's first soliloquy, one must also appreciate how intensely reasoned his thought is in the second one, all of it focussed on one goal: to bring about the death of Hamlet. In its expression of will, Claudius's soliloquy combines rational-sounding legalisms with a forcefully reasoned awareness that England will be conscious of his "great power" and act accordingly. With no qualm about his objective, no trace of the conscience that troubled him in his "painted word" aside (3.1.48–53) and that tormented him in his first soliloquy, his mind is now completely subservient to his governing passion. Claudius's second soliloquy is an explicit clarification of his intention to kill Hamlet, something that was only implicit in his first soliloquy. More importantly, in the reasoned step-by-step discourse setting forth what Claudius wants to take place when Hamlet reaches England, it establishes a concentrated expression of his will that plays dramatically against providence in the final movement of the play's action.

The final soliloquy in the play is Hamlet's "How all occasions do inform against me" speech (4.4.32–66). Since the speech appears in Q2 but not in Q1 or the Folio,<sup>3</sup> and since some critics question its functionality, it is important to understand why this soliloquy, rather than the second one by Claudius, should be the speech that consummates the distinctive role of soliloquies as a major structural, stylistic, thematic, and dramatic feature of *Hamlet*. To be sure, the play does not break down dramatically if the speech or the short scene containing it is cut and Hamlet has only seven soliloquies instead of eight. But something beautiful and mean-



ingful is lost from the tragic depiction of Hamlet and the comprehensive dramatic rationale governing his soliloquies. A fine eight-cylinder engine will also run a car if one cylinder is not firing (some drivers will not notice the difference), but nobody would argue that one might as well run it on seven cylinders when it has been designed to run most smoothly and effectively on eight.

One cannot explain with certainty why the soliloquy is missing from the F text of *Hamlet*, but one can be sure that its presence in Q2 has much greater textual authority in representing Shakespeare's conception of the play than its absence from the Folio. As noted in the discussion of the first soliloquy, the Folio appeared in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death and about thirteen years after his retirement to Stratford, during which time non-authorial changes could easily have occurred.

Nonetheless, one must recognize that currently a number of scholars and critics, including the editors of the new Oxford editions of *Hamlet*,<sup>4</sup> are guided by the hypothesis that Shakespeare continued to revise his work after Q2 was published and that the omission of the soliloquy in F, together with most of the scene where it occurs, represents such revision in the form of cuts. Even so, as Harold Jenkins points out at the end of his detailed review of *Hamlet* texts in the New Arden edition, "With any or all of the group of plays having widely divergent texts there may well have been some factor in the transmission of which we know and can guess nothing."<sup>5</sup> With regard to the textual discrepancies between Q2 and F, and the revision theory that has established itself, I concur with Peter Werstine's view of these matters in his article on "The Textual Mystery of *Hamlet*":

There is little chance of conclusively demonstrating that Shakespeare's must have been the hand that originally wrote the eighty or so lines in the Folio text of *Hamlet* that have no counterparts in the second-quarto version. Nor are we likely ever to know whose hand(s) cut the more than two hundred lines from the second-quarto text that do not appear in the Folio; in the very nature of the case, there is simply no evidence for determining the authorship of cuts.<sup>6</sup>

At the 1988 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Boston, a textual seminar called "Three *Hamlets* Versus Three *Hamlets*" did not, in my judgment, advance beyond this position, leaving Q2 the most authoritative version of Shakespeare's play. Perhaps the most objective way of seeing the textual situation is to recognize that there are two distinct texts of different periods, with considerable uncertainty regarding Shakespeare's relation to the

Folio version. No such uncertainty can be stated as to Shakespeare's relation to Q2, which provides the playwright's important original idea of a certain *conceptual* completeness, regardless of one's view of the text in F.

In concluding his Introduction to the Oxford facsimile of the Second Quarto 1604–5 of *Hamlet*, Charleton Hinman affirms the primacy of Q2 as the text of the play:

[T]hough the precise relationship of the two texts remains problematical, there is very general agreement that Folio *Hamlet* was in some fashion considerably influenced by Q2 and hence that it is certainly not 'substantive' throughout. Thus the quarto . . . despite its own imperfections, is now more firmly established than ever as our principal authority for the text of *Hamlet*.<sup>7</sup>

Some critics and directors, without considering the textual, dramaturgical, and dramatic issues adequately, have allowed the absence of Hamlet's final soliloquy in F to help justify their own elimination of the speech from the play, either for ideological or pragmatic reasons. Eleanor Prosser goes so far as to say that "the soliloquy clearly makes neither logical nor dramatic sense in Shakespeare's final version of the play."<sup>8</sup> No critical judgment could be more in error. Hamlet's final soliloquy is the logical and grand culmination of one of the most important dramatic developments in the play—the subjugation of Hamlet's reason by his passion for revenge. And, as will be seen, the scene that it concludes has been dramatically conceived from its very beginning to display the defeated condition of Hamlet's intellect—his discursive reason—in a way that heightens one's tragic view of the character before he leaves the play for approximately five hundred lines.

The soliloquy is mutely recapitulatory, bringing to mind some of Hamlet's previous soliloquies in ways worth noting because the resemblances give a subtle aesthetic cohesiveness to the function of soliloquies in the structure of the play up to this point, especially in rendering Hamlet's experience and his varying voice in trying to fulfill what he thinks is the duty of revenge. Dramatically, the speech resembles the "rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy in the way Hamlet makes a personal example out of something he has just encountered and in the way similar features of conflict are displayed, including self-reproach. The recurrence of "beast" and "discourse" and "reason" in a cluster brings to mind (and ears!) the forceful phrase, "a beast that wants discourse of reason," from

the first soliloquy. The speech recalls the "To be or not to be" soliloquy in its thought about thought, in its consideration of thought as a symptom of cowardice, and in the way the movement of thought throughout the speech is accented step by step, the ratiocination making one conscious of Hamlet's mind at work. Most importantly, although not noticeable because of the attractive quasi-intellectual tone here, his previous two soliloquies. (" 'Tis now the very witching time" and "Now might I do it") provide a clarifying context for the defective working of his mind in the present one, for his reason is in fact no less subjugated by passion here than in the other two.

The omission of Hamlet's last soliloquy eliminates this incidental but attractive recapitulatory quality and affects the dramatic and thematic development of the play in other ways. It eliminates Hamlet's expression of renewed resolution to achieve his revenge, an expression of will that balances Claudius's expression of will to have Hamlet killed in England. These willful intentions of the two protagonists have an important bearing on Shakespeare's management of providence in the play. Cuts would also affect the artistry and aesthetics of extended duration in the rendering of providence.<sup>9</sup> It might also be noted that the omission of the speech dampens the notion of delay, which is an important matter to some students of the play but continues to be a critically unstable issue.

Since a major purpose of Shakespeare's use of soliloquies in *Hamlet* is to provide views of the prince at crucial moments in the course of his experience as a revenger, this dramaturgical procedure makes this soliloquy virtually necessary in order to reveal Hamlet's sense of himself and his private attitude following his first disastrous episode in pursuit of revenge, when he kills Polonius by mistake. While the soliloquy shows Hamlet still intent on pursuing revenge, it does so in a way that now enables the audience to view him tragically and with a measure of sympathy, something not possible when, in his previous two soliloquies, one listened to the rabid revenger who could "drink hot blood" and kill Claudius with satisfaction only when he could believe he was also damning his soul. What Shakespeare does with climatic emphasis in the play's last soliloquy is reestablish the essential terms of Hamlet's tragic preoccupation with revenge. Celebrating human reason while revealing a fine mind overthrown by an obsession, the soliloquy provides perhaps the most comprehensive and poignant image of the prince as a tragic figure up to that point.

The soliloquy is also dramatically important in facilitating a transition from Hamlet as he appears before the sea voyage to



Hamlet as he appears after his return from it, a change critics have sometimes found abrupt and difficult to comprehend. The "How all occasions" soliloquy makes the change in Hamlet more comprehensible than if there were no transition from the "Now might I do it" soliloquy. The latter, as was seen, projects a totally repulsive portrait of Hamlet the revenger that is not mitigated consequentially by the Closet Scene with Gertrude, the hide-and-seek foolery with his school fellows, and the darkly humorous interview with Claudius before Hamlet is sent away. Without the more sympathetic stage picture of Hamlet engaged in thought and using language that evokes the Elizabethan spirituality of the mind, the tragic resonance that should accompany him to his death is diminished.

Thus, the last soliloquy delineates the contrast between the Hamlet who is no longer able to think straight because he is so obsessed with revenge, as my analysis will show, and the Hamlet who, through the still unimpaired intuitive capacity of his mind, finds "heaven ordinant" in everything and affirms the working of a "special providence," "a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough hew them how we will" (5.2.48; 219–20; 10–11). In these particular terms, which involve the two aspects of man's rational soul as Elizabethans understood it (the discursive and the intuitive), the contrast itself sustains the centrality of Hamlet's mind in Shakespeare's conception of the prince, a characteristic that dominates the soliloquy from beginning to end. Furthermore, in evoking the lofty quality of "godlike reason," which is congruent with the even loftier intuitive capacity of the human mind, the soliloquy prepares for and contributes to the final effect of Hamlet's tragedy. After his return, instead of pressing on in pursuit of revenge, as is his intention at the end of the soliloquy, Hamlet has faith that providence will provide the right opportunity for it, although again he seems to confuse his commitment to revenge with the independent process of divine justice. Despite this confusion, his alteration upon his return suggests that he may have been on the verge of profound personal growth, of perhaps even transcending the revenger's obsession, at the very time when he was tragically doomed.

From the way the speech is set up in the scene, it is clear that Shakespeare was as intent on presenting Hamlet in soliloquy at this moment as he was when he cleared the stage for the "'Tis now the very witching time" soliloquy by having Hamlet say, "Leave me, friends" (3.2.387). Against the logic of Hamlet's probably



being escorted under guard and against the king's order to "Follow him at foot" (4.3.54), Shakespeare has Rosencrantz and Guildenstern grant the prince's request when he says to them, "I'll be with you straight. Go a little before" (4.4.31). In the immediacy of performance, such minor inconsistencies pose no problem and go unnoticed, especially when they can be dispelled by a bit of silent business on the part of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who can show reluctance in granting Hamlet his request and make clear their intention to keep an eye on him nearby with the guards, who can be whispered to or receive a simple gesture or nod to leave him. Actually, such incidental business is not even necessary in the flow of the action. Since the prince of Denmark now seems cooperative, when he asks to be left alone for a moment Rosencrantz and Guildenstern decide to take his word that he will be with them "straight." For all they know, he seems willing to go to England for his own good. Harley Granville-Barker has a footnoted comment about the situation that is precisely right: "He is treated with the respect due to a prince. He is under arrest nevertheless."<sup>10</sup>

Hamlet's continuing preoccupation with revenge springs from his mind with his first words in the soliloquy: "How all occasions do inform against me, / And spur my dull revenge!" (32–33). Toward the middle of the speech, this concern develops into a self-critical expression of bewilderment:

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.

(43–45)

And in his last words, jamming himself on with this obsession, he proclaims a renewed resolution: "O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (65–66). What is strange about these statements, which give an organizational frame to what Hamlet says in the soliloquy, is that they are not in accord with Hamlet's situation and what the audience has actually seen.

The fact is that as he speaks Hamlet has blood on his hands because his thoughts have quite recently been very bloody indeed. It is no more than a matter of hours (only minutes of dramatic time) since he expressed bloody thoughts in two soliloquies and then willfully killed a man, thinking it was the king behind the

arras. Claudius, one knows, is so certain Hamlet's thoughts are bloody that he has him captured immediately after the murder and orders him to be put "with speed aboard," saying, "I'll have him hence to-night" (4.3.55). One must wonder, therefore, why Hamlet reproaches himself and implies that he has been inactive and that his thoughts have not been bloody.

A suitable answer is provided if one sees the soliloquy as completing the tragic portrait of Hamlet expending his spirit in the wasteland of vengeance. Whereas in his previous soliloquy the irrational intensity of his passion made only a perfect revenge acceptable, one that had "no relish of salvation in't" (3.4.92), now that same irrational intensity generates acute frustration and impatience and reduces to inconsequence anything that is not the actual realization of Claudius's death. In the absence of the fulfillment of revenge, regardless of what he has thought and done in pursuit of it, he feels guilty, reproaches himself as derelict, and thinks that he may be a coward. Moreover, Hamlet is being sent away under escort from his intended victim, which must make his sense of failure, and consequent guilt, extremely acute. The word "dull" is already associated with the feeling of guilt he expressed when the Ghost, impatient for revenge, reappeared and told him his purpose was almost "blunted" (3.4.111). Psycholinguistically, "dull" seems to arise from "blunted," a word impressed in Hamlet's memory or subconscious from the Ghost's own impatience in reprimanding him.

What one encounters in this soliloquy is a very confused Hamlet who strains to ennoble and give validity to his continuing commitment to revenge. While appearing to engage in rational discourse, he can no longer think soundly. He seems not to appreciate the reality of his situation when he says: "I have cause, and will, and strength, and means / To do't" (45–46). In the perfectly even iambic movement of the single-syllable words, with the unaccented "and" repeatedly pointing up the ensuing word, Shakespeare highlights each accented main term in a way that makes one pause for a moment's reflection to comprehend its specific essence. The word "cause" (used twice in the speech, with complex ironies, including "cause" as "reason") is another of the play's many juridicial terms and evokes a notion of justice, which, as in Claudius's second soliloquy, plays against his violent intent. Similarly, "will" is expressive of his passion-driven intent and desire, but he seems not to recognize that he is presently subject to the will of Claudius. It is his speaking of having "strength" and "means" that especially betrays Hamlet's blindness to his actual

helplessness as a prisoner. Perhaps his statement arises from an unexpressed thought or fantasy of achieving revenge after making an escape from his escort, an escape he will actually carry out later. One may assume that Hamlet reflected on the chance encounter with the pirate ship during his sea voyage home, realizing that without that chance event he did not have the “strength” and “means” to escape.

Like the “To be” speech, Hamlet’s final soliloquy is especially important for the stage image it projects of a man engaged in thought. It completes the pattern of such stage images arising from the soliloquies—more generally, a pattern of images of the mind—but it stands in significant contrast to the only other soliloquy in which thought itself is one of the main subjects considered. Throughout the speech Hamlet’s reflections play ironically against what has been established both in the play and in the scene. In moving from his opening statement to the next one—

What is a man,  
If his chief good and market of his time  
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more

(33–35)

—Hamlet continues his self-critical expression of impatience by condemning his supposed inaction as equivalent to the routine of mere animal existence. As he does so often and in ways that invariably give him impressive moral and intellectual stature, he casts his thoughts in generalized, universal-sounding terms. The rhetorical thrust of the question and answer (meant to make him—or any person—reject being “a beast, no more”) collides ironically with the play’s various associations of beasts with revenge. These may be seen, for example, in Hamlet’s metaphor of his revenge as a poor-spirited or “dull” horse that needs a spur; in the repulsive beast image of Hamlet ready to “drink hot blood”; in Hamlet’s exclamation, “A rat?” (3.4.24), when he thrusts his sword vengefully into the arras; and in the satanic portrait of the revenger Pyrrhus with “sable arms” (2.2.452), whom Hamlet had compared to the “Hyrceanian beast” (2.2.450), a tiger. The irony is compounded in the next movement of Hamlet’s thought when his beast metaphor leads him to a sublime expression of the essential difference between man and animal—“godlike reason”:

Sure He that made us with such large discourse,  
Looking before and after, gave us not

That capability and godlike reason  
To fust in us unus'd.

(36–39)

In the rhetorical opposition he makes between “godlike reason” and “a beast, no more,” Hamlet assumes that reason supports and ennobles his pursuit of revenge. Indeed, Shakespeare drives home this point by having Hamlet say explicitly that he has “Excitements [incentives, urgings] of my reason and my blood” (58) to seek vengeance. But the play—as is seen in several of Hamlet’s soliloquies—has portrayed revenge as a passion that overthrows reason and subjugates man’s rational faculty, rendering him incapable of “looking before and after” dispassionately.

A concrete example of this corruption of reason by passion is provided by Hamlet’s next statement, which he expresses in the spirit of one who is not allowing “godlike reason” to “fust” in him unused:

Now whether it be  
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple  
Of thinking too precisely on th’ event—  
A thought which quarter’d hath but one part wisdom  
And ever three parts coward—I do not know  
Why yet I live to say, “This things’s to do.”

(39–44)

At the most general level, “bestial oblivion” refers back to the original notion of existing like “a beast, no more.” But “bestial” modifies “oblivion” and that word, in a play where a whole soliloquy shows Hamlet resolving to “remember” the Ghost, evokes the notion of forgetting;<sup>11</sup> “bestial oblivion,” as editors who gloss the phrase point out, means “forgetfulness like that of beasts (which do not remember their parents long),” to cite Kittredge’s often-echoed note.<sup>12</sup> In the rhetoric of the soliloquy, “bestial oblivion,” like bestial existence in general, is something to be rejected. Although Hamlet posits “thinking” as in opposition to “bestial oblivion,” as he had earlier opposed “a beast” and “godlike reason,” he immediately describes the exercise of his thought as possibly “one part wisdom / And ever three parts coward.” The paradox in Hamlet’s confusion at this moment is that on the one hand he dissociates himself from what is bestial while on the other hand he denigrates the exercise of thought. Yet all the while he believes he is engaged dispassionately in the use of godlike reason, looking before and after.



Although Hamlet seems to be considering objectively two possible explanations for why "This thing's to do," it would be hard to imagine a greater confusion of thought than is represented by the contradiction between "bestial oblivion" and "thinking too precisely on th' event." In fact the two terms are logically untenable together. One precludes the consideration of the other as a possible explanation of his problem. Yet Hamlet postulates this very contradiction—that is, that it might be a case of either having forgotten about his father and revenge or of thinking too much about them. So great is Hamlet's obsession with revenge that, out of frustration, he castigates himself unfairly with the hyperbolic and impossible notion that he has been forgetful. Equally untenable is the notion that he has not killed Claudius because, out of cowardice, he has thought too much about doing so.

In castigating himself for "thinking too precisely on th' event," Hamlet is possibly referring retrospectively to his thoughts in the Prayer Scene when he had a chance to kill Claudius but decided not to. While there is truth in the idea that excessive thought can be a symptom of fear—an insight arrived at in the "To be" soliloquy—it is hard to see how this truth applies to Hamlet. He successfully presented the mousetrap play, at great personal risk, and his tone, attitude, and bloody thoughts in the "Now might I do it" soliloquy confirmed his readiness to kill the king as soon as it would be real revenge, not "hire and salary" (3.4.79). If he now thinks he should have killed Claudius when he came upon him kneeling in prayer, he is distorting his reasons for not doing so by suggesting that his thoughts at that time were three parts coward. His lunge to kill the person behind the arras said otherwise, consistent with his expressed readiness "to drink hot blood."

It is the latter half of the speech that clarifies the thought guiding the dramaturgy of the short scene, for it is Shakespeare's quite deliberate choice that Hamlet should have a conversation with the Captain of the Norwegian army but not exchange so much as a single word with Fortinbras. Although a generally recognized purpose of the scene is to bring Fortinbras into the play to prepare for his appearance at the end, this is ancillary to the major way Fortinbras figures in Hamlet's thoughts. As one follows his thoughts, one can see exactly what Hamlet meant in scolding Gertrude: "When the compulsive ardure gives the charge / . . . reason panders will" (3.4.86, 88). Corrupted by a compulsive revenge passion, Hamlet's mind seizes the "occasion" not only to try to ennoble his own purpose by identifying it with "godlike" reason,

as has been noted, but also to fabricate an example for himself out of Fortinbras, finding in that leader and his senseless campaign against the Polack a rationalization for greater resolution in pursuit of revenge.

After Fortinbras's short speech that opens the scene and serves to establish him in the play, he exits as Hamlet enters. In the dramatic movement, no more than a fleeting glimpse of Fortinbras serves as the basis for Hamlet's gushing admiration of him, so that, with unintended irony, his crudely conceived example is indeed "gross as earth" (48). Troubled by a sense of failure to care about honor, he sees Fortinbras as

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 egg-shell.

(48–53)

Fortinbras is great, Hamlet tells himself in formulating a sententious generalization, because he is ready "greatly to find quarrel in a straw / When honor's at the stake" (55–56). Hamlet's view of Fortinbras, generated in his imagination out of an unjustified sense of guilt, serves his perverse need to reproach himself because, in opposition to what has actually been seen, he feels he has "let all sleep" (59)—"sleep" recalling both its earlier occurrence and "bestial oblivion." "While to my shame," he continues in the same vein,

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.

(59–65)

In the context of the scene, Hamlet's remarks reveal gross inconsistency and distortion, his ambivalent tone in places seeming to be a symptom of a sudden shift in attitude. The inconsistency (to which Hamlet unwittingly directs one by his amplified expression of a vast slaughter on a tiny scrap of land) is that his

present acceptance of an appalling carnage contradicts the views he had expressed and concurred with previously—*without any ambivalence*—in his conversation with the Captain, *before* he made an “occasion” to inform against himself out of Fortinbras and his marching army.

Early in the scene, upon learning how worthless was the land Fortinbras was going to fight for, Hamlet could not imagine that the Polack would defend it, and he saw Fortinbras’s campaign as a symptom of social corruption, a self-indulgent squandering of men and money—“th’ imposthume of much wealth and peace / That inward breaks, and shows no cause without / Why the man dies” (27–29). This harshly judgmental view of Fortinbras’s campaign for a worthless “straw” (26) cannot be reconciled with Hamlet’s baseless later admiration of Fortinbras for his supposed ability “greatly to find quarrel in a straw / When honor’s at the stake.” What becomes clear is that Shakespeare’s dramatic strategy in the scene is first to make the audience follow and agree with the reasoning behind the humane views of Hamlet and the plain-talking Captain in the exchange they have when Hamlet asks where the army is heading:

- 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 garrison’d.
- HAMLET. 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. I humbly thank you, sir.
- CAPTAIN. God buy you, sir.

(17–30)

After sympathizing with the sensible views expressed here, when one starts to follow what Hamlet says about these matters in his soliloquy, looking before and after one finds that Hamlet has not only abruptly changed his own views (which logically should lead to a condemnation of Fortinbras for his Polish caper) but has distorted the forthrightly expressed views of the army’s spokesman, who has not in any way given Hamlet the slightest



reason to think that the men are content to "Go to their graves like beds," inspired by a notion of honor. On the contrary, the place that is to be the deathbed of thousands is totally unattractive to him and worthless to everybody. Since there is no trace of Hotspur-like bravura in the Captain (as there is in Hamlet's fantasized view of Fortinbras), there is no basis for Hamlet's thinking that the men go willingly or heroically to their deaths "for a fantasy and trick of fame." Indeed, precisely because there is no basis for Hamlet's saying this about the army, Shakespeare has made it possible for us to see that this phrase, linking the issue of honor to a fantasy, can apply only to Fortinbras—an irony Hamlet hardly intends but that he unwittingly engenders by distorting the Captain's attitude.

Hamlet's reasoning may be summarized as follows: if Fortinbras can expend so much effort, money, and life when a minor issue of honor is "at the stake," then Hamlet, with his sense of a major issue of honor at stake, is all the more obligated to pursue revenge. Ultimately, the crucial question concerns how much real honor is involved in either cause. Hamlet never learns from the Captain or attempts to clarify what the specific issue of honor is that motivates the Prince of Norway. In fact, there is none, for the play has made it clear that Fortinbras's uncle, after discovering and stopping his nephew's secret and illegal revenge campaign against Claudius, encouraged him to use his newly levied forces to fight in Poland. Since this restless idle energy could have caused trouble at home if it had been improperly deployed (as had almost happened), Old Norway wisely sent his nephew on a military expedition out of the country, removing from the body politic "th' imposthume of such wealth and peace," as Hamlet had correctly diagnosed Fortinbras's case originally (with more meaning than he seems to have intended). Ironically, Hamlet's initial diagnosis associates Fortinbras's actions with a fatal disease, a metaphor consistent with the fact that, from the human point of view evoked in the scene, the Fortinbras expedition will result in a senseless waste of life. Although, from the viewpoint of Renaissance theory as to how to keep the body politic healthy and fit, the campaign may be seen as a desirable military exercise,<sup>13</sup> it certainly does not involve an issue of honor, not even a straw's worth. Since no issue of honor is to be found in Fortinbras's cause, Hamlet, through his excessive desire to emulate the Norwegian leader, ironically calls into question whether there is any honor in his own cause.

Shakespeare has been remarkably skillful in his management of tone in the soliloquy as a means, on the one hand, of stressing again that Hamlet is a man of considerable intellect who values



“godlike reason” and, on the other, of revealing how the turbulent desire for vengeance in him precludes dispassionate reasoning. While everything Hamlet says in the speech arises from his continuing preoccupation with revenge, Shakespeare has chosen not to give Hamlet any trace of the sneering, callous tone of the previous soliloquy, a tone that conveyed the ugliest essence of vengeance and repelled sympathy for Hamlet. By contrast, Hamlet’s final soliloquy is cast in a winning, lofty-sounding, quasi-intellectual tone that serves at first to obscure the subjugation of reason by passion. On the surface the style and tone seem quite appropriate for the discourse of reason until at the very end that tone is suddenly shattered by the anti-intellectual outburst which produces the snarling idiom of the frantic revenger. The lofty subjects of Hamlet’s thoughts—reason, honor, the significance of action—are infinitely more important than his thoroughly vengeful thoughts about them.

Indeed, when the tone suddenly changes with his exclamation, “O, from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth,” one is struck with the concluding irony that Hamlet’s thoughts in the soliloquy are really worth nothing *because* they are bloody. More precisely, they are worth nothing because they are confused, irrationally inconsistent, and based on distortion. That they are intrinsically flimsy is suggested in the context by the connotations of words and phrases such as “delicate and tender,” “puff’d,” “egg-shell,” “straw,” “fantasy and trick of fame.” In fabricating a comparison to inform against him, Hamlet uses most of these terms to define what he considers his infinitely more substantial cause involving honor, but the terms also convey an ambivalence resulting from the distortion of his original attitude toward the forth-coming battle for an “egg-shell.” Two of the words—“trick” and “straw”—recur immediately at the beginning of the next scene in the Gentleman’s report of Ophelia’s madness; and two other important words that conclude Hamlet’s soliloquy also recur when the Gentleman says, “Her speech is *nothing*,” although her words “would make one think there might be *thought*” (4.5.5–11; my emphasis). An inversion of the Gentleman’s remark could constitute an ironic commentary on Hamlet’s last soliloquy: his thought is nothing, although his words would make one think there might be rationality guiding his speech. Juxtaposition of the same words used at the end of one scene and at the beginning of the next produces a tonal feedback that suggests *en passant* an association of Hamlet’s obsessed mind with madness.

Whatever the explanation for the omission of Hamlet's last soliloquy from the Folio, this examination of it has attempted to show that the speech is an integral part of the scene where it occurs in Q2 and has substantial significance for the portrayal of Hamlet as a tragic figure both at that point in the action and in the larger context of the play as a whole, particularly in preparing for the so-called "change" in Hamlet when he returns from his sea voyage. Since Hamlet's soliloquies collectively have a distinctive structural role in rendering that portrait, it is consistent with their function in Shakespeare's dramaturgy that the final view of Hamlet, prior to his exit from the play for a long period, be in a soliloquy that somehow epitomizes his tragic plight sympathetically. His tragedy, in large measure, consists in becoming a circumstantial victim of an all-too-common passion from which his great intelligence does not save him although it interferes considerably—sometimes despite himself—with his becoming an easy victim, in contrast to Laertes. This view of Hamlet's tragedy finds his complex intelligence of central significance in Shakespeare's conception of the character and helps account for Hamlet's strong concerns with man's "godlike reason" and the thought that it produces. In his last soliloquy, where his own thinking is hopelessly confused—indeed, *because* it is so confused—there is something poignantly ironic in his celebration of human reason in an attempt to rationalize his "bloody" thoughts. While Hamlet recognizes that he has disturbances ("excitements") both of "reason" and of "blood" (58), his thoughts in the last soliloquy are based on blood alone, with reason pandering will.

## 6

# Wills and Fates: Intimations of Providence

Our wills and fates do so contrary run  
That our devices still are overthrown;  
Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.

The final two soliloquies in *Hamlet*, one by Claudius and one by Hamlet, are imbued with the willful determination each character has to bring about the death of the other. This equation of the wills of two mighty opposites—part of the play’s artfully developed equation of murder and revenge—is dramatically and thematically significant in relation to the fateful working out of providential justice in the dénouement in the play. Although Shakespeare endows each character with a basic faith in Christian values, each discards Christian restraints and relies instead on exercising personal will—Claudius by rejecting repentance and undertaking another murder, Hamlet by committing himself unquestioningly to the Ghost’s call for revenge.

Each character, in affirming his purpose, is blind to how his will might be thwarted or redirected. Claudius believes his treacherous scheme is foolproof once Hamlet is aboard the ship for England, as seen from the tight logic of expectation in his last soliloquy. And Hamlet, as has been noted, seems out of touch with the reality of his captive state when, in his final soliloquy, he says that he has “strength, and means” to carry out his revenge. Countering the intentions of the protagonists, providence in *Hamlet*—a synonym for “fates” and “a divinity that shapes our ends”—ultimately dispenses divine justice in a mysterious process that disallows the triumph of human will governed by homicidal passions. The strength and mysterious means of a “special providence” are intimated in Hamlet’s chance encounter with the pirate ship, a strange event that cancels Claudius’s will as effectively as it makes

possible Hamlet's unforeseeable escape and return to Denmark before news can reach Claudius that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.

Each character in his own way injects the idea of providence into the play in the final movement of the action. Claudius's questions of astonishment in receiving a letter from Hamlet—"What should this mean?" "How should this be so? how otherwise?" (4.7.49, 58)—direct one implicitly to the mystery of providence as the answer to the questions. And Hamlet, upon his return to Denmark, speaks explicitly of providence in a variety of ways, bringing the providential theme strongly into the concluding dramatic movement of the play. His observations about providence amplify the theme first introduced directly into the play by the Player King in the lines that form the epigraph for this concluding chapter. Indeed the Player King's language seems to have influenced the prince's expression (for example, his choice of "will" and "ends") when Hamlet, telling Horatio of his intimations of providence, says aphoristically, in a variation of the Player King's gnomic style:

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will.

Significantly, as an indication of Shakespeare's desire to give thrust to the idea at this point in the play, Horatio interjects in agreement: "That is most certain" (5.2.10–11).

Up until the final movement of the play, after Hamlet's last soliloquy, the role of providence remains indefinite and unnoticeable in *Hamlet*. From the very beginning, however, a universal mystery begins to pervade the play, evoked by the dramatically visible but enigmatic Ghost, whose inexplicable nature and origin raise a number of questions. Indeed, the world of *Hamlet* is fraught with questions and is cast, in Maynard Mack's apt phrase, "preeminently in the interrogative mood."<sup>1</sup> Many of the questions are not quite the same for the audience, from its perspective outside the play, as they are for Hamlet and other characters from their concerns within it. Nor were the perceptions and comprehensions of Shakespeare's audience, with its world view, the same as that of an audience today, particularly with regard to the Ghost and other extraordinary matters, including possible manifestations of providence.

In producing a strong effect of mystery in the play, the Ghost itself is not to be confused with providence, though this issue is



made murky by the combination of the mysteriousness of the Ghost and the fact that Claudius deserves to be punished for his horrendous crime against divine order. Nonetheless, in the context of the play's Christian scheme of things, it should be unimaginable that a revenge ghost can be an agent of divine providence sent to demand that Hamlet pursue an anti-Christian act of personal revenge in behalf of the Ghost or Hamlet himself. A passion-driven act of revenge cannot be rationalized critically or theologically into a notion of heaven's way of punishing Claudius. In this regard, turning as it does on the Ghost's own desire for revenge, Hamlet's situation as an incited revenger is not comparable to the role of someone like Richmond at the end of *Richard III*, where Richmond prays to God for support and fights in His service.

This matter of the relationship—or rather the absence of a relationship—between providence and the Ghost is of considerable importance, for it is easy to lapse into the recurring critical error of accepting Hamlet's fatalistic view of himself as “born to set . . . right” a time that is “out of joint” (1.5.188–89). Undoubtedly because his expression of this quasi-providential notion comes early in the play, shortly after his encounter with the Ghost, it is often mistaken for an authentic providential role assigned to him—as though his effort to fulfill that specific role is what the action of the tragedy is mainly about. If the play is understood as offering a view of revenge as a debasing, brutalizing passion that damages the mind and human sensibilities of the revenger (even if he succeeds in destroying a victim who deserves to be punished), then one must appreciate that the play does this by rendering the notion of personal revenge quite distinct from—and incompatible with—the process of divine justice in punishing the initial wrongdoer. To be sure, in the end Hamlet is circumstantially absorbed into that strange providential process, and it is possible to think that Hamlet is both being punished and meeting his own tragic end after his mind has become irrevocably tainted and he has incurred the guilt of killing Polonius in pursuing revenge. But the ravage of revenge on “godlike reason”—the tragic deterioration of Hamlet's noble mind as revealed by the rationale of his soliloquies in dramatic sequence—requires that this depiction of the dehumanizing passion not be compromised or mitigated by any linkage to divine direction or purpose, or by the fallacious notion of the passion-driven Ghost that revenge can somehow be pursued without tainting the mind.

We know, and Shakespeare's audience may very well have appreciated it as well, that the Ghost in *Hamlet*, for all of Shake-

speare's originality in working with it, achieves its primary significance and identity as the conventional spirit and symbol of revenge in the dramaturgy of revenge tragedy. Within the technical parameters of this particular dramatic genre, the undertaking of revenge is accepted as a given, seemingly in recognition of what is perhaps an instinctual human impulse. Hence the revenger does not reflect on the ethics of revenge in committing himself to pursue it. The nature of what the Ghost wants and its toll on the revenger figure essentially in Shakespeare's creative handling of the stock material. It is a testimony to the greatness of his play in its genre—and as a vast dramatic and poetic system of intersubjective elements—that critics have often been lured from a relatively objective view of the drama within its genre, where it fulfills itself as a critique of revenge, into various more subjective or partial readings (some more cogent and substantial than others), such as the psychoanalytical views of an Oedipal Hamlet or views of the play as a ritual or goatsong ("a sacrificial tragedy in a tradition older than Christendom") or views that subscribe to Hamlet's seeing himself first as fated to set the time right and then as "scourge and minister."<sup>2</sup> In a desire to fathom the mystery of providence generated by the play, critics have consistently failed to see that Shakespeare has rendered that mystery—like the mystery of the Ghost—as something unfathomable, beyond human comprehension, involving a test of faith consistent with Hamlet's allusions to and intimations of providence when he returns from his sea voyage. This mystery is the essence of the effect produced by a *dénouement* seemingly governed by a divinity that shapes the end in a grand, chance-ridden, culminating design of deaths and timely arrivals laden with irony in the final scene.

Approximately the last third of *Hamlet* does not contain any soliloquies. This feature of the overall design raises a question about the structural relation of the last third of the play to the first two thirds, where soliloquies occur regularly within the dramatic structure. The lack of soliloquies in the final movement quickens the tempo by eliminating the pauses created by such speeches, but more importantly it helps render the change in Hamlet's outlook upon his return to Denmark. This change is linked with the idea of providence that enters strongly into the play with Hamlet's return from his sea voyage.

Because soliloquies tend to preoccupy one with the *inner* state of a character, whereas a providential design directs one to the notion of a universal *outer* process, the absence of soliloquies in

approximately the last third of *Hamlet* allows the play's underlying idea of a providential process to emerge with greater clarity and force, free of any subjective counterthrust from the self-absorption of a character in soliloquy. Hamlet's meditative speeches after his return to Denmark (in the graveyard and right before the fencing match) are an effective artistic modulation of Hamlet in soliloquy, providing a certain compensatory balance for the stylistic weight of soliloquies in the preceding part of the play. While Hamlet's thoughts in these speeches remain intensely personal and his insights give a sense of his inner self, as his soliloquies did, they are without any of the passionate assertions of will found in those soliloquies. Moreover, the specific things Hamlet says, as well as his tone (particularly in the "we defy augury" speech), move away from his absorption with self, expressed through the soliloquies, toward an almost mystical comprehension of fate or providence or "heaven ordinant." These meditative speeches are the chief means Shakespeare uses to establish strongly the idea of providence in the play's final movement in preparation for the concluding action. Indeed, in the play's overall design, when the idea of providence becomes dramatically functional in its final movement, it is the main artistic counterbalance to the strong effect of soliloquies in the preceding action.

Upon his return to Denmark Hamlet's sense of "heaven ordinant" in everything that happens, of "special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (5.2.48,219–20), is a matter that relates to his mind and, in terms of dramatic characterization, has links with his intuitive foreboding in the first two soliloquies and his response to the Ghost's disclosure: "O my prophetic soul!" In the last third of the play, Shakespeare emphasizes the intuitive and spiritual significance of Hamlet's intellect. This development, involving the so-called "change" in Hamlet, is best understood in terms of the Elizabethan view of the make-up of man's mind or "rational soul." As W. R. Elton explains, in an essay on "Shakespeare and the Thought of His Age," Elizabethans saw man's mind as divided into "the intuitive or angelic, whose knowledge was immediately infused, without any intervening process; and the discursive, involving rational effort and sense data."<sup>3</sup>

In the last movement of the play, Shakespeare calls new attention to Hamlet's mind by highlighting its intuitive capability, which seems to be unimpaired. In the play's final soliloquy he had shown Hamlet's discursive reason unable to function dispassionately. His strong reactivation of the intuitive dimension of Hamlet's mind needs to be appreciated as a highly imaginative stroke of charac-



terization in the conception of Hamlet as a man whose mind figures centrally in his tragedy. Hamlet's intuitive sense accounts for his fatalistic calm and his comprehension of things divine, although it does not dispel his residual desire for revenge. His intuitive sense is seen in the "ill" or "gain-giving" (5.2.212, 216) he feels about his heart before the fencing match and in his "readiness" to accept whatever providence might bring. His "we defy augury" speech, spoken to Horatio, resembles a soliloquy in that it makes one aware of Hamlet's interior but, more importantly, it is in contact with what Robert West has called the "outer mystery":<sup>4</sup>

. . . 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.

(5.2.219–24)

Hamlet's intuition here anticipates and seems to be in touch with something supernatural that subsequently manifests itself in the design of deaths, including his own, during the Fencing Scene. The supernatural force evoked by that design has a crucial bearing on how Hamlet achieves his revenge, which unfolds primarily as divine retribution on Claudius, not as Hamlet's personal vengeance, although the two events coincide in the way Claudius dies. The coincidence itself resonates with mystery that intensifies the final effect. This dramatic fulfillment of Hamlet's foreboding is the equivalent in the dénouement of what was seen in the beginning, where Hamlet expresses a similar intuitive sense: "I doubt some foul play." Thus the drama is framed by the mysterious effect of the supernatural, with Hamlet's intuitive sense linked directly to it at both ends.

The idea of divine providence, which becomes prominent only in the final dramatic movement of *Hamlet*, has a forceful integrative effect on the play as a whole. The framing of the play by Hamlet's intuitive forebodings functions with other supernatural components to help generate an effect of fate or providence at work in the falling out of events. Broadly, the seemingly random, chance-ridden movement is a stylistic attribute of the play, one that helps render providence as an unobtrusive extraordinary process (that is, beyond ordinary cause and effect) in the linear working out of the action. Events that contribute obliquely to the suggestion of providence are subtly woven in, some of them acquiring in retrospect a strong sense of the special role chance has played in them.



They figure in the pervasive but elusive art of Shakespeare's circular poetics. Such events include the Guards' reporting of the Ghost by chance to Horatio first and then to Hamlet, rather than to a military superior and the king (the more logical persons to inform); the ominous circulation of the Ghost precisely when Hamlet is persuaded not to return to Wittenberg (Claudius has his will but it eventually redounds on him); and the arrival of Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern with their opportunistic and joking pursuit of fortune in Claudius's court. Approximately in the middle of the play the subject of providence—expressed as an opposition between “wills and fates,” “thoughts” and “ends” is made explicit in the speeches of the Player King, whose company of actors comes to Elsinore by chance at this time. In the last third of the play this supernatural deterministic force begins to figure strongly as a dynamic in the design of the action. Its emergence is emphasized dramatically in Hamlet's strange and surprising return from his sea voyage, his consciousness imbued with a sense of the mystery of providence that figures in all events.

The muted role of providence in the overall organization of the play helps explain why portions of it move scenically in an almost leisurely, episodic manner, without a rigorous or clear causality linking some of the events. The entry of the Players into the action and Hamlet's encounter with the pirates, for example, occur in such a manner. In commenting on the pirate episode as Hamlet tells of it in his letter (4.6.13–30), Coleridge rightly observed (without looking into the larger significance of his observation) that in *Hamlet* “mere accidents, independent of will, form an essential part of the plot.”<sup>5</sup> The aesthetics of long duration in *Hamlet*, which in the end makes one conscious of the ordered mystery of time passing through events and of events passing through time, helps render the effect of fate as a subtle process at work in the world of the play, a process beyond clear or complete human perception, though Hamlet acquires an intuitive inkling of it several times in the play. The soliloquies in *Hamlet* constitute an important aspect of the leisurely movement of the action, producing an arresting counterpoint with those segments of the drama involving more than one character.

Providence in *Hamlet* is probably the most difficult aspect of the play for a modern audience to relate to and experience as part of the play. At the end of the tragedy it figures in a powerful climactic design that both tests and confirms Christian faith, even while the questions concerning such faith seem to linger and puzzle. To a great extent this is a peculiarly modern response, in which an analytical and skeptical bias is at odds with the synthesizing,

order-seeking, God-affirming outlook of a general Christian consciousness in Shakespeare's time. But in some measure the puzzlement is also written into the play, in ways too complex and tangential to discuss here. The play produces its climactic effect by rendering the idea of a mysterious providence operating in human affairs, an idea implying that divine justice will be done but that it has its own inscrutable timetable and way of proceeding. In this instance providence achieves its purpose ironically through the agency of Hamlet. After he has tainted his mind and cast his will in opposition to the Everlasting, he seems to become an instrument of providence to punish Claudius.

When Hamlet kills Claudius at the end of the play, the dramatic coinciding of what appears to be divine retribution and Hamlet's personal revenge is the culmination of Shakespeare's artistic counterpointing of the two irreconcilable moral codes that arise initially from the inconsistent injunctions of the Ghost: to take revenge on Claudius but to leave Gertrude to heaven. How to understand this ironic conjunction of what seems to be personal revenge and providential or divine justice at the end of the play has been at the center of conflicting criticism that bears on overall views of the play and the tragedy of Hamlet. The issue requires at least brief consideration here because it figures centrally in the view of *Hamlet*—and Hamlet—encouraged from the perspective of the soliloquies.

Fredson Bowers defines Hamlet's tragedy as a case of the prince lapsing into "a criminal private revenge," instead of remaining patiently faithful to his realization that "he has been supernaturally appointed as a minister"<sup>6</sup> to punish Claudius in a public manner that heaven will arrange and that Hamlet will recognize when it comes. "We may see with full force the anomalous position Hamlet conceives for himself," says Bowers, summarizing Hamlet's predicament as follows:

... is he to be the private-revenger scourge *or* the public-revenger minister? If scourge, he will make his own opportunities, will revenge murder with murder, and by this means visit God's wrath on corruption. If minister, God will see to it that a proper opportunity is offered in some way that will keep him clear from crime, one which will preserve him to initiate a good rule over Denmark. This crux for Hamlet has not been really pointed up, in part because Shakespeare had no need to make it explicit for his own audience.<sup>7</sup>

According to Bowers, after Hamlet kills Polonius by mistake, he becomes heaven's scourge and is doomed to divine punishment for

pursuing private revenge. Although Bowers's explanation is made entirely in Christian terms and without recognizing Shakespeare's creative use of conflicting moral codes, there is in his explanation an interesting dualism that is a kind of equivalent to the sharper conflict of two distinct moral codes I find in the play.

Unlike this study, Bowers does not deal with the pagan ethic and its contrast to the Christian ethic as this figures in Shakespeare's artistry in *Hamlet*. Nor does he take into account the conflict in moral codes established initially in the disparate demands of the Ghost. Whereas Bowers regards the Ghost's injunction as "the transmission of a divine command,"<sup>8</sup> I see the Ghost essentially as David Bevington does:

The Ghost in fact does not appear to speak for providence. His message is of revenge, a pagan concept basic to all primitive societies but at odds with Christian teaching. His wish that Claudius be sent to hell and that Gertrude be more gently treated is not the judgment of an impartial deity but the emotional reaction of a murdered man's restless spirit.<sup>9</sup>

Like Bevington, and also in contrast to Bowers, Patrick Cruttwell sees that there are two moralities at work in the play. He recognizes that "both play and character *are* notably Christian," but he assumes "Shakespeare's acceptance in *Hamlet* of the ethic of revenge." According to Cruttwell, "we must accept also that the man who follows this ethic with courage and responsibility cannot be doing wrong, whatever mistakes or inevitable damage to others may befall him on the way."<sup>10</sup> While Cruttwell has fully recognized the dual moral codes operating in the play, he finds Shakespeare's use of them a "muddle":

. . . there are no signs from Hamlet of conscientious scruples about undertaking the task of revenge . . . but is it not strange that there should be none? For both play and character *are* notably Christian . . . what we have in *Hamlet* is an extraordinary muddle of *two* moralities, one avowed, the other not avowed, but both playing heavily and continuously on the central character. . . . How aware was Shakespeare of this moral muddle at the core of the play? And how aware was Hamlet that his behaviour as revenger and his belief as Christian were scarcely compatible?<sup>11</sup>

Cruttwell says that "we shall never be able to answer these questions,"<sup>12</sup> but surely these are the very kinds of questions that criticism should be able to deal with in a meaningful and illuminating way.



The answer to how aware Shakespeare was that he was combining incompatible moral codes is found, as this study has shown, in his purposeful, controlled, dramatic, and strongly expressive use of them in the portrayal of vengeance as an un-Christian obsession that overwhelms the mind like madness. As may be seen merely from the dramatic thought underlying the brilliantly conceived combination of soliloquies and stage images in the Prayer Scene, what one has in *Hamlet* is not an extraordinary muddle of two moralities, which would prevent the play from being a unified work of art, but an extraordinary and very artistic *juxtaposition* of two moralities, with a Christian moral scheme serving as a backdrop against which one fathoms what is repulsive about the pagan revenge ethic. In a variety of ways that have been explained in this study, Shakespeare associates revenge with hell, bestial violence, a breakdown of rationality, and both *de facto* and explicit defiance of God as the ultimate judge.

The linking of revenge with hell, sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly, can be found throughout *Hamlet*, starting with the questionable origin of the Ghost. Abandoning any sense of rational or Christian restraint in his passionate commitment to revenge, Hamlet evokes the support of hell in several soliloquies, evocations critics persist in overlooking or regarding as merely hyperbolic expression. Yet Hamlet associates his bloodthirsty determination with hell in the "'Tis now the very witching time" soliloquy, where he also defies Judgment Day; and in the "Now might I do it" soliloquy he concludes that his revenge will be satisfied only if Claudius is eternally damned. In the final movement of the play, Shakespeare uses the case of Laertes to amplify the central case of Hamlet: "by the image of my cause," says Hamlet, "I see / The portraiture of his" (5.2.77–78). Accordingly, Shakespeare casts Laertes's ranting passion for revenge as a defiance of Christian judgment:

To hell, allegiance! vows, to the blackest devil!  
 Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!  
 I dare damnation. To this point I stand,  
 That both the worlds I give to negligence,  
 Let come what comes, only I'll be reveng'd  
 Most throughly for my father.

(4.5.132–37)

In its expression of a passionate commitment to revenge, this speech recalls Hamlet's frenzy in his "O all you host of heaven"



soliloquy, as well as his implicit challenge to Judgment Day in the "witching time of night" speech. Indeed, Laertes's speech, occurring as it does late in the play, fills out the poetics of the larger dramatic context of Hamlet's earlier soliloquies and will be echoed again by Hamlet in his final justification to Horatio of his revenge attitude.

It is primarily through his conception of Hamlet that Shakespeare shows the conflict of moralities that he formulated as a major idea for his revenge play. This may explain why he simply renders Hamlet undergoing the conflict in considerable bewilderment, without specific reflections about it. In many ways the conflict involving the two moral codes is dramatically more stark and painfully effective precisely because the prince does not consciously face it, but rather experiences it and acts it out. Despite his enormous intelligence, so purposefully bestowed on him by the playwright, he accepts the revenge ethic unequivocally, never questioning its rightness or examining any possible contradiction with his own ethical values. The paradox of Hamlet is that, although he is a thinker, he commits himself *unthinkingly* to the revenge passion at the expense of the very reason he values so much. Obsessed with revenge and a false sense of duty and honor, he denigrates the very thinking activity to which his mind reverts naturally and spontaneously in its resistance to the bewildering onslaught of passion. One witnesses the degeneration of his capacity for dispassionate reasoning until, as displayed in his final soliloquy, his mind has become passion's slave.

The conflict between the obsessive demands of passion and the dispassionate interests of free reason, a conflict rendered in the play mainly through Hamlet's soliloquies, has its fullest significance in terms of the two disparate moral codes, pagan and Christian, that are found together in the play, nowhere with sharper dramatic focus than in the soliloquies and stage images of the Prayer Scene. The correlation between the conflict in Hamlet and the conflicting moralities in the play figures fundamentally in grasping *Hamlet* as a unified drama in which passion is related to the pagan revenge ethic and "godlike reason" to the Christian ethic. This opposition of passion and reason seems to have been Shakespeare's indirect way of affirming the humane Christian ethic against the pagan ethic of revenge, even though, for dramatic reasons, he chose not to show Hamlet consciously preoccupied with Christian doctrine regarding revenge.

It is because Shakespeare could assume that his audience's professed values would be Christian, and because a tradition of

blood revenge was not yet dead (as it is today), that he could conceive the artistic technique of counterpointing disparate moralities ironically and of presenting Hamlet, especially in his soliloquies, as unaware of the conflict the audience perceives. Such dramatic irony predicates this perspective in the audience, with the revenge impulse made to appear entirely natural even though it is morally reprehensible and sinful in Christian terms. Shakspeare's dramatic strategy in the play is not to have Hamlet raise the moral issue concerning revenge but to leave the audience to recognize and think about it within the framework of the audience's values and of the conclusion of the play. His artistic juxtaposition of the materials, however, serves as a guide to a comprehension of the issues.

The value of the study of a limited aspect of a work of art lies in the special illumination it can provide for appreciating the work as a whole. In this study of the soliloquies in *Hamlet*, the dominant concern with dramatic design and contextual matters has been a way of deliberately restricting the range of commentary and remaining constantly aware that the speeches are primarily part of a larger developing action. What emerges from this analysis of the soliloquies is the way the play's themes and dramatic issues are tightly interwoven into and distributed among them. Even more striking is the way the soliloquies serve as a substructure within the action of the play, determining interrelationships that tend to be obscured by the momentum of action between the soliloquies. An example of this is the significant expressive relationship linking the theme of Ophelia's soliloquy to the "To be or not to be" soliloquy before it and to the remainder of Hamlet's soliloquies after it. Such relationships among the soliloquies form links in the larger dramatic and poetic design, interconnections arising from a specific context but having structural functions beyond it.

It would, of course, be unimaginable that the major systemic network formed by the soliloquies could have a dramatic configuration that is either independent of or not basically congruent with that of the overall structure or plot, which surely determines the arrangement of the soliloquies. What has not been seen, however, and what this study reveals, is that the soliloquies in *Hamlet* have collectively a cohesive dramatic rationale that enters into the fuller action of the play as it develops and that may very well provide a clarifying abbreviation of the larger structure. What that larger structure of action conveys remains the central issue in the continuing challenge of *Hamlet* interpretation.

A brief review of the soliloquies outlines the play's dramatic opposition between passion and reason, a conflict that focuses on Hamlet's mind in rendering his tragic experience in trying to be a revenger. Hamlet's first soliloquy, in addition to introducing the theme of the contrast between "beast" and "reason," concludes with an intuitive sense of ill-boding: "It is not, nor it cannot come to good." This premonition seems to be similar to the intuition of "foul play" in his second soliloquy, leading to the dramatic confirmation of these intuitions in his "O my prophetic soul!" outcry upon hearing the Ghost's disclosure. In reaction to the Ghost's story, Hamlet's "O all you host of heaven" soliloquy portrays a mind submitting to a sudden, powerful onslaught, as seen by Hamlet's readiness to dismantle his mind in a frantic resolution to "remember" the Ghost. The unavoidable conflict that besets him—resulting from his strong and well-schooled mind being subjected to a strongly aroused passion for vengeance—is then delineated in the form of his next soliloquy, the "rogue and peasant slave" speech. Here passion and reason are conjoined sequentially in a very meaningful dramatic nexus. The stormy and self-abusive first half of the soliloquy recalls the passionate turmoil of his previous one ("O all you host of heaven"); in the second half Hamlet seems to recoil in revulsion from the violent siege of passionate frenzy. Turning abruptly to his "brains," he thinks through a plan of action and finds relief in the satisfying rational stability that sets in.

In his next appearance (only fifty-five lines later), the accented reasoning in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy seems to be a continuation of the rationality that had asserted itself and provided stability in the latter half of the "rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy. In the "To be" soliloquy, as Hamlet faces an action of great consequence under the most distressing of personal circumstances, he thinks about the meaning and doubtful efficacy of action in a world where life seems to be a chance-afflicted losing enterprise. Dramatically, the fact that Hamlet is using his mind dispassionately and rationally is at least as important as what he is thinking about, and perhaps even more important, for it shows that "sovereign reason" still has its proper ruling power. His ruminations, which again make one aware of his considerable intelligence, lead him to the insight that thought may interfere with action, an insight that enables him to resolve what might have become a philosophical stasis of thought without action. But even in this admirable exercise of what he later calls "godlike reason," his unqualified linking of cowardice with conscience and thought reveals the strong tainting power of his revenge intention. Re-



venge is not abandoned; it remains in abeyance, awaiting the outcome of the mousetrap play.

In turn, only sixty-two lines later, the orderly and controlled reasoning of the mind on display in the "To be" speech is counterpointed by the theme of "a noble mind . . . o'erthrown" in Ophelia's soliloquy. The Play Scene then shows a mind overthrown in Lucianus's sinister soliloquy, which provides a version of Claudius's state of mind in murdering his brother and serves as a prelude to the remaining soliloquies in the play—all of them governed by homicidal passion that has subverted rationality.

Following the success of the mousetrap play, Hamlet's next soliloquy reveals a passionate resurgence of his revenge commitment and his bestial readiness to "drink hot blood." In the ensuing Prayer Scene the dramatic juxtaposition of two soliloquies, one by Claudius and one by Hamlet, constitutes a very complex pairing, each speech a discourse of passion. Hamlet's soliloquy presents a horrifying example of how his reasoning power has been perverted by his commitment to revenge, while Claudius, in his inability to repent, presents the case of a defeated conscience and a will to maintain his sinful gains, even if he has to murder Hamlet. In his final soliloquy, "How all occasions," Hamlet displays an intellect unable to function rationally, in striking contrast to the fine working of his mind in the "To be or not to be" speech. In a scene designed from beginning to end to dramatize the defeated and subjugated state of Hamlet's reason, Shakespeare portrays Hamlet in this climactic soliloquy as incapable of using his mind dispassionately at the very time he is expressing his reverence for man's rational faculty and articulating the lofty idea that a man, because he is not a beast, should act in accord with his "godlike reason." Still governed by his passion, Hamlet inverts his values in thinking that the exercise of "godlike reason" endorses the violence of revenge. Thus, in one form or another, directly and indirectly, the underlying and unifying dramatic issue in Hamlet's six soliloquies, after his encounter with the Ghost, is the relation of passion to reason or the mind, especially the vulnerability of even the greatest of intellects to a defeat by passion. In their own ways, the soliloquies of Ophelia and Claudius relate to and amplify this central concern with the mind, Ophelia's by calling attention to the tragic idea of "a noble mind . . . o'erthrown" and Claudius's by offering another case of right reason, and ultimately conscience, defeated by passion.

The last soliloquy of the play echoes certain very significant words introduced in Hamlet's first soliloquy: "God," "beast," "dis-



course," "reason." In both instances Hamlet's thought is informed by the hierarchical paradigm—God, man, beast—defined by these words. The balanced occurrence of these words at the beginning and end of the segment of the play containing soliloquies is a clue to the kind of significance they have in a drama that, within a distinctly Christian framework, looks at the mind in a wide variety of ways. The mind is viewed in the play not only as the seat of reason, thought, intuition, conscience, and memory; it is also shown assaulted by passion and guilt, afflicted by melancholy, and beset by mental anguish and madness. In particular, it is a sense of the vast and largely hidden realm of the human mind that emanates from all of the soliloquies, not just from Hamlet's. In Hamlet's case, the images of the mind provided by the soliloquies lead progressively to the tragically poignant paradox of an expressed celebration of "godlike reason" by a great mind in total disorder because it has been overwhelmed by a bestial passion.<sup>13</sup>

Whether or not Hamlet is "the most intelligent figure ever represented in literature," as he has been called,<sup>14</sup> the tragic idea structuring the dramatic rationale of his soliloquies makes clear why a character of supreme intelligence was required by—and is an integral part of—that idea: a great mind was necessary to give magnitude to its tragic defeat.<sup>15</sup> This dramatic rationale suggests that there may be no more comprehensive and precise way to define the essential tragedy of Hamlet than in terms of "a noble mind . . . o'erthrown"—not only in the sense of the overthrow of his magnificent intellect by a passion for revenge but also, with "mind" functioning as metonymy, in the sense of the undoing of the "courtier's, soldier's, scholar's" tragically blood-stained life.

The revenge passion as a form of madness, which must figure in any explanation of Hamlet's mental condition, is quite explicit in the way Shakespeare handles Hamlet's apology to Laertes. Conveniently making an excuse of the "madness" based on the "antic disposition" he had put on, but that he now privately recognizes as an episode of real "madness," Hamlet dissociates himself from the person who wronged Laertes:

This presence knows,  
And you must needs have heard, how I am punish'd  
With a sore distraction. What I have done  
That might your nature, honor, and exception  
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.  
Wasn't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet!  
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,  
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,

Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.  
 Who does it then? His madness. If't be so,  
 Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged,  
 His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.

(5.2.228–39)

Although he expresses himself in a distinctly courtly style that may remind one of his recent mockery of Osric's artificiality, one knows that Hamlet's apology is genuine because he had told Horatio he was sorry for his treatment of Laertes (5.2.75–78). What is of great interest is that, on the "private" level of this public speech, Hamlet links the revenge passion with madness in characterizing the impulse that caused him to thrust his sword into the arras. It is a very poignant apology because, below the public rhetorical surface, there is a moving subtextual elaboration of Hamlet's private awareness of his victimization by the revenge passion. He seems aware that the antic disposition has been an overlay on the real "sore distraction" caused by his efforts to subsume himself under a revenger's persona. "If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away" summarizes in its own way Shakespeare's central tragic idea: Hamlet taken away from his "noble mind," his "godlike reason." "His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy" could well serve as an epigraph for this study.

Both in its public and its private, subjective terms Hamlet's apology shows insight and suggests a possibility of growth, along with a prospect of mastery over the revenger's passion—the revenger's madness—that has held him prisoner. Such growth would seem to be an implication of the almost mystical confidence in what his intuition has enabled him to begin to comprehend about "a divinity that shapes our ends." This may be an overstatement, however, for Hamlet does not renounce his revenge intentions despite some new understandings. The final and distinctly rational-sounding modulation of his revenge passion occurs when Hamlet, speaking to Horatio, justifies sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths and continuing to seek revenge on Claudius. Concluding his litany of good reasons for taking revenge, he now reveals in a calm tone how ingrained and insidious his obsession has become since the end of his last soliloquy:

—is't not perfect conscience  
 To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damn'd,  
 To let this canker of our nature come  
 To further evil?

(56.2.67–70)

This justification of the rightness of his cause repeats the perversity of the rationalizations in his final soliloquy, where he tried to make "godlike reason" serve his cause. He now perverts reason again by trying to justify his passion for revenge by "conscience" and heaven, in his blindness expressing rhetorically the notion that he would be "damn'd" if he fails to "quit" Claudius—another of his inversions of Christian values.

In the Fencing Scene, a vengeful tone flares out again spontaneously and quite naturally when, in the heat of reacting to the treachery he discovers, Hamlet forces Claudius to drink his own poison: "here, thou incestious, murd'rous damned Dane / Drink off this potion!" (5.2.325–26). Although he appears at this moment to achieve a measure of revenge, and reverts emotionally to expressing his earlier vengeful attitude, including his desire to damn Claudius, Hamlet is not in fact fulfilling a scheme of his own, as occurs conventionally in the mechanics of revenge tragedy. The moment has been regulated by the "fates" in thwarting the "wills" of Laertes and the king and deflecting their "devices" in ways that redound on them, though Hamlet, who has incurred his own guilt, is not spared and seems to be punished as part of the process of providential justice. Furthermore, when the fencing match is exposed as a murder plot to kill Hamlet, the prince is not then a revenger in action, but a man fighting off two attackers, one of whom has already struck him a fatal blow. In legal parlance, he does not commit a crime of passion but acts in self-defense, albeit he seems also to function as an instrument of providence to punish Claudius.

How Claudius would ultimately have been punished if Hamlet had remained faithful to the values of the Everlasting and not become a revenger—this is part of the play's comprehensive and impenetrable mystery in rendering the idea of providence. This mystery arises from the larger structure of *Hamlet*, encompassing the role of soliloquies in the full design of the action. While the Ghost, like providence, is mysterious in the nature of things, the two are not metaphysically interrelated by this quality of mystery they have in common. We may be tempted to reason, however, that if there is special providence in the fall of a sparrow, the same can be said about the appearance of the Ghost. Such reasoning proves specious because the passion of revenge, which gives the Ghost its basic (generic) significance, is not consonant with the implementation of divine justice. But such a proposition, by entertaining the fallacy of a metaphysical link between the Ghost and providence, helps indicate obliquely how, strictly in aesthetic terms, the idea of



providence is served by, partakes of, and is augmented by the mysteriousness of the Ghost, paradoxical as this strictly aesthetic relationship must seem in an attempt to explain the complex poetics and components of the overall effect of mysteriousness in the play.

The inscrutable mystery of divine providence is greater than man can fathom, judging from the way the idea exists in the play and brings the action to a climactic end which resonates with that mystery in the pervasive but subliminal design. Even if we do not subscribe spontaneously to the larger providential notion of the play, as Shakespeare's audience probably did, we can assent to it (as to the Ghost) through an act of imagination, apprehending it in the artistic terms of the play's grand design.<sup>16</sup> This providential idea, this "divinity" that shapes the end, appears in the pattern of deaths taking place in the final scene. Hamlet, blood-stained and continuing his commitment to revenge, dies from the sword of Polonius's revenger-son, who also has been overwhelmed by the revenge passion and in turn dies from his own sword. Since drinking in the play is linked to excessive carousing and royal debauchery, Gertrude dies from Claudius's poisoned drink that is associated with the lustful passion of their incestuous relationship. And Claudius, the hidden evil poisoning the life of Denmark (he causes the deaths of two whole family lines), dies from both the poisoned sword and the poisoned drink, a complex expressive combination that equates all the passions which defeat right reason and move people to depravity and murder—lust and a thirst for power in Gertrude and Claudius, an obsession with revenge in Laertes and Hamlet.

As a part of the ending, in parsing the play's major events, Shakespeare has emphasized the special providence that has worked itself out, with Hamlet a tragic victim of the process—"a noble mind . . . o'erthrown." In promising to tell "How these things came about" (5.2.380), Horatio will speak

Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,  
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,  
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,  
And in this upshot, purposes mistook  
Fallen on th' inventors' heads.

(5.2.381–85)

"Casual slaughters"—this is Horatio's judgmental perception of how Hamlet sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths,



when aroused anew by the “bloody” thoughts of vengeance that had overthrown his mind. Indeed, when Hamlet gives Fortinbras his “dying voice” (5.2.356), it is a reminder of the damage that has been done to his “godlike reason.” For, in continuing to ascribe honor to Fortinbras, Hamlet, as he dies, evokes the essence of his tragedy.

# Appendix: The Soliloquies in *Hamlet*

The text of *Hamlet* used in this study is that of *The Riverside Shakespeare*. G. Blakemore Evans, the textual editor, provides the following note in presenting his edition: “Words and passages enclosed in square brackets in the text above are either emendations of the copy-text or additions to it. The Textual Notes immediately following the play cite the earliest authority for every such change or insertion and supply the reading of the copy-text wherever it is emended in this edition.” The editor’s copy-text is Quarto Two; his square brackets, omitted in the quotations used in this discussion, have been retained in the text of the soliloquies given here. The soliloquies are numbered in the sequence of their occurrence in the play. Though the concluding couplet of Claudius’s first soliloquy comes after the dramatic intervention of Hamlet’s “Now might I do it” soliloquy, the couplet is not regarded or numbered as a separate soliloquy. The speaker of each soliloquy is named after the identification of the lines as numbered in the Riverside edition.

## 1.

### 1.2.129–59: HAMLET

O that this too too sallied flesh would melt,  
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew! 130  
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd  
His canon 'gainst [self-]slaughter! O God, God,  
How [weary], stale, flat, and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world!  
Fie on't, ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden 135  
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 140  
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven  
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,

Must I remember? Why, she should hang on him  
 As if increase of appetite had grown  
 By what it fed on, and yet, within a month— 145  
 Let me not think on't! Frailty, thy name is woman!—  
 A little month, or ere those shoes were old  
 With which she followed my poor father's body,  
 Like Niobe, all tears—why, she, [even she]—  
 O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason 150  
 Would have mourn'd longer—married with my uncle,  
 My father's brother, but no more like my father  
 Than I to Hercules. Within a month  
 Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears  
 Had left the flushing in her galled eyes, 155  
 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.

## 2.

1.2.154–57: *HAMLET*

My father's spirit—in arms! All is not well, 254  
 I doubt some foul play. Would the night were come!  
 Till then sit still, my soul. [Foul] deeds will rise,  
 Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.

## 3.

1.5.91–113: *HAMLET*

O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?  
 And shall I couple hell? O fie, hold, hold, my heart,  
 And you, my sinows, grow not instant old,  
 But bear me [stiffly] up. Remember thee! 95  
 Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat  
 In this distracted globe. Remember thee!  
 Yea, from the table of my memory  
 I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past 100  
 That youth and observation copied there,  
 And thy commandment all alone shall live  
 Within the book and volume of my brain,  
 Unmix'd with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!  
 O most pernicious woman! 105

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.

*[He writes.]*

So, uncle, there you are, Now to my word:  
 It is “Adieu, adieu! remember me.” 110  
 I have sworn’t.

#### 4.

#### 2:2.550–605: HAMLET

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I! 550  
 Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
 That from her working all the visage wann’d,  
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect, 555  
 A broken voice, an’ his whole function suiting  
 With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing,  
 For Hecuba!  
 What’s Hecuba to him, or he to [Hecuba],  
 That he should weep for her? What would he do 560  
 Had he the motive and [the cue] for passion  
 That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,  
 And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,  
 Make mad the guilty, and appall the free,  
 Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed 565  
 The very faculties of eyes and ears. Yet I,  
 A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak  
 Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,  
 And can say nothing; no, not for a king,  
 Upon whose property and most dear life 570  
 A damn’d 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? 575  
 Hah, ‘swounds, I should take it; for it cannot be  
 But I am pigeon-liver’d and lack gall  
 To make oppression bitter, or ere this  
 I should ‘a’ fatted all the region kites  
 With this slave’s offal. Bloody, bawdy villain! 580  
 Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!  
 Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,



That I, the son of a dear [father] murdered,  
 Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,  
 Must like a whore unpack my heart with words, 585  
 And fall a-cursing like a very drab,  
 A stallion. Fie upon't, foh!  
 About my brains! Hum—I have heard  
 That guilty creatures sitting at a play  
 Have by the very cunning of the scene 600  
 Been strook so to the soul, that presently  
 They have proclaim'd their malefactions:  
 For murther, though it have no tongue, will speak  
 With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players  
 Play something like the murther of my father 605  
 Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks,  
 I'll tent him to the quick. If 'a do blench,  
 I know my course. The spirit that I have seen  
 May be a [dev'l], and the [dev'l] hath power  
 T' assume a pleasing shape, yea and perhaps, 610  
 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. 605

## 5.

3.1.55–87: *HAMLET*

To be or not to be, that is the question: 55  
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
 And by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep—  
 No more, and by a sleep to say we end 60  
 The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
 That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation  
 Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep—  
 To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub,  
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, 65  
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
 Must give us pause; there's the respect  
 That makes calamity of so long life:  
 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
 Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, 70  
 The pangs of despis'd love, the law's delay,

The insolence of office, and the spurns  
 That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,  
 When he himself might his quietus make  
 With a bare bodkin; who would fardels bear, 75  
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
 But that the dread of something after death,  
 The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn  
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will,  
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have, 80  
 Than fly to others that we know not of?  
 Thus conscience does make cowards [of us all],  
 And thus the native hue of resolution  
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
 And enterprises of great pitch and moment 85  
 With this regard their currents turn awry,  
 And lose the name of action.

## 6.

## 3.1.150–61: OPHELIA

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! 150  
 The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,  
 Th' expectation and rose of the fair state,  
 The glass of fashion and the mould of form,  
 Th' observ'd of all observers, quite, quite down!  
 And I, of ladies most deject and wretched, 155  
 That suck'd the honey of his [music] vows,  
 Now see [that] noble and sovereign reason  
 Like sweet bells jangled out of time, and harsh;  
 That unmatch'd form and stature of blown youth  
 Blasted with ecstasy. O, woe is me 160  
 T' have seen what I have seen, see what I see!

## 7.

## 3.2.255–60: LUCIANUS

Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing, 255  
 [Confederate] season, else no creature seeing,  
 Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,  
 With Hecat's ban thrice blasted, thrice [infected],  
 Thy natural magic and dire property

On wholesome life usurps immediately. 260  
*[Pours the poison in his ears.]*

## 8.

## 3.2.387–99: HAMLET

'Tis now the very witching time of night,  
 When churchyards yawn and hell itself [breathes] out  
 Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood,  
 And do such [bitter business as the] day 391  
 Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother.  
 O heart, lose not thy nature! let not ever  
 The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom,  
 Let me be cruel, not unnatural; 395  
 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!

## 9.

## 3.3.36–72; 97–98: CLAUDIUS

O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven,  
 It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,  
 A brother's murther. Pray can I not,  
 Though inclination be as sharp as will.  
 My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent, 40  
 And like a man to double business bound,  
 I stand in pause where I shall first begin,  
 And both neglect. What if this cursed hand  
 Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,  
 Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens 45  
 To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy  
 But to confront the visage of offense?  
 And what's in prayer but this twofold force,  
 To be forestalled ere we come to fall,  
 Or [pardon'd] being down? then I'll look up. 50  
 My fault is past, but, O, what form of prayer  
 Can serve my turn? "Forgive me my foul murther"?  
 That cannot be, since I am still possess'd  
 Of those effects for which I did the murther:  
 My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen. 55

May one be pardon'd 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: 60  
There is no shuffling, there the action lies  
In his true nature, and we ourselves compell'd,  
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,  
To give in evidence. What then? What rests?  
Try what repentance can. What can it not? 65  
Yet what can it, when one can not repent?  
O wretched state! O bosom black as death!  
O limed soul, that struggling to be free  
Art more engag'd! Help, angels! Make assay,  
Bow, stubborn knees, and heart, with strings of steel,  
Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe! 71  
All may be well.  
. . . . .  
My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:  
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.

10.

3.3.73–96: HAMLET

Now might I do it [pat], now 'a is a-praying;  
And now I'll do't—and so 'a goes to heaven,  
And so am I [reveng'd]. That would be scann'd: 75  
A villain kills my father, and for that  
I, his sole son, do this same villain send  
To heaven.  
Why, this is [hire and salary], not revenge.  
'A took my father grossly, full of bread, 80  
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, 85  
When he is fit and season'd 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' incestious pleasure of his bed, 90  
At game a-swearing, or about some act  
That has no relish of salvation in't—



Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,  
 And that his soul may be as damn'd and black  
 As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays, 95  
 This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.

## 11.

## 4.3.58–68: CLAUDIUS

And, England, if my love thou hold'st at aught—  
 As my great power thereof may give thee sense,  
 Since yet thy cicatrice looks raw and red 60  
 After the Danish sword, and thy free awe  
 Pays homage to us—thou mayst not coldly set  
 Our sovereign process, which imports at full,  
 By letters congruing to that effect,  
 The present death of Hamlet. Do it, England, 65  
 For like the hectic in my blood he rages,  
 And thou must cure me. Till I know 'tis done,  
 How e'er my haps, my joys [were] ne'er [begun].

## 12.

## 4.4.32–66: HAMLET

How all occasions do inform against me,  
 And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,  
 If his chief good and market of his time  
 Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more. 35  
 Sure He that made us with such large discourse,  
 Looking before and after, gave us not  
 That capability and godlike reason  
 To fust in us unus'd. Now whether it be  
 Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple 40  
 Of thinking too precisely on th' event—  
 A thought which quarter'd hath but one part wisdom  
 And ever three parts coward—I do not know  
 Why yet I live to say, "This thing's to do," 44  
 Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means  
 To do't. Examples gross as earth exhort me:  
 Witness this army of such mass and charge,  
 Led by a delicate and tender prince,  
 Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd  
 Makes mouths at the invisible event, 50

Exposing what is mortal and unsure  
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,  
Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great  
Is not to stir without great argument,  
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw 55  
When honor's at the stake. How stand I then,  
That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,  
Excitements of my reason and my blood,  
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see  
The imminent death of twenty thousand men, 60  
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 stain? O, from this time forth, 65  
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

# Notes

## Introduction

1. G. K. Hunter, "The Heroism of Hamlet," in *Hamlet* (English Institute Essays), ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), p. 106.

2. Quotations from Shakespeare's plays and line references throughout this study are based on *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). The Second Quarto serves Evans as basic copy-text for *Hamlet*. Square brackets used by him to call attention to textual emendations or additions have been dropped from quotations given in the discussions. They are retained in the texts of the soliloquies given in the Appendix. In two instances that I discuss, I have preferred and provided a reading from Q2 instead of the Folio reading preferred by Evans.

3. I have come upon only one published attempt to fathom the play through the soliloquies, an article by Larry S. Champion, "'By Indirections Find Directions Out': The Soliloquies in *Hamlet*," *The Journal of General Education* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1976): 265–80. In large sections, particularly in the second half of this article, the soliloquies themselves do not serve sufficiently as the basis for the sweeping interpretive commentary on the play.

4. G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), p. 304.

5. Hamlet's identity as a student among a cluster of students seems to have been unique in Shakespeare's version of the Hamlet story. The question of when the prince acquired his identity as a student in stage versions of the Hamlet story is part of a larger topic that has been generally neglected in *Hamlet* studies: the students in *Hamlet* and Shakespeare's conception of the play. My concern with this question, aroused in part by the special function of the soliloquies in *Hamlet*, has led me into some dramaturgical and textual considerations that have yielded a new historical finding about the play. This finding indicates that, in the murky history of plays about Hamlet on the English stage, it was Shakespeare who first gave Hamlet and other characters student identities. I have dealt with this matter in "The Etiology of Horatio's Inconsistencies," in *"Bad" Shakespeare*, ed. Maurice Charney (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988), pp. 143–56. In accounting for Horatio's inconsistencies as a character, inconsistencies recognized by some critics but never explained, the essay establishes that the creation of a cluster of characters identified as students was uniquely Shakespeare's idea, something he did not find in his sources, as illustrated by the case of Horatio.

6. Henry MacKenzie, *The Mirror*, no. 99, 18 April 1770. Reprinted in *Memoirs of Shakespeare*, ed. Nathan Drake (London, 1828).

7. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*, 24 June 1827. In *Hamlet: A Casebook*, ed. John Jump (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 31.

8. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas M. Raysor (London: J. M. Dent, 1960) 1:34.

9. William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930), 4:235.

10. John Holloway, *The Story of the Night* (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 21.

11. Frank Kermode, Introduction to *Hamlet*, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, p. 1140.

12. For discussions of Shakespeare's use of soliloquies see Morris LeRoy Arnold, *The Soliloquies of Shakespeare: A Study in Technic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1911); Kenneth Muir, "Shakespeare's Soliloquies," *Occidente* 67 (1964), 45–58; Lloyd Albert Skiffington, *The History of English Soliloquy: Aeschylus to Shakespeare* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985); and Wolfgang Clemen, *Shakespeare's Soliloquies*, trans. Charity Scott Stokes (London: Methuen, 1987). The following doctoral dissertations focus on the soliloquies in *Hamlet* as part of their scope: Lorraine A. Janus, "The Telling Word: The Soliloquy in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1972); Margaret Coleman Gingrich, "Soliloquies, Asides, and Audience in English Renaissance Drama" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1978); Gideon D. Rappaport, "Some Special Uses of Soliloquy in Shakespeare" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1979); Richard Joseph Sullivan, "Functions of Soliloquy in Shakespeare's Tragedies" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1976).

13. Morris Arnold provides relevant background information in the opening chapter, "A General View of the Soliloquy: Its Origin, Nature, Development and Disappearance" of *The Soliloquies of Shakespeare*, pp. 1–24.

14. Kenneth Muir, *Hamlet* (London: Edward Arnold, 1963), pp. 33–34.

15. *The Arden Shakespeare Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 485.

16. Ibid.

17. Wolfgang Clemen, *Shakespeare's Soliloquies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), pp. 6–7. This publication of Clemen's address is not to be confused with the work by Clemen cited in note 12 and bearing the same title.

## Chapter 1. Images of the Mind

1. Matthew Arnold, "Preface to the First Edition of *Poems*" in *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allot (London: Longmans, 1965), p. 591.

2. "Hamlet was made to seem many-faceted simply by endowing him with many of the facets of the total melancholy syndrome," says Rosalie Colie, *Shakespeare's Living Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 211. Colie provides a valuable discussion of the range of melancholic symptoms Shakespeare has given to Hamlet for dramatic purposes. Timothy Bright's *Treatise of Melancholy* (London, 1586) has long been recognized as the apparent source for many of the specific symptoms Shakespeare chose to bestow on the prince.

3. A detailed and comprehensive appreciation of the opposition between corporeality and spirituality in *Hamlet* has been provided by John Hunt in "A Thing of Nothing: The Catastrophic Body in *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39 (Spring 1988), 27–45. "Not until he [Hamlet] finds his way out of a despairing contempt for the body can he achieve the wish of his first soliloquy and quietly cease to be," says Hunt in the prefatory section of his essay, p. 27.



4. Because Shakespeare's use of classical references in the play is consistently very adept, it is not surprising to find that Hamlet's comparison of himself to Hercules is fraught with appropriate and ironic overtones—matters which entertain the mind if one thinks of them. For one thing, by way of example, Hercules is Hamlet's opposite not only in physical strength but also in *intelligence*, since he is famous for his brawn but hardly for his brain: "Intelligence did not figure largely in anything he did and was often conspicuously absent," says Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (New York: New American Library, 1962), p. 160. For another, Hercules' father was not his mother's husband, a general who was away fighting when Zeus came to her in the shape of her husband. This circumstance may remind us of the adultery of Gertrude and that Hamlet was born when Old Hamlet was away fighting Old Fortinbras.

5. Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet's 'Sullied' or 'Solid' Flesh: A Bibliographical Case-History," *Shakespeare Survey* 9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956): 44–48.

6. The new Oxford editions are: *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) and *Hamlet*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

7. Fredson Bowers, *Essays in Bibliography, Text, and Editing* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975), p. 373.

8. The New Cambridge Shakespeare *Hamlet*, ed. Philip Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 88.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Having ventured an explanation based on staging considerations, I cannot resist noting one editor's amusing suggestion that "solid" is not correct because "it may have an unpleasantly comic effect, especially if Richard Burbage, the actor who first played Hamlet, were putting on weight (compare *He's fat and scant of breath*, V.i.281)." The New Penguin *Hamlet*, ed. T. J. B. Spencer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 223.

11. Willem Schrickx, "The Background and Context of Hamlet's Second Soliloquy," *Modern Language Review* 68 (April 1973): 243. Schrickx discusses what really is Hamlet's third soliloquy. His point about invocation as a feature of Elizabethan revenge tragedy is noticed but not stressed in any way by Fredson Bowers in *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959), pp. 62, 78. Eleanor Prosser also does little more than notice it as part of her argument (which I do not find convincing) that the Ghost in *Hamlet* is a devil. *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), p. 138.

In the counting of Hamlet's soliloquies, Schrickx is not alone in having overlooked the short soliloquy at the end of scene 2 ("My father's spirit—in arms!"). Others who have not counted it are: Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet's Fifth Soliloquy," *Essays on Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama*, ed. Richard Hosley (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961); Tucker Brooke, "Hamlet's Third Soliloquy," *Essays on Shakespeare and Other Elizabethans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948); James L. Calderwood, *To Be and Not To Be* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Wolfgang Clemen, *Shakespeare's Soliloquies*, trans. C. S. Stokes (London: Methuen, 1987); Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954).

12. Romans 12: 19.

13. Schrickx, p. 255.

14. Nigel Alexander has pointed out that "the 'word' chosen by Hamlet at the end of this soliloquy should be understood as a technical 'word' used as an aid to

memory in the Classical and Renaissance systems of the art of memory. Quintilian advised his students to remember rhetorical passages by remembering one word on the page which would act as a trigger, calling the entire passage to mind. Hamlet's choice of 'Remember me' and its frequent repetition in the soliloquy is a deliberate mnemonic device which allows Hamlet to call all the details of the Ghost and his command to instant and complete remembrance" (*Poison, Play, and Duel* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971], p. 47). Alexander has argued this point more fully in "Hamlet and the Art of Memory," *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 15 (1968): 137–39.

15. For a discussion of the evolutionary process of the revenger's madness, see chapter 3, "The Revenger's Madness and Renaissance Psychological Theory" in Charles A. Hallett and Elaine S. Hallett, *The Revenger's Madness: A Study of Revenge Tragedy Motifs* (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), pp. 60–84.

16. Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1960), p. 23.

17. Patrick Cruttwell, "The Morality of Hamlet—'Sweet Prince' or 'Arrant Knave,'" *Hamlet (Shakespeare Institute Studies)*, ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris, p. 110.

18. Maurice Charney, "The Persuasiveness of Violence in Elizabethan Plays," *Renaissance Drama*, ed. S. Schoenbaum, n.s. 2 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), pp. 59–70.

19. Maurice Charney, *Hamlet's Fictions* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. ix.

## Chapter 2. Passion and Reason: A Dramatic Nexus

1. Critics have explained these complexities in a variety of ways. Arthur Johnson, in "The Player's Speech in *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 20 (1962): 21–30, explains them in terms of Shakespeare's creation of mirroring. Clifford Leech, in "The Hesitation of Pyrrhus," in *The Morality of Art: Essays Presented to G. Wilson Knight by His Colleagues and Friends*, ed. D. W. Jefferson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 41–49, explains them in terms of "two equations contained within the [Player's] speech: Pyrrhus is both Hamlet and Claudius, Priam is both Claudius and the elder Hamlet, Hecuba in both equations is Gertrude." And Joseph Westlund, in "Ambivalence in the Player's Speech in *Hamlet*," *Studies in English Literature* 18 (1978): 245–56, explains them in terms of "the ambivalence so characteristic of Hamlet."

2. It really comes to the same thing because, despite any notion of delay one may choose to appreciate, the tragedy of Hamlet is that, in violation of his great reasoning capability, he makes progress toward the bestial spirit of revenge and, his mind tainted, is fully imbued with it at the moment he kills Polonius, a death that no more deflects him subsequently from his pursuit of revenge than one murder deflects Claudius from pursuing another.

3. For a general discussion of Shakespeare and Pirandello, see Charney, *Hamlet's Fictions*, chapter 2, "How Pirandellian Is Shakespeare?" For fine appreciations of theatrical symbolism in *Hamlet*, see Charles Forker, "Shakespeare's Theatrical Symbolism and Its Function in *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 14 (1963): 215–229.

4. Clemen, *Shakespeare's Soliloquies* (1987), p. 6.

5. Ibid., p. 124.
6. Charney, *Hamlet's Fictions*, p. 15.
7. Marvin Spevack, *A Complete Concordance to the Works of William Shakespeare*, (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968).
8. The one exception is its last occurrence, when Hamlet asks Laertes: "What is the reason that you use me thus?" (5.1.256). In this case, however, what the word directs us to is significant because the context for understanding what "the reason" is involves the revenge passion that has taken hold of Laertes's mind, which parallels what has happened to Hamlet in the play. Thus the poetics of this final occurrence of "reason" include the thematic conflict between passion and reason.
9. Charney, *Hamlet's Fictions*, p. 21.
10. Ibid., p. 15.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. 19.
13. Ibid., p. 25.
14. Ibid., p. 19.
15. Ibid., p. 25.
16. Ibid., pp. 153, 77.
17. Ibid., p. 86.
18. Ibid., p. 21.
19. Ibid., p. 10.
20. Ibid., p. 4.
21. Ibid., p. 78.
22. Ibid., p. 86.

### Chapter 3. Discourse of Reason

1. The range of discussion before 1933 is well represented in the abundant documentation of Irving T. Richards, "The Meaning of Hamlet's Soliloquy," *PMLA* 48 (September 1933): 741–66. With the exception of Samuel Johnson's comments on the soliloquy, which modern critics have frequently referred to, only criticism since 1933 is dealt with directly in this discussion, which has as its main purpose the presentation of a detailed interpretation, not a review of criticism.

2. Clemen, *Shakespeare's Soliloquies* (1987), pp. 134–35.
3. L. L. Schücking, *The Meaning of "Hamlet,"* trans. Graham Rawson (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), pp. 115–16.
4. John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in "Hamlet"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 127. A. C. Bradley makes the same point: "He is meditating on suicide. . . . Hamlet, that is to say, is here, in effect, precisely where he was at the time of his first soliloquy ('O that this too too solid flesh would melt')" (*Shakespearean Tragedy* [London: Macmillan, 1958], p. 105).
5. Edwards, Introduction to *The New Cambridge Hamlet*, p. 48.
6. Jenkins, *The Arden Shakespeare Hamlet*, pp. 486, 488, 489.
7. Ibid., pp. 487, 489.
8. Schücking, pp. 115, 180–84.
9. Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 68.



10. C. S. Lewis, "Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem?" *Proceedings of the British Academy* 38 (1942): 149.

11. Light pointing is more suitable than heavy to render the appropriate movement. The textual studies of John Dover Wilson in *The Manuscript of Shakespeare's "Hamlet"* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1934) and of Thomas Marc Parrott and Hardin Craig in *The Tragedy of "Hamlet": A Critical Edition of the Second Quarto, 1604* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1938) indicate light punctuation as closest to what Shakespeare probably used in writing the speech.

12. The blocking is indeterminate, but it would seem that Shakespeare did not intend Hamlet to be within the earshot of Claudius and Polonius until he sees Ophelia and goes to where she is, after the soliloquy. The king does not refer to the speech but the issue is not entirely a quasi-realistic matter involving Hamlet's proximity to where Claudius and Polonius are hidden, since a convention of the soliloquy is that it may be regarded as a character's silent thoughts that only the audience hears spoken. Nonetheless, if it is assumed that the king overhears Hamlet, then Claudius, even though he does not fully comprehend the speech, has additional grounds for thinking that Hamlet may not be mad, since the speech does not exhibit the pathological remoteness from reality of a madman's mutterings.

13. Setting up words that remain open to receive meaning created along the way is not an unusual poetic technique for Shakespeare. An example from Sonnet 18 will illustrate the technique in a different context. The open phrase is "every fair" in the first of the following lines:

And every fair from fair sometimes declines,  
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimm'd;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;  
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade.

In the next-to-last line the iterative use of "fair" in referring to the person causes a backtracking to "every fair," where "fair" seemed at first to be an adjective in a phrase speaking of every fair summer day. Shakespeare uses it substantively, however, and by backtracking one realizes that he is definitely speaking of every type of fairness. As a result of seeing that the scope of "every fair" includes "That fair thou owest" (the specificity of "that" also points back relatedly to the comprehensiveness of "every"), the line "By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed" acquires poignant human relevance as a description of how "Death" in the last line may come. That whole line, in addition to "every fair," has remained open to receive—and thereby yield—additional meaning created along the way. How the poetic flux can be blocked off may be seen if the open phrase is eliminated by substituting "And summer's day from fair sometimes declines," a line that is metrically correct and fits the immediate context.

14. Samuel Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Walter Raleigh (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 191.

15. *Ibid.* The italics are Johnson's. Johnson is quite mistaken in thinking that the prince has any doubt "whether, *after our present state, we are* to be or not to be." Johnson's words, not Hamlet's, express the doubt for Hamlet has no such problem of belief, and his thought and expression in the soliloquy are predicated



on a belief in existence after death. For a discussion of the soliloquy in terms of Renaissance Christian outlook, see Bertram Joseph, *Conscience and the King: A Study of "Hamlet"* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1953), pp. 111–16.

16. L. C. Knights, *An Approach to "Hamlet"* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), pp. 75–76.

17. L. C. Knights provides a stimulating and valuable discussion of the philosophical idea of suffering as a means of dealing with evil, an idea that derives from Boethius and had currency in Shakespeare's time. "It is clear from *Macbeth*," he says, "that Shakespeare was deeply familiar with the traditional doctrine of the nothingness of evil." The essential points of this doctrine may be summarized as follows: good is the only mode of positive existence; evil in any absolute sense is nothing; suffering is superior to the evil brought by fortune, because it is a positive act related to good. As Knights rightly points out: "It is for this very reason we may notice, that Hamlet admires Horatio. . . . Hamlet's deep underlying concern is with essential being." *Ibid.* pp. 76–80.

18. G. Wilson Knight senses the multiplicity of meanings in the opening line, but he does not attempt to clarify how they are "somehow" contained: "'To be' can scarcely just mean 'to act'; nor, surely, does Hamlet mean anything so simple as 'to live or die' and nothing more. He might mean 'to exist or not to exist after death,' but that makes no proper opening to a speech certainly concerned deeply with this thought but containing others that tend to interrupt the sequence such an opening demands; if this be its whole meaning, then it is a poor opening. Probably all these meanings are somehow contained." (*The Wheel of Fire*, p. 308).

19. Having concluded this lengthy elucidation of the opening line, I should point out that Harold Jenkins has not described my approach to the line correctly in linking my reading of the soliloquy with the following statement: "interpretations which depend on equating 'To be or not to be' with 'To act or not to act' take a wrong direction from the start." *The Arden Shakespeare Hamlet*, p. 486. Jenkins refers to my article, "The Dramatic Context and Meaning of Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' Soliloquy," *PMLA* 80 (March 1965), 38–50. The interpretation here is based on that article.

While I find that the question of what action may mean is indeed central to Hamlet's thought in the soliloquy, arising dramatically from the action he conceived but has yet to carry out, I do not equate "To be or not to be" with anything specific from the start. Quite the contrary, my discussion of the line begins with the central point to be explained: "The opening line of the speech cannot be understood until one determines the issues that come within its scope." It ends by stressing that the opening line does not have a single meaning from the start but rather becomes stratified with multiple meanings determined by what Hamlet thinks about in the course of his speech.

Jenkins himself lapses into the common error of assuming that the opening line has a single meaning that can be summarized from the outset. He states that the "question" can be "crudely paraphrased as 'Is life worth living?'" *The Arden Shakespeare Hamlet*, p. 487. Inadvertently, in formulating this paraphrase, he also lapses into a contradiction, for if we are to see Hamlet as taking his question seriously, then the possibility of a negative answer to it implies the consideration of suicide. Yet Jenkins correctly finds that it is "impossible to say that Hamlet ever contemplates suicide for himself."

That the suicide implication is definitely present in Jenkins's paraphrase may be gathered from the same question as Albert Camus poses it: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or

is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy." *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Knopf, 1955), p. 3. In *The Question of Hamlet*, Harry Levin refers to Camus's question in his interpretation of Hamlet's speech as a suicide deliberation (see note 20).

20. One of the most thoroughgoing and reductive interpretations of the "To be" soliloquy as a suicide deliberation is presented by Harry Levin, whose interpretation exhibits all the characteristics specified. "The ontological question becomes an existential question," says Levin, who sees Hamlet confronting the one philosophical problem that Albert Camus says is "really serious"—suicide (*The Question of Hamlet*, pp. 67–73). If one wishes to retain it, the existential question is no less present in seeing Hamlet confronted by the problem of action, for action (actively chosen or chosen passively by default of an active choice) determines the essence of existence in the general terms of existential philosophy. The philosophy of Boethius and the Renaissance Christian outlook, however, should also be retained and are more essential.

21. G. Wilson Knight, p. 307.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 306.

23. Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 77.

24. John Middleton Murry, *Shakespeare* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), p. 262.

25. "In one aspect, *Hamlet* is a play about the mystery and impenetrability of human personality," says Kenneth Muir in *Shakespeare: The Great Tragedies*, ed. Bonamy Dobree (London: 1961), p. 11.

26. A final matter that might be considered is whether or not the interpretation of the "To be" soliloquy presented here can be acted out on stage. I believe it can be performed with much more interesting dramatic effect than the conventional rendering of the speech either as a detached set piece with philosophical thoughts not relevant to the action or as some kind of a contemplation of suicide. To offer one directorial suggestion, which the actor would have to develop, I would have the soliloquy relate to a manuscript Hamlet would be reading when he enters, which the actor would look up from and then handle so as to make it figure symbolically in Hamlet's problem of action, with all its implications. The manuscript is of the lines Hamlet said he would set down and insert in *The Murder of Gonzago*. Through the handling of the prop, the actor would convey that the presentation of the mousetrap play is the immediate meaning of the soliloquy's last word—"action." Hamlet's bodkin would remain sheathed, though he might touch it at the appropriate moment in a gesture meant to express the easy access people have to death. When he casts his warning in the Nunnery Scene, he would thrust out his arm and point with the manuscript toward the place where he thinks Polonius and perhaps Claudius are spying on him. Also, holding the manuscript near Ophelia's face, he could confuse her further by tapping it emphatically with his free hand, a gesture that would help convey the special significance of the prop. The manuscript might thus be associated with Claudius, and the play to come could be suggested. The juxtaposition of Polonius's scheme to observe Hamlet alongside Hamlet's scheme to observe Claudius constitutes a piquant and dramatically ironic interrelationship that should be heightened by focussing the soliloquy on the problem of action. The failure of Claudius and Polonius to learn the truth about Hamlet (i.e., why he behaves strangely) produces a forward thrust that intensifies the suspense of Hamlet's impending project to expose the truth about Claudius. Significantly, the king's

guilt is made clear in his aside immediately before Hamlet enters in soliloquy. The "to be" speech fits into and its meaning enriches a definite dramatic context.

## Chapter 4. Discourse of Passion

1. Hamlet is quoting from *True Tragedy of Richard III*, perhaps condensing two lines into one because he is very impatient for Lucianus to proceed with the murder of Gonzago. The condensation, which seems also to be satiric about such extravagant expression (would a "croaking raven" also "bellow"?), involves the following lines: "The screeking Raven sits croking for revenge. / Whole herds of beasts comes bellowing for revenge." It should be noted that through "croaking," "raven," and "bellow" Shakespeare maintains an association of the revenge passion (and passion in general) with beasts. The anonymous play was published by Thomas Creede in 1594.

2. Maurice Charney, "The 'Now Could I Drink Hot Blood' Soliloquy and the Middle of *Hamlet*," *Mosaic* 10 (Spring 1977): 81.

3. This reading replaces the line from F in the text of *Hamlet* given in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, the edition being used in this study.

4. Maurice Charney, *Style in Hamlet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 10.

5. Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet's Fifth Soliloquy," *Essays on Elizabethan Drama*, ed. Richard Hosley (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 215. The soliloquy is really Hamlet's sixth.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

7. Charney, "The 'Now Could I Drink Hot Blood' Soliloquy," pp. 81–82.

8. Jenkins, *The Arden Shakespeare Hamlet*, p. 314.

9. Catherine Belsey in *The Subject of Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1985) has explained the special ability of a soliloquy to suggest the hidden self of the speaker:

When the soliloquy is all in the first person, when the subject defined there is continuous and non-fragmentary, the occurrence of "I" in speech is predicated on a gap between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the utterance, the subject who is defined in the speech. Since the subject of the enunciation always exceeds the subject of the utterance, the "I" cannot be fully present in what it says of itself. It is this gap which opens the possibility of glimpsing an identity behind what is said, a silent self anterior to the utterance, "that within which passes show." (Pp. 42–43)

10. In the quotation, Q2's text of the line replaces the hybrid version provided by the textual editor of *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

11. There is no basis for thinking that Pyrrhus is hesitating—or delaying—to kill Priam out of some momentary qualm, as has been suggested at times. On the contrary, his pause is fully explained in the Player's narrative as strictly an aural distraction produced at that moment by the "hideous crash" of the citadel of Ilium, a fall strongly expressive of the enormity of what Pyrrhus is doing—killing a king. Directly after his brief distraction, "A roused vengeance sets him new a-work" (2.2.488) and he slaughters Priam. Because there seems to have been no abatement in the already "roused vengeance," only a brief disruption of it, the



pause serves Shakespeare as a way to display vengeance in yet another forceful image of the hideous passion. Similarly, there is no abatement in Hamlet's roused vengeance in the Prayer Scene, only a brief postponement of it until Hamlet's passionate thrust into the arras in the Closet Scene.

12. Such stage images, arising from the script, are virtually stage directions, and efforts should be made to incorporate them into the play in performance, where they are very effective dramatically. For example, if the actor playing the role of the Player would use excessively broad swings of the arm when he speaks of the "wiff and wind" of Pyrrhus's sword (2.2.473) Hamlet can, with similar gestures, instruct the Player specifically about this exaggerated movement when he advises the troupe, "do not saw the air too much with your hand thus" (3.2.5). The posture of Pyrrhus over Priam, as performed by the Player, can be coordinated with Hamlet's posture with his sword when he sees Claudius kneeling. The way Pyrrhus uses his sword in killing Priam can be made to resemble Hamlet's thrust in killing Polonius behind the arras, and a variation of this thrust might be shaped into the way Laertes lunges to wound Hamlet with, "Have at you now!" (5.2.302). Such stage images render meaningful interconnections that give cohesiveness and clarity to a production.

## Chapter 5. The Mind O'erthrown: Reason Pandering Will

1. Holloway, p. 35.
2. Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1933), pp. 123, 126.
3. In Q1 and the Folio the scene ends after Fortinbras leaves.
4. *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); the *Oxford Shakespeare Hamlet*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).
5. Jenkins, *The Arden Shakespeare Hamlet*, p. 73.
6. Peter Werstine, "The Textual Mystery of *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39 (Spring 1988): 2.
7. Charleton Hinman, Introduction to the Oxford facsimile of the Second Quarto 1604–5 of *Hamlet* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), n. p.
8. Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), p. 206.
9. Some plays require longer than average duration in order to fulfill their artistic conception and dramatic effect. In our time a play like Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* includes the notion of lengthy duration in its title. The length of *Hamlet* is related to several meaningful matters, including the rendering of the inscrutable process of providence.
10. Harley Granville-Barker, p. 115.
11. In the opening of his essay "What Hamlet Remembers," Richard Helgerson calls attention to the frequency in *Hamlet* of words having to do with remembering and forgetting: "'Memory,' 'remember,' 'remembrance,' and their opposites, 'forgotten,' and 'dull oblivion,' echo through *Hamlet*" (*Shakespeare Studies* 10 [1967]: 67).
12. *Hamlet*, ed. George Lyman Kittredge and Irving Ribner (Waltham, Mass.: Blaisdell, 1967), p. 121.
13. Kittredge refers to this theory in his note on "imposthume": "It was an old theory that war is the natural exercise of gymnastics of the body politic, and that a



country long at peace develops faults in the national character analogous to the diseases that idle luxury breeds in the human body" (*Hamlet*, p. 120).

## Chapter 6. Wills and Fates: Intimations of Providence

1. Maynard Mack, "The World of Hamlet," *The Yale Review* 41 (1952): 505.
2. Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1954); J. Philip Brockbank, "Hamlet the Bonesetter," *Shakespeare Survey* 30 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977): 103–114; Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge," *PMLA* 70 (1955): 740–9.
3. W. R. Elton, "Shakespeare and the Thought of His Age," *A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, ed. Kenneth Muir and Samuel Schoenbaum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 183–84.
4. Robert West, *Shakespeare and the Outer Mystery* (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1968).
5. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas M. Raysor (London: J. M. Dent, 1960), 1:32.
6. Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge," *PMLA* 70 (1955): 744.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 745.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Hardin Craig and David Bevington (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1973), p. 902.
10. Patrick Cruttwell, "The Morality of Hamlet," pp. 120, 121.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
12. *Ibid.*
13. In his essay "The Heroism of Hamlet," G. K. Hunter provides a rich appreciation of the centrality of Hamlet's mind in Shakespeare's conception of the prince: "The central focus which is lacking in *Julius Caesar* and *Troilus and Cressida* is here found in the mind of the prince; his self-consciousness (especially seen in the soliloquies) is the means by which Shakespeare is enabled to collate and compare modes of heroism which (objectively considered) are essentially disparate; for their fields of activity are here less important than the feelings about them in the central observing mind" (in *Hamlet*, ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris, p. 94).
14. Frank Kermode notes this in his Introduction to *Hamlet* in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, p. 1139.
15. A similar relationship between the tragic plot and the tragic hero is found in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*. The elaborate and logical fitting together of a great many little pieces—an interlocking of all parts in a way that conveys the Greek idea of a rational, orderly universe in which nothing gets lost—makes use of a hero whose dominant characteristic is a relentless and arrogant exercise of rational powers, even when he formulates a mistaken theory, as in Oedipus's suspicion of Creon.
16. In two interesting articles, Madeleine Doran has discussed the complex matter of the difference between modern responses and Elizabethan responses to supernatural materials in literature and drama: "That Undiscovered Country: A Problem Concerning the Use of the Supernatural in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*," *Philological Quarterly* 20 (1941): 413–27; "On Elizabethan 'Credulity': With Some Questions Concerning the Use of the Marvelous in Literature," *Journal of*

*the History of Ideas* 1 (1940): 151–76. Robert H. West is also concerned with this aspect of Shakespeare's dramaturgy. See *The Invisible World: A Study of Pneumatology in Elizabethan Drama* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1939) and *Shakespeare and the Outer Mystery* (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1968).

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tant matters that Hamlet's soliloquies help to clarify—consistent with over two centuries of commentary about the prince—is the centrality of his great intelligence in Shakespeare's conception of the character and his tragedy. In his impulsive commitment to revenge after his encounter with the Ghost, Hamlet resolves to “wipe away” everything from his mind except the Ghost's revenge “commandment.”

This commitment to revenge is reconfirmed dramatically by the subjugation of his reason by passion in Hamlet's soliloquies after his strongly rational plan catches the conscience of the king. Claudius's guilt and the Ghost's honesty in no way change the intrinsic nature of the revenge passion to which Hamlet succumbs, not unlike Claudius's victimization by his passion. Indeed, with the brilliantly dramatic juxtaposition of soliloquy with soliloquy and soliloquy with stage image in the Prayer Scene, Shakespeare highlights the irreconcilable conflict between pagan and Christian morality and consolidates the play's general equation of blood revenge and murder.

Because the numerous soliloquies in *Hamlet* all occur in approximately the first two thirds of the play, they figure especially strongly in the dramatic structure of that section of the action. They also raise an important critical question concerning the relation of this portion of the play to the last third. The answer to this question clarifies the larger structure and meaning of *Hamlet*, as this study shows.

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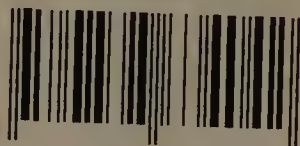
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Alex Newell received his doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh, where his teachers included Mellon Professors L. C. Knights, Kenneth Muir, and Allardyce Nicoll. His dissertation, directed by Charles Crow, was entitled *Fate in Shakespeare's Tragic Art: A Critical Study of the Early Development*. In a graduate seminar with Kenneth Muir, he wrote a paper that was first published in *PMLA* in March 1965. In recommending that *PMLA* publish this paper on "The Dramatic Context and Meaning of Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' Soliloquy," the journal's reader stated in his report: "This essay makes more consistent sense out of this important passage than any other attempt that I know. It obviously deserves to be known." In 1977, the article was translated and published in Germany in a major volume of *Hamlet* criticism from A. C. Bradley to Jan Kott. This well-received essay, slightly revised, is now reprinted for the first time in English and provides its fullest critical clarification in *Soliloquies in Hamlet*. Professor Newell teaches court drama, and American literature at Concordia University. He has published essays on Shakespeare and other topics, and has performed in Shakespearian productions, and has written on racial conflict, *White Clouds, Black Dreams*, which has been produced in the United States.



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