

from The Riverside Shakespeare

G. Blakemore Evans, editor.

Boston: Houghton Mifflin

1974

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

NO BRIEF INTRODUCTION can take account of centuries of debate and disagreement concerning *Hamlet*, except perhaps to register the belief that the endless commentary—inspired, or dull; shrewd, or absurd—testifies to the fact that this is a play

which history, as well as its own extraordinary merit, has given a special place apart, with such works as the *Commedia* and *Faust*. Certainly no play before *Hamlet* could have accommodated so much and so diverse metaphysical and psychological speculation. How Shakespeare came to write it is, of course, a mystery on which it is useless to speculate; but although it is formally related to a popular set of dramatic conventions (which we know from many other surviving examples), *Hamlet* clearly works on a different level from any other play of its kind, and indeed from any preceding play of Shakespeare's. Somehow, as Granville-Barker suggested, he himself became a different man in those early years at the Globe; he found his *daimon*. *Hamlet*, in addition to all its other titles to veneration and notoriety, was the first great tragedy Europe had produced for two thousand years.

T. S. Eliot's well-known judgment that *Hamlet* is "certainly an artistic failure" stems, as much other criticism does, from a not unreasonable conviction that in expanding a simpler Revenge play Shakespeare produced something which is inexplicably confused as drama, something distorted by the pressure of a personal emotion which did not succeed in finding an objective equivalent in so simple and archaic a form. Thus the action of the play gives rise to many problems, for reader and producer alike; and there is—especially in the part of Hamlet himself—an evident charge of passion, a wild contrariety between his

language and its occasions, which blur the outline of the work, and have encouraged generations of critics since Coleridge to use it only as a glass in which to see a flatteringly distorted image of themselves.

Coleridge's "I have a smack of Hamlet" may, however, be a tribute to the world's remaking of Everyman in Hamlet's image, and it is something we are all, in a time of obligatory and schematic introspection, entitled in some degree to feel. We are no longer satisfied with simple accounts of motive, and we are ready enough to find metaphysics to explain why our response to any such stimulus as "duty" seems inhibited beyond anything the immediate crude circumstances appear to justify. In the perplexed figure of Hamlet, just because of our sense that his mind lacks definite boundaries, we find ourselves. And no amount of explanation in terms of Elizabethan conventions or Renaissance psychology, useful and interesting as such inquiries have been in deepening the complexities they sought to remove, can abolish our natural and historic right to do so. (By the same token, the conjectures of such psychologists as Ernest Jones have a relevance scholarship should not deny.) It may be that Hamlet's "buffoonery" is "the buffoonery of an emotion which Shakespeare cannot express in art" (save that he must in some sense have expressed it if we know of its existence); it may be that on a possible definition of art such expression is either limited or excessive. Certainly *Hamlet* is problematic, full of doubt concretely as well as discursively projected, unsparring of words, even to the point of habitually using two for one, as it uses two characters and two themes for one. It is of no clear shape, oblique, dubitant, duplicate. What Harry Levin has said of Hamlet himself applies equally to the play as a whole: "it is not so much a perplexing personality as . . . a state of

perplexity into which we enter." But its affective power, its "negative capability" or failure to assert any of the possible ethical or metaphysical positions it creates, while at the same time generating its unique atmosphere of anxiety and its genuine hints of charity, made it a model for the new mind of Europe.

The history of the text of *Hamlet* is very complex. Techniques of scholarly inquiry grow more subtle, but as yet they have achieved no certainty on some issues crucial to the task of editing *Hamlet*. The play was entered in the Stationers' Register in 1602, presumably in an attempt to block unauthorized publication; but the First Quarto of 1603 was a piracy, perhaps the work of the actor who played Marcellus and Lucianus, with the part of Voltmand at hand. It is a brief, mutilated text, based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at some stage in its history, but evidently also reflecting material not in the later authorized texts. Polonius is called Corambis, the "To be or not to be" soliloquy is placed earlier in the play, and there are other differences. The compilers supplied the defects of their memories from other plays and notably from recollections of an old *Hamlet*; this play, probably by Kyd, is mentioned with some contempt by Nashe as early as 1589, and seems to have been well known in the 'nineties. The lost *Ur-Hamlet*, as it is called, is also reflected in a German play called *Der bestrafte Brudermord (Fratricide Punished)*, existing in a text of 1710 and possibly the corrupt descendant of a *Hamlet* performed by English actors on a German tour in the early seventeenth century. Here Polonius is called Corambus. Attempts to reconstruct the *Ur-Hamlet* have to rely largely on Q1 and the German play. In any case, Q1 has no textual authority, although, for reasons explained in the "Note on the Text" below, editors cannot ignore it.

The Second Quarto, dated 1604 in some copies and 1605 in others, was authorized, and claimed, correctly, to be "enlarged to almost as much againe as it was." It is a notoriously ill-printed book, but has of course great authority. The First Folio text of 1623 differs from Q2 in hundreds of readings, and has about eighty-five lines missing from Q2 to compensate for over two hundred that it lacks. An account of the complex relationships between the three main texts, and of the principles of the present recension, is given in the "Note on the Text."

Q1, it will be observed, is no longer regarded as representing an earlier Shakespearean version of *Hamlet*. The old *Hamlet*, as Henslowe's diary testifies, was performed in June 1594, but probably belongs to the 'eighties; Nashe in the Epistle to Greene's *Menaphon* (1589) speaks satirically of "whole Hamlets, I should say handfuls of tragical speeches." We may think of it as the archetype of Revenge plays, and as preceding *The Spanish Tragedy* (whether or no Kyd wrote both), since so many recurring features of the theatrical revenge plot belong to the original *Hamlet* story. It seems likely that a vogue for Revenge plays grew up around 1599, when Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* was played by a boys' company; this would explain the decision of Shakespeare's company to

revive *Hamlet* in a modernized form. In 1601 some very sophisticated additions were made to *The Spanish Tragedy*.

Some scholars believe that Shakespeare rehandled *Hamlet* more than once. The facts as we know them suggest, at any rate, that he rewrote the old play in 1600. Gabriel Harvey's observation that Shakespeare's play and *The Rape of Lucrece* "haue it in them, to please the wiser sort" was written in a copy of Speght's *Chaucer* (1598), and in the same context Harvey spoke of the Earl of Essex in the present tense. Essex was executed in February 1601; and on the balance of evidence Harvey's note appears to indicate that Shakespeare's play existed before that date.¹ But the passage in F1 (not in Q2) about the child actors and the War of the Theatres (II.ii.337-62) cannot have been written before the middle of 1601. The allusions to "innovation" and "inhibition" in the same scene (332-33) have often been thought to refer to the rebellion of Essex (February 8, 1601); *innovation* is a word Shakespeare uses of political upheavals, and Shakespeare's company, which was commissioned to act *Richard II* as a curtain-raiser to the insurrection, might in consequence have been "inhibited," that is, officially forbidden to play in the city for a time. But in fact it was not; and the words are more likely to refer to a Privy Council order of 1600 limiting the number of performances by the two major companies—a kind of "inhibition"—and to the new popularity of the boys' companies—taking *innovation* in the sense of *novelty*, a word which the pirates of Q1 used to render *innovation*. Probably Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* after *Julius Caesar* (1599) and finished it before February 1601, adding the reference to the War of the Theatres late in that year.

The *Hamlet* story has its origins in Norse legend. The name Amlothi has been explained as signifying "desperate in battle," with a hint of madness attached, or, alternatively, as meaning "simpleton." Perhaps a piece of folklore about a hero who assumed madness or stupidity for purposes of revenge became attached to a semihistorical figure of the same kind as the Brutus of Roman prehistory. In such guise he appears in the *Historia Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1200, printed 1514), which contains in its Third Book the story which is the foundation of *Hamlet*. Here *Hamlet's* father kills the king of Norway in single combat. Saxo's prince is a very clever boy, with method in his madness. His enemies set on a beautiful courtesan (a curious ancestor for Ophelia) to seduce him, but he rapes her. He makes a voyage to England, where his wit wins him the king's daughter; and on his return kills the usurper, having changed swords with him. Saxo has the germs of the fratricide, the incest, the king's love of drink, and much else. The tone of course is very different. Amleth's revenge is extremely brutal; he boils the ancestor of Polonius and feeds him to the pigs. He upbraids his mother in language as strong as Shakespeare's. Despite his vigor he is

¹ For a different possibility see the headnote to the reprint of Harvey's comment in Appendix B, Number 18, below.

also somewhat and involve

When th
in his coll
apologized
it retained,
kept the ma
but has son
Thus in his
speare's, it
Hamlet's fai
to save the
Queen is cl
(by no mean
pretends ma
of the Cleve
and in a sen
tries to prov
girl he loves
and then by
Hamlet avoi
warning, and
be mad, rush
the spy, who
on Hamlet's
year, procur
marries the I
still feigning
exchange of s
hall.

Belleforest
the *Ur-Hamle*
Ghost, the
Whether it a
plot, which Sh
the most part
a powerful c
V. K. Whit
struction, sug
doubtful ghost
aggression, no
the story the
an avenging s
Thus it estab
contrasts, but
Ophelia and F
within the play
as in *The Span*
veracity; but
show, with no
was Hamlet's
Corambis, as i
immediately af
some time late
producer and th

There is no
level the chang
bility. If the ol
Hamlet's difficu

An English trar
may have existed

also somewhat melancholic, but his revenge is brisk and involves burning down the palace.

When the French writer Belleforest used this story in his collection of *Histoires Tragiques* (1576)¹ he apologized for its primitive ferocity and gave it, what it retained, the setting of a contemporary court. He kept the main features of the story as outlined above, but has some emphases different from Shakespeare. Thus in his story, as in Saxo's but not as in Shakespeare's, it is generally known that Claudius killed Hamlet's father; his defense is that he did so in order to save the life of the Queen. In Belleforest the Queen is clearly an adulteress. The young Hamlet (by no means thirty, as he is in Shakespeare's last act) pretends madness in self-protection, a rationalization of the Clever Boy folk-theme that survived into Saxo and in a sense re-emerges in Shakespeare. Claudius tries to prove him sane, first by a trick involving the girl he loves (in Belleforest she is, in fact, his mistress) and then by planting a spy in Gertrude's chamber. Hamlet avoids the first of these traps through a friend's warning, and the second he escapes by pretending to be mad, rushing about the chamber, and discovering the spy, whom he kills. After this scene Gertrude is on Hamlet's side. He then goes to England for a year, procures the death of his companions, and marries the English king's daughter. On his return, still feigning madness, he kills Claudius after an exchange of swords, and burns down the banquet-hall.

Belleforest must have been the principal source of the *Ur-Hamlet*, which would doubtless have added the Ghost, the dumb Show, and the fencing match. Whether it accepted the motivation of Belleforest's plot, which Shakespeare clearly rejects, and which for the most part keeps Hamlet on the defensive against a powerful opponent, we cannot certainly know. V. K. Whitaker, in the most careful recent reconstruction, suggests that it had a secret murder, a doubtful ghost, and feigned madness used as a way of aggression, not defense. It perhaps made the girl in the story the daughter of the spy, and gave the spy an avenging son, so creating the Polonius family. Thus it established not only the Hamlet/Laertes contrasts, but a contrast between the real insanity of Ophelia and Hamlet's antic disposition. The play within the play was probably not a means to revenge, as in *The Spanish Tragedy*, but a test of the Ghost's veracity; but as yet it was probably only a dumb show, with no text. After the closet scene Gertrude was Hamlet's accomplice. Polonius was called Corambis, as in Q1. The nunnery scene took place immediately after its planning, not, as in Q2 and F1, some time later, with consequent difficulties to the producer and the interpreter.

There is no doubt that on a purely dramaturgical level the changes made by Shakespeare reduce plausibility. If the old play followed Belleforest in stressing Hamlet's difficulty in getting at the King, Shakespeare

was not much interested, and located the problems within the hero's own personality. It may have had a much more plausible Horatio, who in Shakespeare's play is a somewhat chameleonic figure—a stranger or an habitué of the court as the need arises. Its Ghost was doubtless a simple affair, raising none of the problems caused by Shakespeare's equipping it with a Christian context and perhaps even inviting some theological controversy. In short, Shakespeare, not for the first or last time, shows less interest in mere probability than in thematic development of a subtler kind. Consequently this play—difficult enough in all conscience to comprehend, a mass of problems indeed—is made even less simple by the presence of certain inconsistencies and anomalies entailed by the drastic rehandling of the sources.

Although Hamlet says that "the story is extant, and writ in very choice Italian," there is no known source of the Gonzago plot, though there are a few hints in Belleforest. Shakespeare seems even to have altered the details of King Hamlet's murder in order to make the play-within-the-play fit, though this may have been done in the earlier play to allow for the introduction of a Ghost, and to make the murder a secret instead of common knowledge. As to minor sources, the handling of Hamlet's mental condition owes something to Timothy Bright's *Treatise of Melancholy* (1586), and there are some much-debated echoes of Montaigne, especially in the soliloquies on suicide. Florio's translation of the *Essays* was published in 1603, but existed for some years before, under circumstances which do not make it improbable that Shakespeare could have read it, even supposing he had not read the original French (published in full in 1588).

Hamlet is a multiple play; Shakespeare not only alters the old plot but expands it at every opportunity. For implicit comment on Hamlet's attitude to his task of revenge, we have the carefully-built-up Laertes; we see how he feels about his family, how he is cherished by the King who fears Hamlet, how he dares damnation and the loss of "both the worlds" for instant and savage revenge, and is willing to use any amount of "policy" to make it possible. And if this is not enough, we have also Fortinbras, contrasted with Hamlet not only in I.ii, before the story is launched, but in IV.iv, where he becomes an "occasion" that expressly "informs" against Hamlet. We have Ophelia's madness as a foil to Hamlet's "antic disposition," and the factitious grief of the player who "acts" without motive when Hamlet, with all the motive in the world—as he tells us—cannot act at all. Polonius dies, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "go to it," not so much because they are spies as to show that Hamlet can kill. The Mouse-trap becomes a great excuse for a long lecture on acting, the death of Ophelia for hundreds of melancholic lines on death. And these instances of the apparently leisurely, expansive construction of *Hamlet* could be multiplied. Everything conspires to make the play long: those wild changes of mood from antic to melancholic; those fierce renewals of passion as when he turns

¹An English translation, *The History of Hamlet* (1608), may have existed in earlier editions no longer extant.

again on his already reeling mother in the closet scene; the game of feeding suspicions with evidence as when he helps Polonius to believe that love is the cause of his distemper, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to compile reports on his ambition; all these, and Hamlet's own pale cast of thought, make of *Hamlet* a delaying play at least as surely as Hamlet himself is a delaying revenger.

The unusual obliquity of the opening is worth noting. Shakespeare normally opens with plot and thematic material of the highest importance, shrewdly and economically presented; *Julius Caesar*, the last tragedy before *Hamlet*, is a fine instance. In *Hamlet* all is different; one has almost to assume an audience that knew the story and was willing to be teased by indirection. To be sure, the opening scene is as economical in the creation of atmosphere as that of *Macbeth*. There is the challenge of Barnardo, who nervously steals the sentry's words; the telling "I am sick at heart"; the cold and the fear. "Shakespeare," says T. S. Eliot, "had worked for a long time in the theatre, and written a good many plays before reaching the point at which he could write those twenty-two lines." Out of their varied rhythms, and the beautifully unexpected speech of Marcellus, "It faded on the crowing of the cock," there arises, as Eliot says, "a kind of musical design." But meanwhile the ghost—"this thing"—has appeared. (Horatio as sceptic raises questions as to its status which could have been avoided.) There has been speculation as to its purpose, but one thing seems sure: it has to do with the state of the nation—it "bodes some strange eruption to our state"—and with the armaments drive now in progress under the threat from Norway. That it genuinely has to do with the state of the nation—its spiritual rather than its merely political state—we shall learn; and to give us a "musical" sense that this is so, there is the unexpected speech about Christmas. But so far as plot goes, this might be the opening scene of a play about a Caesar-like Hamlet now dead but still posthumously interested in empire. Young Hamlet is not even mentioned until line 170—after nearly nine minutes' playing time.

The second scene opens with a passage of formal pomp, dwelling on the late King and his successor, and moving on first to the question of the threat of war and then to the departure of Laertes. Only when the ambassadors leave does Hamlet enter the story or the dialogue. The effect is, of course, theatrical and calculated. We have had before us Hamlet's two rivals, Fortinbras and Laertes; we have seen his enemy, the King, formidably in action; we have met the mature and rational Horatio; and then at last, twelve minutes after the start, the black Hamlet. He opens with an antic quibble, and his first sustained speech is a melancholy moralizing on the great gulf between being and seeming. Finally he rejects the proper *consolatio* offered by the King, and—before he commences business as a revenger, be it noted—soliloquizes on his disgust with life in a corrupt world. Only then, in his examination of Horatio and his companions, do we see the Hamlet of sharp practical intelligence and

fine charity of manner; and then too, for the first time, we hear mention of specific "foul deeds" about to arise. We await with new interest his encounter with the Ghost; but seven minutes of mutual moral exhortation in the Polonius family intervene. Even as he waits on the battlements, Hamlet is given time to discourse thoughtfully on the dangers of scandal in public life; and Horatio, with his fear of the Ghost as potentially evil, delays the meeting yet again, until Hamlet follows, hears, swears instant revenge, and gives the first of those displays of manic behavior which prove him—lapsed in passion—to be punished with a sore distraction.

This, for all its violent action, is the mood of the play, a play in which an Osric can postpone the imminent catastrophe for over a hundred affected lines, in which even Hamlet's soliloquies seem slightly misplaced; in which the characters busy themselves with rival theories about the nature of Hamlet's unease. For Polonius it is disappointed love, for his mother "His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage"; for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern it is thwarted ambition, and for Ophelia simple lunacy. Nor is this all the theorizing in the play. Hamlet himself theorizes constantly—about the Ghost, about passion, about action; about manners and acting and suicide and custom. If those long delays at the outset are intended to kindle the interest of the audience in this new Hamlet—how will he differ from the old? what kind of hero and revenger will he be?—they will find that there is no simple answer to their questions. *Hamlet* is not what they expected; they must join with the other characters in the great *Hamlet* activity of guessing, theorizing, waiting, testing. Above all, they are kept waiting and kept doubting. Shakespeare will no more than Hamlet sweep to his revenge with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love. For both of them, it seems, the murder of the old Hamlet is simply a particular instance of a general evil. And in the delays which follow—delays which we, fascinated by the uniquely irregular rhythm of the play, might not note for ourselves if Hamlet did not draw our attention to them—we are always conscious that we are being offered not so much a man, but a play, or a world that delays and doubts; suddenly inventing, for instance, the problem of whether the Ghost is to be believed, questioning not the difficulties of the particular act of murder but the questionable shape of all action.

This is not a complexity entailed by the sources, where, as we have seen, Hamlet's practical difficulties are emphasized, and the Ghost is a Senecan theatrical invention designed primarily to start the revenge action. Nor can we explain the doubts which the Mouse-trap is intended to settle as merely ethical. It is true enough that on Elizabethan views to be a revenger was to be oneself condemned: the scourge of God will be scourged: woe to him by whom the offense cometh. But if we look at Revenge plays where the ethical issues are central—*The Atheist's Tragedy*, say, or *The Revenge of Bussy*—we see at once that *Hamlet* is different. Hamlet, for instance,

dou
woi
tior
and
of t
sim
of a
Fur
amb
to I
mor
H
the
thea
self-
ence
simp
of th
surv
from
not j
us th
in th
The
gossi
of be
theat
to na
for h
by ar
blood
suade
"acti
but h
acting
and it
each
This
comp
issues
an ap
and a
to the
mance
in ger
terms
It h
himse
be so.
play,
It is n
bras a
event.
momen
of acti
that h
and wi
The
actor i
reinfor
play, a
pretens

doubts, or professes to doubt, the truth of the Ghost's word, not the wisdom of complying with his instructions. And since this doubt begets the *dumb show* and the play, it is worth observing also that the arrival of the players creates a problem very remote from simple morality, namely, the question of the nature of action, or rather of motive abstractly considered. Further, Shakespeare makes the Mouse-trap itself ambiguous; it explains as much to the King as it does to Hamlet, and makes the problem of *acting* much more difficult.

Hamlet is an extremely theatrical play. It is part of the story of the development of the Elizabethan theatre that as it grew more and more professional and self-conscious, it more and more distanced its audience. The medieval custom of using direct address for simple exposition, of treating the spectators as part of the show, rapidly disappears; only the soliloquy survives, and we see how far even that is in *Hamlet* from the tradition of direct explanation. *Hamlet* does not pretend the stage is the little world. It reminds us that all this is occurring in a theatre, with the Ghost in the "cellarage" and the stage peopled by actors. The play-within-the-play is introduced by topical gossip about the London theatre. The whole question of being and seeming is considered in terms of the theatre. The purpose of playing is to hold up a mirror to nature, but that is in itself an artificial act, calling for high skill. The actor simulates genuine passion by artificially stiffening the sinews, summoning up the blood. By enacting the appearance of passion he persuades us of its reality. But he is "play-acting," not "acting." Hamlet's problem is a problem of action, but has more than a mere semantic relation to play-acting: hence the great soliloquy "O, what a rogue . . ." and its rapidly following sequel, "To be, or not to be," each of them dealing with a sense of the word *act*. This at least gives one a notion of the urgency and complexity of Shakespeare's intentions. *Hamlet* raises issues as to the validity of its own existence as a play—an appearance which dares to comment on reality—and at the same time tells us to attend not so much to the difficulties its hero experiences in the performance of a specific act, as to his difficulties over action in general, to an irresolution which explains itself in terms of the undoubtedly corrupt society around him.

It has sometimes of late been argued that Hamlet himself shares the corruption, and this may in a sense be so. He is an actor, after all, both in fact and in the play, and sometimes the play makes him a bad one. It is not merely that he cannot act, and, like Fortinbras and his soldiers, make mouths at the invisible event. He also muddles occasions; it is at the very moment when his own enterprise has lost "the name of action" and he is bound for England under guard that he falsely professes to have strength and means and will to kill the King.

The most striking characteristic of Hamlet as play-actor is the "antic disposition." His antic quibbles reinforce the deliberate semantic puzzlement of the play, and are very much a theatrical matter. But his pretense of "idleness" also shows us that a great man,

a courtier, a man noted for generosity and acuteness of mind (he has been called the most intelligent figure ever represented in literature) can have the reality of his intellect clouded by assuming the appearance of madness. Hamlet is punished by the sore distraction he assumes; so he tells Laertes in one of those moments of charity. Someone remarked that his madness is the shadow thrown on Hamlet by the evil that surrounds him. To some degree his judgment is clouded; Polonius is not the fool Hamlet takes him for, the King far from the contemptible figure of Hamlet's words to Horatio and his mother. And even Horatio sees that Hamlet needs to control his wild and whirling moods, to beget a temperance in his passion, as an actor should. But there are important respects in which Hamlet judges right, as in his attribution of his suffering not to particular threats but to the seduction of his mother; though even in that marvellous unpacking of his heart with words we are allowed to think he acts intemperately, as if his emotional ruin is enacted at the very moment when he discovers its cause. The treatment of Ophelia in the nunnery scene—whether or no Hamlet is supposed to know of the presence of the King and Polonius—is another instance of the same thing. We are entitled to infer that corruption has shadowed the courtier's and scholar's mind.

The environment has been tainted by that evil, by what H. D. F. Kitto, aptly quoting Aeschylus, calls the *protarchos ate*—the crime that sets crime in motion, the crime of the King. As Wolfgang Clemen says, the "leprous distillment" of the poisoning is shown as corrupting the body politic as well as killing the old King. This crime has a kind of totality resembling that of Eve's: it involves pride, murder, lust, gluttony, and the rest. Given the curious duplicity of the play, we see Claudius as politic in both senses: basely scheming, but effective as a ruler (though Hamlet of course sees him single). We see him anguished by guilt and preparing to incur more guilt. We observe that the imagery of disease which so echoes in the play—the quick of the ulcer, the undivulged disease—is concentrated in Claudius' lines, as he makes his evil plans; but he is tortured by guilt, his own undivulged disease. He is a drunkard; yet twice at least—at the play, and after the Queen has drunk the poisoned liquor—our attention is drawn to his self-control. But Claudius is a tyrant; boundless intemperance was traditionally the habit of tyrants. He is even treated as a usurper, and we are encouraged to build upon hints that Hamlet "the Dane"—a term normally used of the King—will treat him so. The air breathed by tyrants is tainted; you have a court of immoralists like Laertes and rich idiots like Osric. It is a court where espials are lawful (the play is full of spying, of "tricks"—a repeated word; and Hamlet does his share, setting Horatio to watch the King). Power is abused—another repeated word—as in the letter to England (by which Hamlet also benefits). Custom is maintained in bad instances, broken in good. The evil of the tyrant is a contagious blastment for Ophelia. One may infer that the heaven which rejects his

prayers will also ensure, as it was held ever to have done, that the tyrant's life is a short one.

And here we do touch the quick of the ulcer. Hamlet calls himself "scourge and minister" (III.iv.175); the two functions are sometimes sharply differentiated, but I do not think they should be. Hamlet is not asking himself whether he is required to be one or the other. It is true that he will not, like Laertes, disregard "both the worlds," and indeed that he explicitly considers them in soliloquy; and it is true that he will not, like Fortinbras, find his quarrel in a straw. He is aware of the moral danger of being a scourge of God. On his departure to England his thoughts, he says, will be bloody. Yet on his return, as everybody notices, his mood is different. As to the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "Why, even in that," he says, "was heaven ordinant" (V.ii.48). What Hamlet has discovered is simply that "there's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (V.ii.10-11). He does not have to decide whether or not to be a scourge. Even the death of Ophelia is made merely an aspect of death in general, part of the large arrangements of Providence. Every chance, every evil intention such as the King's wager, is now part of a plan; and Hamlet's part is compliance. "Over and over again in *Hamlet*," says John Hollo-

way, "chance turns into a larger design, randomness becomes retribution." If the "positive" of the play has been the universal encroachment of death, the Hamlet of the last scenes has come to see this, and everything else, as part of an inexplicable and painful plan. He therefore acquiesces. That Chance is a mask of Providence most Elizabethans, at any rate, believed. In the last moments Laertes dies by his own rapier, and Claudius by his own poison, as Polonius has died in a lawful espial. Hamlet dies, having served as scourge but also as minister, as a man who has acted properly under a discipline higher than the Ghost's. Then he is a soldier and, briefly, a king. His last decisive act is to name as his successor a man capable of "enterprises of great pitch and moment."

Hamlet ends with a strong sense of purgation; the *protarchos ate* has been thoroughly purged, at the cost of extinguishing the two families involved. This may, then, be the catharsis. But in rendering account of the pleasures of *Hamlet*, we should recall also much that may seem to be external to this purgation; the pleasures of theatrical hesitation and duplicity, of alienation and illusion; our strong intellectual delight in the calms and furies, the great rhythmical pulse of the play, in its invention of a new mirror to hold up to a changed nature.

Frank Kermode



"Springes to catch woodcocks." From Henry Parrot, *Laquei ridiculosi: or Springes for Woodcocks* (1613). The proverbial phrase just quoted is Polonius' worldly-wise indictment of lovers' vows—"the holy vows of heaven," as Ophelia terms them (*Hamlet*, I.iii.114). The woodcock was considered unusually stupid, even for a bird, and easily snared in traps ("springes"). "Woodcock" was therefore a common term for a gullible fool of either sex. In V.ii.306 the dying Laertes calls himself a woodcock who has been caught in a springe of his own devising. (By permission of the Harvard College Library)