

10. A Florentine Secretary for the Prince of Denmark

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics* Hegel offers us the following interpretation of Hamlet's tragedy:

The collision turns strictly here . . . on Hamlet's personal character. His noble soul is not made for this kind of energetic activity; and full of disgust with the world and life, what with decision, proof, arrangements for carrying out his resolve, and being bandied from pillar to post, he eventually perishes owing to his own hesitation and a complication of external circumstances.¹

This interpretation is certainly not original with Hegel. In accordance with the general plan and purpose of his philosophy, he gives us what he takes to be the universally recognizable meaning of this great "modern" tragedy for its own modern age. Apparently he derived his interpretation from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*.ⁱⁱ But I have not investigated its origins. That it is objectively valid for the latest "modern" time that Hegel was addressing we can see by comparing it with the thesis that Coleridge expounded (probably in 1813):

In Hamlet I conceive him [i.e. Shakespeare] to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to outward objects and our meditation on inward thoughts — a due balance between the real and the imaginary world. In Hamlet this balance does not exist — his thoughts, images, and fancy [being] far more vivid than his perceptions, and his very perceptions instantly passing thro' the medium of his contemplations, and acquiring as they pass a form and color not naturally their own. Hence great,

enormous, intellectual activity, and a consequent proportionate aversion to real action, with all its symptoms and accompanying qualities.ⁱⁱⁱ

Even that sensible fellow William Hazlitt agrees with the more habitually fanciful Coleridge: “The character of Hamlet stands quite by itself,” he says. “It is not a character marked by strength of will or even of passion, but by refinement of thought and sentiment.” He goes on like this for two of his always readable pages and concludes: “His ruling passion is to think not to act: and any vague pretext that flatters this propensity instantly diverts him from his previous purposes.”^{iv}

This reading has proved to be long-lived, and with the advance of universal literacy it has become ever more general. It was proclaimed as the motto-truth of Olivier’s film *Hamlet* in the nineteen-forties: “This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind.”^v

So we cannot fault Hegel upon historical grounds. The interpretation is objectively there, and it is, indeed, quite generally adhered to. But it is both *decadent* and *wrong*. This can be demonstrated from the text of the play. *Hamlet* is, indeed, a modern tragedy, a tragedy of *Christian* values — or in Hegelian terms, it is the presentation of a “collision” between the “natural” and the “spiritual” order of ethical life. But it is not at all a *subjective* tragedy, i.e. there is no internal “collision” of values in the will of the hero. On the contrary, that is precisely the “wounded name” which the hero foresaw, when he asked Horatio “in this harsh world to draw thy breath in pain to tell my story” (V, 2, 351-2).

Hegel offers us a much better piece of Hamlet criticism, on his own account, in the *Phenomenology*. There he contrasts Hamlet’s wary distrust of the Ghost with the naive trust of Orestes in Apollo’s Oracle. In Hegel’s earlier book Hamlet appears as the modern figure of “Conscience”; he is the hero who knows that he cannot shift the responsibility for his own unethical or immoral actions onto any outside authority:

So the consciousness that is purer than the latter [i.e. Macbeth] which puts belief in witches, and more prudent, more solid and thorough, than the former [i.e. Orestes] which trusts the priestess and the beautiful god, carries with his revenge, even though the very spirit of his father reveals to him the crime by which he was murdered. He institutes still other proofs — for the reason that this revelatory spirit could also be the devil.^{vi}

It is only when we see how true this insight is, and how deep it goes, that we can understand the play properly. We should start, as the play itself does, with the Ghost. Hamlet is very clever indeed, and very “modern,” about ghosts. In the most famous speech of the play he says that death is “a sleep” in which there may be “dreams,” but there can be no community — and hence no effective action. The afterlife is “the undiscovered country from whose bourn/ *No* traveller returns” (III, i, 80). Both generally and specifically this is a surprising thought — and indeed a shocking one. For Hamlet is a professional scholar — thirty years old or thereabouts, and just now home from the University — so he can no more have forgotten his Savior than he can have forgotten his father. Yet he flatly asserts that neither of them has returned from the dreaming world of death. The resurrected Savior, and the Ghost, are both of them real enough, but they are not travelers from that still “undiscovered country.” When we start thinking of them as having come back from there, that is when our consciences make cowards of us; and if we have an “enterprise of great pitch and moment” that is what must not happen.

This is the very moment in the play when Hamlet shows that his own resolution is not (as Hegel and his contemporaries thought) “sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought.” Directly after this soliloquy, he plunges into his “sea of troubles” and creates the very worst of them for himself. His killing of Polonius results from a trap set by his enemy, that he has fallen into; but his own cruel rejection of Ophelia at this very moment is a quite deliberate act of policy. What it costs him personally, we can judge later when he leaps into her grave and challenges Laertes. But now and always, he is ruthless rather than irresolute; and even in this famous meditation about our failure to

accept the Stoic view of suicide, the options that he is really pondering are quite the opposite of what they seem. “To be” is to “take arms” (and very probably die for it); “not to be” is to “suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” without resistance — i.e. to go back to Wittenberg, and live out the normal term of life as a scholar, not a Prince. The speech comes at this central point in the play, because this is the moment for resolution, the point after which there may well be no turning back.

Hamlet has formed a plan for testing the “conscience of the King.” He has earlier said to his confidential friends that “It is an honest Ghost” (I, v, 138). But he must test whether this judgement is true, and not merely what he wants to believe. He knows very well that the *speech* of the Ghost is in his own mind.^{vii} So it may well be the voice of his own father-worship and mother-fixation. For Hamlet was as good a scholar of the book of man as Shakespeare himself; and he knew where and what his guardian-devil was, long before Freud and Ernest Jones came from their consulting rooms to tell him. Even more surely he knows that Claudius is listening, when he gives his exit line in Act III scene i: “Those that are married already, all but one, shall live, the rest shall keep as they are” (III, i, 151-2). That is his declaration of war. At this moment he rejects the destiny that his mother certainly wished for him, and which Claudius would have accepted as the most convenient arrangement. He is not going to be a married professor in Luther’s Wittenberg.^{viii} Ophelia must — for the moment at least — be off to the Catholic form of nunnery. Hamlet certainly does not want her marrying anyone else; and, although he has certainly been to bed with her, and she, poor girl, is very probably pregnant, he does not seriously mean that she should accept the destiny of a whore, and be off to a brothel. But either his mother’s marriage must be broken, or he will die a bachelor quite soon. If the Ghost is *not* “honest” then the secret listener to all this will not understand the threat, and the die will not be cast after all. But Hamlet’s soul is “prophetic” (I, v, 40). Even before the Ghost spoke, he *wanted* to believe that there was something very rotten in the State of Denmark.

Now I am going too fast. I said that we must begin with the Ghost, and we did. But there is much more to say about him, before we can deal with Hamlet’s *resolution*. So far, we know, as Hamlet does, that the *speaking* Ghost is a denizen of Hamlet’s mind, and not a “traveller” from the beyond. This is confirmed by the old King’s final appearance (in the Queen’s “closet”), when his

own wife fails to see him, and asks Hamlet why “You do bend your eye on vacancy/ And with th’incorporeal air do hold discourse?” (IV, iv, 117-8). In his speaking role the Ghost is like Banquo’s ghost in *Macbeth*. But what are we to make of his *silent* appearances at the beginning of the play? He could not exist in this mode at all, if he were not a *public* object. Before the play begins he has been seen twice by two specific sentinels; and when the curtain rises, they have brought Horatio to see him (obviously as the best avenue to obtaining a confidential audience with Hamlet).

Shakespeare has decked this silent ghost in all the armor of the popular superstition “that makes cowards of us all.” But we have to recognize that he is essentially a political phenomenon — a force and presence of rumor that causes bad morale.^{ix} The sentinels are “seeing ghosts” partly because they cannot understand why they are on watch at all. Preparations for war are in progress, and they don’t know *why*. No one tells *them* anything. They have chosen the right man to ask, because Horatio knows all that Hamlet himself knows about the political situation. The fact is that the kingdom of Denmark is threatened by the Crown Prince of Norway. The independent monarchy of the realm is a feudal-elective one (V, ii, 65). The King is chosen by the Council of Barons. But the Council has acquiesced in the succession of Claudius, without the formality of an election; largely (no doubt) because of this military crisis, in which “Young Hamlet” — the perpetual scholar — hardly seemed to them to be the leader that they needed. In these circumstances, the report that “the Old King’s walking” indicates that the people (who *love* “Young Hamlet”) are not happy about that decision.

Horatio has been brought to this night rendezvous by Marcellus, a scholarly officer. He is to meet yet another courtier, one Bernardo. They have evidence that Claudius helped King Hamlet out of this world, *in order to* take advantage of the crisis. Some unimportant member of the servant class claims to know this. This witness would seem to be Francisco who appears first on the watch, mysteriously “sick at heart” though “not a mouse is stirring”; and he has confided to Bernardo (his watch officer) what he saw. He claims that he saw Claudius doing his dirty work. With respect to its factual content, the story that the psychological Ghost tells Hamlet when it speaks (I, v, 59-79) has to be what Francisco (or someone he knows) actually witnessed. Listening to this report

becomes for Hamlet the beginning of an experience that is *truly* “ghostly.” Marcellus and Horatio have heard the story already. So they have to be sworn to secrecy. *For them* — and indeed, for the public generally — the ghost is, and must remain, silent.

When Hamlet has his speaking encounter with the Ghost, even Bernardo is no longer on stage. But the account given by the witness, and heard already by Bernardo, Marcellus and Horatio, is the only way that Hamlet could have learned those concrete details of the story that he tests for truth in his own “play.” The report provides a circumstantial foundation for the widespread rumor that “something is rotten in the State of Denmark”; and for Hamlet’s “prophetic soul” telling him that “the Serpent that did sting thy father’s life/ Now wears his crown” (I, v, 39-40). It is some actual witness who cannot speak out publicly, who reports the murder. The rest of what the *speaking* Ghost says, is the voice of the spirit in Hamlet’s mind. But did the uneducated witness rightly understand what he saw? And is this Ghost (this present vision in Hamlet’s mind) a “spirit of health or goblin damned?” (I, iv, 40). That is what the Prince does not yet know.

In the drama, Hamlet comes to the battlements to hear this story. He is terribly upset by it; Marcellus and Horatio are afraid that he may commit suicide. It is instructive that Bernardo is among those named as present. On the previous night, Marcellus brought Horatio to him, and *he* first told the story. Bernardo is (dramatically speaking) *there* all right — and a good director should make sure that we see him. But for Hamlet himself, Bernardo’s voice is the actual voice of the Ghost confirming the presentiment of his “prophetic soul”; and it is Hamlet’s own inner voice that gives us all of the subsequent rhetoric about “that incestuous, that adulterate beast” and “Oh Hamlet what a falling-off was there” (I, v, 42, 47). Hamlet is then alone with his own thoughts, and he is hearing the voice of the goblin jealousy, as he understands very well; for he was nursing all these thoughts before the story of murder ever came to his ears.

Let us consider what would happen if Hamlet were to drag the witness to the authorities of the daylight world. Supposing that Francisco — or the gardener’s boy who is his son perhaps — were fool enough to go with the Prince, and to tell his story in public, he would be racked. Very

soon he would confess that he made it all up, and quickly then (if he is lucky) he would be out of “this harsh world” and away in the “undiscovered country.” The witness — whoever he is — counts for nothing in the high politics of the Council. So there is no way forward on that line of action. Hamlet must go another way to work — and first of all he must put his own goblin to rest. The Ghost makes his last *public* appearance as a *voice*.^x He reinforces the oath of Horatio and Marcellus that they will give no one any reason to suspect that they have private insight into the strange behavior of the Prince. It is Francisco (and/or someone close to him) whose bones and sinews (and then his neck) will pay if these courtiers say anything that arouses suspicion. Francisco, therefore, is the “old mole” whose voice says four times urgently, “Swear” (I, v, 149, 155, 160, 180).

Hamlet’s *resolution* when he embarks on his strange policy is not that his father shall be “revenged,” but that he shall be “*remembered*” (I, v, 91-104, 110-12). The Ghost crying “Hamlet, revenge!” was the theme of the old story (which Shakespeare had to know in some form); and it was the theme of the old play — since it seems that there *was* an old play, and (probably) that was how Shakespeare knew the story. In the old story the revenge was carried out. In Shakespeare’s play too, Uncle Claudius dies at the last by Hamlet’s sword, and so a simple revenge is achieved. But Shakespeare’s play is a tragedy, not because that revenge costs Hamlet his life, but because Hamlet *fails* to achieve what he is resolved upon. The Ghost commands “Remember me” (I, v, 91). But it was the elder Fortinbras whom King Hamlet overthrew; and it is Young Fortinbras who gets the kingship back in the end (with Young Hamlet’s own vote in the election — V, ii, 358-9). In the end King Hamlet is not *remembered* as he should be. He ought to be remembered in the person of King Hamlet II; but instead “Young Hamlet” dies a Prince still, and a prince with a “wounded name.”

Horatio is puzzled and shocked to see Hamlet going secretly to work. This is the context in which Hamlet tells him: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/ Than are dreamt of in your *philosophy*” (I, v, 165-6). The oath of silence is the first such undreamt of thing. For at Wittenberg where the two close friends have studied moral philosophy together, the first principle they have been taught is “Tell the truth, and shame the devil!” Hamlet’s policy puts a strange gloss on this moral philosophy of the schoolroom — for in producing his own play, he *does* “tell the

truth”; but he tells it *inside a fiction*. And he “shames the devil” by it too; but the shaming is only for his own private knowledge and satisfaction. “The spirit that I have seen/” (he says) “may be a de’il; and the de’il hath power/ T’assume a pleasing shape; — yea, and perhaps/ Out of my weakness and my melancholy/ (As he is very potent with such spirits)/ Abuses me to damn me” (II, ii, 603-8).

Just what does the fear of “damnation” mean for this unorthodox scholar, who must have been on the verge of his doctorate when his father died suddenly, and he came home? He will soon tell us that the Heaven and Hell of orthodoxy are the “dreams” that “make calamity of so long life” (i.e. they are what make us willing to live with our calamities so long). When the Council failed to elect “Young Hamlet” to the Kingship, then “calamity” fell upon him; and he does not mean to give *his* calamity a long life. His test will show that the spirit he has seen was *not* a devil; and what damnation *really* is, we see when Claudius communes with himself after Hamlet’s play: “But, O, what form of prayer can serve my turn? ‘Forgive me my foul murder?’/ That cannot be since I am still possessed/ Of those effects for which I did the murder./ My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen” (III, iii, 51-55).

Hamlet and his enemy are at one in their “philosophy.” We bring the Last Judgement upon ourselves here in this life. Hamlet knows he is on the verge of damnation, when he denies Ophelia’s love:

I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth? We are arrant knaves, all; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery” (III, i, 122-).

It is this self-evaluation that we must attend to, rather than the sentimental-romantic interpretations of everyone from Wilhelm Meister to Laurence Olivier. To be “indifferent honest” is Hamlet’s choice because he is a *Prince* who bears his father’s name; and his father’s ghost has “commanded” him to remember that. His “indifferent honesty” manages to avoid damnation; but salvation, as he understands it, is different. He has been near salvation himself, and Horatio still has it; but for the sake of his father’s remembrance he, Hamlet, must give it up. Hamlet is “passion’s slave” — slave not to Ophelia, poor girl, but to his father’s life-work. It is Horatio who is now the saved soul, or the true philosopher:

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice,
And could of men distinguish, her election
Hath seal’d thee for herself: for thou hast been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing:
A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards
Hast ta’en with equal thanks: and bless’d are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled
That they are not a pipe for Fortune’s finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him
In my heart’s core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee. (III, ii, 63-74).

Hamlet is the man with a scholar’s vocation, who was born a Prince; and a Prince he is firmly resolved to be. There are “more things in his Heaven and Earth” than there are in the philosophy of the Schools, because a Prince must live by a different standard of “honesty” than a commoner. He must be aware of the human passions and emotions as “things” — things that may often go unnamed, but things more real than those that are named, and more honest than the stories that are told about them. The book of the Prince’s Heaven and Earth, the book in which the nameless things are named, and their true stories told, was written by an Italian, Niccolò Machiavelli, sometime Secretary of the Republic of Florence, in the very years when Luther was liberating the modern moral conscience at Wittenberg. It does not matter whether Shakespeare read it — though I think we are meant to suppose that his scholarly Prince Hamlet has done so — because Shakespeare has read the chronicles of how his own nation became a sovereign monarchy; and to

dramatize those he needed to be a very objective observer of what the political life of Princes was really like.

Macchiavelli wrote the *Prince* when the Florentine Republic fell, and he lost his active political career as “Secretary to the Ten.” Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* to express what he had learned in dramatizing English History under the eyes of the Tudor censors. *Those* English dramas of his had to correspond with the popular mythology on one side, and with the image-making of Princes on the other. (The great Princess who was the whole Hamlet family rolled into one, was on her death-bed; and King Polonius was about to come to the throne even while Shakespeare scribbled in some corner of the theater.) *Hamlet* was Shakespeare’s own free meditation on his dramatic secretaryship to the English Crown. In it he shows us how the mythology and the image-making interact (and even what the place of the drama, and its makers, is in that interaction). But his real concern was with the *truth* of politics behind the images; and since the whole consciousness of the political agents — their secret thoughts, as well as their public actions — was (as he, like Machiavelli, had learned) all images, he had to appeal to the philosophical Horatio in us all to tell Hamlet’s story to ourselves properly. I shall now tell the story, as Hamlet’s Horatio knew it; and since I am no theologian myself, but only a Machiavellian observer in the great playhouse of history at best, there will be felicity itself for me in the telling — rather than the absence of it.

Even with Hamlet’s Horatio there are some masks that have to be removed before we can begin. In his first meeting with Horatio at Court, Hamlet pretends not to know why he is there (or how long he has been in Elsinore). That this is a pretense, is certified by Horatio’s previously demonstrated knowledge of the political situation at the Council level. Horatio lectures Marcellus and Bernardo about that in the very first scene. And, of course, the idea that Horatio would come to Elsinore without going at once to see Hamlet is quite absurd. In fact, they probably traveled home from Wittenberg together. The point of their formal pretense of meeting for the first time now at Court, is to show us that Horatio’s world *does* include courtly or *conventional* pretenses. It is the game that begins with the enforced oath of silence, that is *not* in accordance with Horatio’s “philosophy”; and he does not understand or like it.

When Horatio says (during this pretended first meeting) that he saw King Hamlet *once* (I, ii, 184) we should believe him. Why should he lie *to Hamlet* about that? But if he saw the old King only *once*, then it is certainly odd that he is so sure about the identity of the Ghost (I, ii, 208-12). Shakespeare (I infer) is doing his best to indicate to those of us who do not believe in the *literal* existence of ghosts that Horatio did not actually see the Ghost yesternight; he has been *told* something about the old King by a witness whom he believes.

Hamlet is tormented by his mother's marriage. Before he hears Horatio's story of the Ghost, his plan is to retire to Wittenberg; but Claudius and Gertrude want him to remain at Court. At least, Claudius pretends to want that; we can reliably infer from what Gertrude says at Ophelia's grave that she did want it — and Claudius must, for the moment at least, agree with her. Hamlet's agreement to stay must at this point be read in terms of his confessed frustration. It appears that there is nothing to be done about his situation. In his Christian culture, suicide is regarded as cowardice and desertion of one's post.^{xi} So Horatio's news is just what he has been wanting to hear. It opens up the possibility of action on his part.

Since he came home for the funeral Hamlet has been openly courting Ophelia. Laertes — himself a shameless womanizer (as both the gentle admonition of Ophelia — I, ii, 47-51 — and the contemptible deviousness of Polonius — II, i, 1-74 — reveal to us) — has noticed this, and gives her a very proper brotherly warning about it. Probably she needed the warning; and certainly — like young Anne Boleyn — she wants to become a Princess. Obviously Laertes does not think the Prince is any closer to the angels than himself in this sphere. (Hamlet's outburst at the grave will show how mistaken he is. There is a blazing contempt for Laertes' view of womanhood in the comparison that Hamlet makes; and the same idealization of woman is evident in his violence about his mother's "adultery.")

What the relations between Hamlet, Laertes and Ophelia *have been*, Shakespeare's Horatio would know, while mine can only guess. Laertes I take to be a couple of years younger than Hamlet, and Ophelia at least five years younger than that (otherwise, this obedient daughter of a scheming

and complacent father would be married already). What Hamlet has told *my* Horatio is that the boys grew up together with the little sister trailing after them (or listening to their exploits), her round eyes full of worship; and that now, on a sudden, that worship is reflected in Hamlet's own returning gaze. They have not wasted any time — and Hamlet's "poems" are not much better than Orlando's. But it would not be proper for a true courtier to tell tales about what does not get into the poems — so we get no hint of that till Hamlet is "mad." But it does not matter what we suppose, as long as we admit that they are really in love with each other. Hamlet is deeply hurt when he finds that Ophelia has willingly become her father's puppet; and he is someone who reacts very viciously when he feels "betrayed."

Polonius is an open book. Shakespeare has written him down for us so perfectly that we never need to ask what Polonius intends, but only — sometimes — why we are shown it. (Why, for example, do we need to know that this prating apostle of "truth to oneself" is a man who sets a spy on his own son? Perhaps because, if this were not shown us, we might feel sorrier than we ought for the "wretched, rash, intruding fool" who gets himself killed. We need to be shown that — like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern — Polonius only gets what he has deserved — cf. V, ii, 57-62. He is an inveterate *schemer*, but he does not have the wit to realize the risks that he is taking.)

When the visible Ghost gives Hamlet an opening, and the invisible voice calls him to the destiny that his name represents, he begins to behave in a way which ordinary folk call "mad." Hamlet is a very emotional person, and even his friends (including Horatio) are afraid for his rational stability, when he hears the story of his father's death. It is the existence of this general reputation — an important element in his supposed unfitness for the succession in the eyes of the sage and steady Councillors — that makes the cover of "madness" both possible and easy for him. We need now to understand what this "cover" is for.^{xii} Hamlet does not seek to deceive any of the intelligent people around him at Court. Polonius is the only person whom we meet, who is successfully imposed upon.^{xiii} The "cover" is for public consumption only. Hamlet's one major asset is his popularity with the people. This popularity rests (partly at least) on the image of him as "the glass of fashion and the mould of form" (Ophelia, III, i, 155). In order to defeat Claudius, Hamlet needs to

be able to violate the image of the perfect courtier-soldier-scholar at will, without thereby losing or staining it. Being “out of his wits” with grief (or love) is the perfect excuse for any “outrage” that he may need to commit. Everyone feels sorry for him, and no one blames him. Ophelia puts the public image of Hamlet perfectly at the end of her heartbreaking scene: “O what a noble mind is here O’erthrown!/ The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s, eye, tongue, sword, . . .” (III, i, 153-4).^{xiv}

The first stage of Hamlet’s political scheme aims only to establish the truth of what he has been told about his father’s death. We see now that Horatio (who was so bewildered when the deceit began) has been taken into Hamlet’s confidence completely. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, on the other hand, are quickly recognized as willing tools of the enemy. Just as Hamlet needs to be certain that Claudius is a murderer, so Claudius needs to know for sure that Hamlet really wants to kill him (without incurring any public responsibility for the act). The political position of Claudius is extremely insecure. We see him send Voltimand and Cornelius to the aged King of Norway with a diplomatic authority that is rigorously limited (I, ii, 36-38); it is obvious that Claudius does not dare to trust anyone who is in touch with his enemies. Voltimand and Cornelius return quite soon with a reassuring message that turns out to be a pack of diplomatic lies (II, ii, 59-79).^{xv} It is very clear that someone who has popular support is badly needed at the helm of State.

In his scene with Ophelia, Hamlet tells her unmistakably that (since she has willingly become the tool of her father and Claudius) she is no longer the person to whom he gave tokens of love;^{xvi} and further that she must forget about the love affair, and keep out of the way while he is dealing with Claudius. He also gives a plain warning to Polonius not to meddle in what does not concern him. But Polonius is by his natural habit a meddling busybody. Claudius gets the message meant for himself without any mistake. So when he finds that Polonius is still enamored of the “lovesickness” theory, he readily falls in with the suggestion that Polonius should be the spy in the Queen’s “closet.”

This is a very cunning trap. Hamlet knows that he is being spied upon; but he thinks that only Claudius can spy on him in his mother’s private apartment. Claudius means to have Hamlet

killed in England in any case; but he needs to get him into a situation where he cannot refuse to go. Homicide committed in a rash and violent overreaction to being spied upon, is the perfect cause. (At this point, Claudius has Hamlet's measure exactly; for Hamlet's own plan is to present the deliberate murder of Claudius as an impulsive response to the invasion of his mother's most private space by a stranger.)

By the time Hamlet has received two invitations to come to his mother after the play, he must be well aware that a plot is in progress. "They fool me to the top of my bent," he says (III, ii, 387). He has already given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern a very clear and explicit warning that they cannot fool him (III, ii, 366-75) — just as he told Polonius plainly not to meddle. But Claudius does fool him this time, to the top of his bent indeed — and only Polonius is more completely and disastrously gulled.

Just before this happens, Claudius has a fit of bad conscience, and Hamlet comes upon him praying. The whole of Hamlet's speech at this juncture (like his meditation on the disgracefulness of suicide) is a reflection upon how the conventional world interprets actions. This man sent his father's soul to heaven "Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd" (I, v, 42). That will be a strong card in Hamlet's hand, when the exposure comes (and come it will, once Hamlet is King, for no one will threaten even the gardener's boy with the rack then). But to kill someone at his prayers is *very* bad policy. If agents do it, then a strong King can wriggle out of the awkward corner created, as Henry II did in the case of Thomas Becket. But for the King to do it with his own hand would be political suicide, even if he could prove that the victim was no saint. So Hamlet is wise to let this moment pass. But, of course, he thinks that he will soon have another opportunity to do his business "inadvertently."

Claudius wins this round. He is no "mouse" for Hamlet's "mouse-trap." He understands that the play was a threat of *Hamlet's* revenge for his own crime (portrayed in the "dumb-show").^{xvii} Indeed, *everyone* understood that the poor crazed Prince was threatening the life of his uncle. From that "mouse-trap" of Hamlet's play, we have now advanced to rat-killing. But the "rat" turns out to be only Polonius. "I took thee for thy better" says Hamlet fairly calmly, and goes straight back to

the task of telling his mother that she has married a murderer. Her startled echo “As kill a king?” (III, iv, 31) is a sincere expression of shock. She did not know that her lover killed her husband. What shows this, is the resolute way in which she keeps Hamlet’s secrets, and supports his cause from this point onwards.

The ruthless firmness of Hamlet’s character is demonstrated clearly in the “closet” scene. Anyone tricked into killing the father of his beloved in mistake for his real enemy, must be expected to break down in some way. Hamlet’s rage and frustration give his planned lecture to his mother an edge of violence that rises to hysterical hallucination with the last appearance of the Ghost. We are made to understand that this Ghost is strictly in his mind, by the Queen’s reaction. Hamlet is truly “out of his wits” at this point (just as he went off the deep end for a while when he heard Bernardo’s story). But he recovers himself almost at once, and begins to talk first like a confessor, and then like a political counselor. The corpse of Polonius gets almost no attention — except for the remarkably confident assertion “I will bestow him, and will answer well/ The death I gave him” (III, iv, 176-7). But we should notice that Hamlet speaks here for the first time of the plan to send him to England; and he speaks of it as an accepted thing. (He was not previously expecting to have to go — but he indicates that he has already made a contingency plan against that emergency in any case.)^{xviii}

His first plan had been to kill the usurper “by misadventure” so to speak; and then to impeach him with whatever evidence exists (my postulated baseborn eyewitness). But Claudius saw that trap, and he has avoided it. Now, therefore, Hamlet must walk open-eyed into the trap that *he* can see, hoping to turn the tables in the same way. He has lost the first round, but he will win the second one. At this stage he must act the madman rather more earnestly than before; and the Queen backs him up. The hiding of Polonius’ body is part of this pretense. When Hamlet says mysteriously that “The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body” (IV, ii, 27-8) there is method in his madness. He means that the responsibility for Polonius’ death rests properly with Claudius, but that it can never be brought home to him.

Claudius can now say openly that Hamlet really means to kill *him*. But the people love Hamlet, and all sympathy will be with him in his distracted state, if any direct action is taken against him. So to England he must go; and while Hamlet is on his travels we have Ophelia truly mad, and Laertes home from Paris in an insensate rage — ready apparently to lead a revolutionary uprising. Hamlet, for his part, meets Fortinbras on the march “to Poland.” A Norwegian force heading for “Poland” would find it very convenient to be allowed to go across Danish territory. But Hamlet realizes at once (and the event will prove) that Poland is not, in fact, where they are going. So this encounter enforces the urgency of the situation upon his mind. Fortinbras must very quickly be faced by a united people ready to fight for its freedom, or the game will be lost, and King Hamlet’s work undone.

Prince Hamlet is equal to this challenge. The very odd “pirate” ship onto which he leaps as soon as it comes abreast of his Danish ship, and which promptly sheers off, has plainly been hired to rescue him; and with him he carries the despatch that will prove incontrovertibly that Claudius ordered the English vassals of Denmark to put him to death. Now he has a witness who cannot be racked, and Claudius’ days are numbered.

Claudius, however, is corrupting Laertes even before the news of Hamlet’s return arrives. I do not know by what route Shakespeare had knowledge of the *Odyssey*, but it seems clear that Hamlet’s letter to Claudius is meant to establish a parallel between his return to Denmark and that of Odysseus to Ithaca.^{xix} The fencing match in the last Act takes the place of the great trial with the bow. But in this case the crafty plot is made by the suitors. Only one of them can wed the Queen (and that is done already). But the other (Laertes) can have the succession. Laertes, too, is (as we have seen) a favorite of the people; and we must suppose he is not unmindful of this when he joins in the last plot of Claudius. It is he — shame on him! — who has the poison ready and volunteers its use. The two of them are worthy successors to Penelope’s “Suitors.”

But Hamlet-Odysseus has his allies too. Horatio, summoned to meet him, is cast for the part of the swineherd Eumaeus; and the faithless Gertrude-Penelope proves faithful in the end. She does

not know about the poisoned rapier, but she is listening when Claudius adds the poisoning of the cup to the plot (to make assurance doubly sure). So she knows just what she is doing when she drinks it.^{xx}

Ophelia's death does not belong to the *Odyssey* pattern. Hamlet tries to fit her into the Iphigenia myth (Old Testament version) when he calls her father "Jephthah" (II, ii, 406). But there is no shifting the responsibility for this sacrificial victim from his own shoulders, and he knows it. Certainly Laertes and Polonius undermined her confidence that Hamlet really loved her. But she did not fall into suicidal despair until he killed her father, and was sent to England (this last event is crucially important if she was indeed pregnant). She is a plant too delicate for the Machiavellian world of princely policy; and Hamlet's passionate outburst at the funeral is tragically genuine. From the point of view of policy, his outburst is a bad mistake and he recognizes this (V, ii, 75-80). He desperately needs to be reconciled with Laertes, and he must know well enough that his old friend is hot-tempered and rash. Claudius calculates well, when he says in the plotting, "He [Hamlet], being remiss,/ Most generous and free from all contriving,/ Will not peruse the foils" (IV, vii, 133-5). Hamlet is not generally "remiss," and he is certainly not "free from all contriving." He is prudently suspicious, and he is crafty himself; so he has a premonition that something is wrong about the fencing match. But he *is* "generous," and he does not suspect Laertes of "contriving" against him. (He refers his "gainsaying" to Claudius, and would probably have avoided the poisoned cup — V, ii, 216-20.) When he is scratched by the unbated foil, he shows how skillful he really is, by disarming Laertes, and setting up a courteous exchange of weapons. He probably knows at that point that the game is lost; for Laertes has shown signs of guilt, and Hamlet is very quick to recognize the embarrassment of an unpracticed amateur actor.^{xxi}

Thus, in the end, only a simple "revenge" is possible. So the story comes out in accordance with the old tradition. But the tragedy is that at the political level, Hamlet fails. not only is the territory that his father won from Fortinbras lost, but the "homelet" of Denmark itself falls back under the "strong arm" of feudal lordship. The modern world of popular sovereignty loses. That is where the Hegelian "collision" can be seen. Fortinbras utters Hamlet's proper epitaph: "he was

likely . . . to have proved most royal” (V, ii, 400-1). But instead, Hamlet dies with a “wounded name,” from which his last address to Horatio tells us that we can save him if we will but try.

When we are pondering on the story behind Hamlet’s “wounded name,” we are bound to ask ourselves whether the Ghost was a devil after all. Did it matter, in the Machiavellian perspective, that Claudius was a usurping murderer? The pretended campaign against “Poland” is Shakespeare’s way of directing our attention to the right answer. (His lack of popular support forced Claudius into a secret pact to surrender the lands that King Hamlet had gained. That is the meaning of the agreement to give Fortinbras a “quiet pass” to “Poland” (II, ii, 73-79). Hamlet’s “How all occasions do inform against me” speech (IV, iv, 36-66) is his reaction to the discovery of this “quiet pass.” He will have to fight for the integrity of his kingdom, once again, even when the usurper is disposed of. This usurper (Claudius) is no bold and bloody warrior (like Richard III for example) but a coward through and through. He fully deserves the sobriquet of “wicked uncle.” As most of us know, it is an open question whether Richard III really deserved it; and I cannot help thinking that Shakespeare suspected that. For *Hamlet* proves, to my satisfaction, that Shakespeare had a far deeper understanding of princely politics than Ms. Josephine Tey.^{xxii}

Postscript on Ophelia

The first draft of this essay was written for, and read to, a large general audience. There was no opportunity for a proper discussion. Probably this was quite fortunate, because all of the comments that were made to me informally afterwards (some of them *years* afterwards) concerned *Ophelia*. No ordinary reader wants to believe that Ophelia is not “honest”; and everyone assumes that the standard of “honesty” in her case is that of Christian chastity. My own concern is with Hamlet’s “*indifferent* honesty”; and I do not think that Shakespeare would let him speak of it, at the very moment when he is uttering a simple factual falsehood. He tells Ophelia “Get thee to a nunnery”; and in its vulgar secular (Protestant) sense a “nunnery” was a brothel. He certainly wants Ophelia to behave like a nun, until they can be married properly. When he is King Hamlet, Ophelia will be his Queen. But at this moment he is furiously angry with her, and he wants to *hurt* her. The “honesty” of what he says arises from the fact that Ophelia has been to bed with him. (If she is pregnant as a result, then there is a powerful motive for her psychological disturbance and her suicide.)

I am as much impressed by the essential *innocence* of Ophelia as any other reader or viewer. But it appears to me that the proper standard for her “honesty” is that of romantic love. She wanted to be Hamlet’s *wife*, but she had no ambition to be Queen. Once they had plighted their troth to one another — and it is clear enough that they have done that — she thought of herself as married already, so that she was only doing what a wife was supposed to do when they went to bed together. On my view of the matter, the “indifferent honesty” of Hamlet’s comparing her to a whore, was more cruel in its conventional truth, than an outright lie would have been.

But Hamlet’s consistent “honesty” is not essential to my thesis. I want only to show that Hamlet was truly “Prince of Denmark” — and as such well worthy to succeed his father. That thesis can be accepted, even if what he says to Ophelia is simply the ruthless implication of a lie, and not a lover’s truthfully cruel vengeance for what he sees as betrayal. (Whichever it was, the speech certainly deserves to be counted among “such things that it were better my mother had not borne me.” The Prince who utters it knows himself only too well as a follower of Machiavelli.) So I invite

the reader to think whatever (s)he likes about Hamlet and Ophelia, and to concentrate her attention upon the *policy* of the Prince of Denmark.

Notes

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- i. *Aesthetics*, trans. T.M. Knox, pp. 1225-6: compare further pp. 583-4.
 - ii. Book IV, chapter 13 — compare Knox, p. 231.
 - iii. *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T.M. Raysor, I, 34 (Lecture 3 of 1813 — see *Collected Works* V, i, 539 for the critical text).
 - iv. *The Characters of Shakespeare's Plays, Works* (ed. P.P. Howe), IV, 233-5.
 - v. The film had its London premiere in May 1948.
 - vi. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §737 (numbering of A.V. Miller, 1977). Hegel later incorporated this valid insight into his *Wilhelm Meister* view of Hamlet's character (see Knox, p. 231).
 - vii. As Hegel puts it: "the appearance of the Ghost in *Hamlet* is treated as just an objective form of Hamlet's inner presentiment" (*Aesthetics*, Knox, p. 231).
 - viii. At the beginning of the play his mother wants Hamlet to stay home in Elsinore; and Claudius has to pretend to agree with her (see below). But because of his guardian-devil, this is never a real option for Hamlet (any more than it would have been tolerable for Claudius).
 - ix. Even the learned world have their own superstitions about him — I, i, 158-65.

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- x. At this point the essentially *theatrical* (make-believe) character of the Ghost is emphasized. He is actually referred to as “the voice in the cellarage” (i.e. in the space under the *stage*).
- xi. It is my opinion that “solid flesh” (I, ii, 129) should be read as “sullied flesh.” Hamlet the scholar has a deep appreciation of the truth expressed in the Christian dogma of Original Sin (cf. III, i, 117-31). He is about to confess to us the shape of Original Sin in himself. But it is also certain that he knows there is no “everlasting canon against self-slaughter.” *He* cannot commit suicide because he is Prince Hamlet, his father’s son; and Stoic suicide, the act of rational courage that most attracts him at this moment, would only bring shame on the name he shares with his father (and serve as the best possible evidence that the Council made the right decision about the succession). Cf. F. Bowers, 1989, 155-62.
- xii. I do not mean that it is *only* a “cover,” since Hamlet’s mind is a boiling cauldron of violent emotions which he cannot control *perfectly*; but Hamlet is never “mad” in the sense of being completely *out of control*. His pretense of being “mad” *allows* him to “let himself go.” So the pretense (which almost everyone close to him recognizes as such) gives him *also* a very necessary *safety-valve*.
- xiii. Gertrude seizes upon the “lovesick” theory, and affects to believe it. But it seems to me clear that she knows that Hamlet is faking, and she has a shrewd suspicion why. The only point where she really believes that he is mad, is when he is talking to the Ghost. At that point all of us who judge by ordinary standards would have to agree that Hamlet is “emotionally disturbed” in a rather serious way. (One *can* think of Ophelia as too innocent to understand anything, but to me she appears to be the most intelligent member of her family. So I do not believe that she accepts Hamlet’s madness.)
- xiv. It can be demonstrated that, by the time she utters this lament, Ophelia knows that Hamlet is

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- faking. The best hypothesis is that earlier, when she comes to her father with the news that Hamlet is distraught for love of her, she has gathered that the “madness” is a pretense, but thinks that the object of the pretense is to forward the cause of their betrothal. In this present scene she has discovered that Hamlet is playing a political game, and that he is quite willing to use her as a pawn. It is when he kills her father in his game that she suffers her nervous breakdown. At present she is backing him up as well as she can. (But *she* does not need to do any faking; she is truly distraught on her own account.)
- xv. Why the Norwegian force *needs* to cross Danish territory (II, ii, 76-79) is never made clear. When Fortinbras comes, he is supposed to be fresh from a campaign of conquest in Poland (V, ii, 353, 379). But it is transparently obvious that his Polish campaign is a diplomatic fiction. Cornelius and Voltimand have already made a secret agreement with Fortinbras on behalf of Claudius. And it seems to me that we are meant to think of them as prospering mightily in the restored regime of Fortinbras. The reason for the talk of “Poland” I shall return to at the end.
- xvi. III, i, 96 should be accented thus: “I never gave *you* aught.”
- xvii. The dumb-show and the play, taken together, are Hamlet’s “indifferent honesty.” By the standards of Horatio’s philosophical indifference to fortune, what Hamlet does is exactly the same as — and therefore just as *bad* as — what Claudius did. But Hamlet is “indifferently honest” about it. Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern all receive a clear warning of Hamlet’s intentions. The last three are told to stay out of what does not concern them.
- xviii. In “Hamlet as Minister and Scourge,” Fredson Bowers has analyzed the *problem* that Polonius’ death sets for Hamlet very ably. But Hamlet thinks he can return from the status of “scourge” to that of “minister.” The knowledgeable audience may expect his defeat, but

he does not do so yet (1989, 90-101).

- xix. Claudius is puzzled by the word “naked” — he draws our attention to it by repeating it — and he tells us of the “alone” in the postscript. His instant reaction shows that he realizes Hamlet must have the goods on him. Probably he supposes that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have sold him out. That is certainly what they ought to have done, since they must have been fairly sure what was in the despatch they were carrying. (There is nothing to prove that they knew; but it is plain from Hamlet’s extremely vindictive attitude that he thought that they ought at least to have suspected, checked, and told him. Those who become the willing agents of Princes are assumed to know what they are doing. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern certainly knew that they were advancing their own careers, and not supporting the cause of an old friend. If they did not know what the risks were for him — and them — then so much the worse for them. In that case (like Polonius) they were bigger fools than Hamlet took them for. The despatch that Hamlet puts in the place of the one he steals, shows that that is his view of the matter — compare V, ii, 57-59.)
- xx. The Folio text omits “But stay what noise” at IV, vii, 161 — and substitutes “How, sweet queen?” Apparently the actors preferred a melodramatic accident. But it is essential to the *tragedy* that we should understand that the Queen has heard the previous four lines.
- xxi. This is the point of his indignant lecture to Guildenstern (III, ii, 366-75).
- xxii. Her novel *The Child of Time* is the best fictional statement of the case *for* Richard Crookback.