Hamlet, II.ii—III.iv: Mirrors of Revenge

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The great sequence of scenes that make up the central movement of *Hamlet* shows Hamlet the revenger mounting his first assault on the king. Characteristically, for this play and this hero, it is an indirect and unsuccessful assault. The movement begins with the arrival at Elsinore of the players. This event suggests to Hamlet the form of his assault—the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*. More than that, the arrival of the players induces in Hamlet a surge of energy, and something in the histrionic atmosphere induces an enthusiasm for the role of revenger: hence Hamlet's readiness to embark, however indirectly, on his enterprise. At the centre of this central movement is the play scene. Shakespeare builds up to the play by bestowing much dramatic attention on Hamlet's plan to use it to convince himself, and (as he hopes) others, of the king's guilt. After the play, two highly charged scenes maintain much of the intensity of Hamlet's energy, though they also show it dispersing, its currents turning awry and losing the name of action. The engrossing sequence of play scene, prayer scene, and closet scene seems to be pressing toward a decisive crisis, but though it furnishes us, indeed, with a whole series of crises, it does not quite deliver on its own seeming promise. In the last scene of the sequence, Shakespeare does provide a climax of masterly, gruesome unexpectedness. But Hamlet's murder of Polonius ends the play's central movement—passing the dramatic initiative back to Claudius—in a way that does nothing to advance his cause. Hamlet's first decisive act as a bloody revenger falls blindly beside the mark; it is incidental to his purposes, its unjustifiable wildness can only discredit him in the eyes of others, and it sets in train the revenge of Laertes, in which Hamlet now figures as the guilty object.

The murder of Polonius is merely the last of a series of failed plans and foiled opportunities. The repeated creation and disappointment of expectation in the central movement of *Hamlet* suggests that Shakespeare is toying with the audience, and with the conventions of revenge drama that help form the audience's expectations. The performance of *The Murder of Gonzago,* for example, is elaborately purposive. Hamlet has a hand in the script, primes the judicious part of his audience, and obtrusively takes on the function of stage manager and presenter. In the event, the play discommodes the king, but in a way that confirms

his guilt only to the knowing. It fails to move him presently to proclaim his malefactions, according to classic tragic prescript. Not only that, but the precise nature of the king's discomfiture is left obscure by Shakespeare's mystifying management of the scene, which leaves uncertain even what parts of the entertainment the king sees. In the prayer scene, Shakespeare contrives a single "confrontation" between murderer and revenger. This meeting, at this point in the play, is not within the usual conventions of revenge drama, which tend to emphasize the victim's inaccessibility and the revenger's need for secrecy. Even in the act of inventing such a scene, Shakespeare simultaneously devises a variation on it: his "confrontation" produces only a breathtaking misapprehension; it takes place with no exchange of words, still less with the act of vengeance threatened by Hamlet's unsheathed sword. In the closet scene, Shakespeare makes good, but with new ironies, the omissions of the previous scene. Hamlet now achieves his confrontation, a highly voluble one—but with the hardly penetrable Gertrude; he accomplishes a slaying—but his victim is merely Polonius. The scene provides a wider context of confused expectations. Hamlet's victims had intended to sound him and his madness, but in the event it is he who seizes the dramatic initiative. As the scene progresses, this seizure is itself thwarted: Hamlet seems to win over Gertrude but with the appearance of the ghost he seems to lose her. (As with Claudius in the play scene, an element of doubt surrounds Gertrude's attitudes to husband and son from this point in the play.) Finally, the ghost appears in order to whet Hamlet's almost blunted purpose at a moment when his purpose seems in fact to be unwontedly sharp.

The dramatic pattern by which expectations are aroused and disappointed, though unusually insistent in the play's central movement, is pervasive in *Hamlet* as a whole. The larger significance of this pattern is educed by Horatio's sorrowing lines at the end:

> So shall you hear
> Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
> Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,
> And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
> Fall'n on th'inventors' heads.[1]

1 *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, The Arden Shakespeare (London 1982), V.ii.385-90. Further references to the play cite this edition and are incorporated in the text in parentheses.

The tragedy of *Hamlet* resides partly in the ironies, the limitations, and occasionally the impossibility, of knowledge—preeminently, knowledge of oneself and others. Yet the play never subsides into the expression of a bleak scepticism, like the *aporia* of *Troilus and Cressida.* Horatio's summary, even as it anatomizes fatality, betrays the inexhaustible vitality of the play's characters and action. One element that helps create this dramatic richness is Shakespeare's characteristic manipulation of the idea and the possibilities of theatrical roles. Some of this is metatheatrical—directed at the audience's awareness of dramatic imitation—but much takes place within the confines of the dramatic fiction. The Machiavellian role-playing of the king, for example—his decorous grief for a dead brother, his avuncular benevolence toward Hamlet—is set against the truth of his politic ruthlessness and stricken conscience. Hamlet's repertoire of roles—some intentionally assumed, some reflex strategies of evasion or displacement—both exhilarates and exasperates by its multiplicity. This aspect of *Hamlet* contributes in its fashion to the play's sceptical cast of mind. While the characters' role-playing endows them with vitality it likewise induces mystification in others—and in Hamlet's case, frequently enough in himself.

The variety and the mystifications of role-playing in *Hamlet* are augmented by the extraordinary fashion in which the dramatic functions, the assumed roles, the schemes, and even the thoughts of characters are constantly reflected or echoed by, and even as it were exchanged with, those of other characters. This recurrent device might be likened to the deployment of an elaborate system of mirrors—a metaphor licensed, perhaps, by its frequent occurrence in the play itself. The ideas of theatrical playing as a mirror held up to nature, of a noble prince as the glass of fashion, of stern reprobation as a means of setting up "a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you" are all commonplace Renaissance uses of the mirror metaphor. It is useful with *Hamlet*—if apparently fanciful with regard to strict Renaissance usage—to extend the metaphorical possibilities of the mirror a little further. As well as instructively *reflecting* and imaginatively *perfecting* nature, a mirror may be designed so as to *distort,* a series of mirrors may be arranged so as to *multiply* images, and even a mirror otherwise faithful must *reverse* an object as it reflects it.[2] All these functions or attributes of the mirror have

2 The literary uses of mirror imagery and mirror conceits in the Renaissance are exhaustively treated in Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable*

their dramatic equivalent in the central movement of *Hamlet,* and all the images they create reflect aspects of the play's main subject: revenge. It is in the determining context of revenge that Shakespeare develops his theme of knowledge and self-knowledge, casts his characters in their dazzling repertory of roles, and deploys his elaborate series of dramatic mirrors. These elements of the play are brought together in a highly complex interrelationship in the prolonged crisis of the play's central movement.

The news of the players' arrival at Elsinore stirs Hamlet to a delight scarcely witnessed hitherto:

> He that plays the king shall be welcome—his Majesty shall have tribute on me, the adventurous knight shall use his foil and target, the lover shall not sigh gratis, the humorous man shall end his part in peace, the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are tickle a th' sear, and the lady shall say her mind freely—or the blank verse shall halt for't. (II.ii.318-24)

If Hamlet's first words are ironic and obscurely ominous, the tenor of his speech expresses pleasure in the world of the players, a world in which everyone has his reassuring place. As if relieved and unburdened by the contrast between this realm and the treacherous realm of Denmark, Hamlet also springs into impetuous action—though the action amounts to no more than hearing a passionate speech: "We'll e'en to't like French falconers, fly at anything we see. We'll have a speech straight. Come, give us a taste of your quality. Come, a passionate speech" (II.ii.425-8). There is a pointed contrast between Hamlet's exuberant catalogue of players and Polonius's pedantic catalogue of plays—"pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral" and the rest. Polonius shows a scrupulous awareness of the artifices of the play world and, later in the scene, a fastidious awareness of the social status of players; Hamlet enthusiastically embraces the play world and discovers in its mirror a truer and less restrictive reality than the prison of

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Glass, trans. G. Collier (Cambridge 1982). Grabes's examples do not correspond to all the properties of mirrors listed here. He does, however, show that, in addition to the familiar instructive properties of the mirror, writers also exploited its capacity to produce a "magnified, reduced, distorted or discoloured image of the original" (p. 131; cf. pp. 104-5). For a compressed discussion of *Hamlet* as a whole that takes the same approach as this essay, see P. L. McNamara, "Hamlet's Mirrors", *Ariel* (Calgary), 4 (1973), 3-16.

Denmark. Polonius's view has its own cogency: the players have their fictional authority only because Hamlet, and others, are prepared to concede it to them; Hamlet playing the impetuous falconer is feigning a truth more than reflecting one. And whatever their professional ability to perfect reality, the players' off-stage selves mirror the vicissitudes of a very imperfect world. Their livelihood is constantly imperilled, by cracked children's voices or by the caprice of public favour or by the competition of rival companies. Having lost their place in public favour, they directly mirror a Hamlet who feels that he has lost *his* place. As victims of fortune, they inversely mirror a Claudius whom fortune has made king of Denmark: "It is not very strange; for my uncle is King of Denmark, and those that would make mouths at him while my father lived give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats apiece for his picture in little" (II.ii.359-62). The children who have displaced the players in public favour are in the process displacing themselves: by scoffing at the men's companies they "exclaim against their own succession"—that is, against themselves when older. The child actors thus mirror one of the play's most characteristic ironies, that of the malefactor who becomes his own victim.

This condition especially afflicts the revenger. Its nature is delineated by the Pyrrhus speech, in which Hamlet and the player join to demonstrate and delectate the player's art. It is important to recognize the association between the Troy story and revenge. The Greeks' war against Troy was an act of revenge: the *Oresteia* treats it as the exemplar, as well as a partial cause of the train of revenges that begins with Agamemnon's return from Troy. Pyrrhus's slaying of Priam is a more particular act of revenge—Pyrrhus was the son of Achilles, who had been slain by Priam's son Paris. Shakespeare, referring to Pyrrhus's "aroused vengeance", recognizes him as a revenger, whether of Greek dishonour or his father's death or both. The ways in which the revenger, obeying even the most solemn imperatives, is in a sense turned into a simulacrum of the guilty victim whom he must scourge are themes of the tragedy that take shape with this model tragic speech.[3] Here first appears a new image of the revenger: the tigerish, treacherous, man of blood, whose acts are monstrous, hellish, and promiscuously visited on guilty and innocent alike.

3 This aspect of the play, and its relation to ancient Greek origins and exemplars of tragedy, are discussed in J. Philip Brockbank, "Hamlet the Bonesetter", *Shakespeare Survey* 30 (1977), 103-15.

At first a distorting mirror of Hamlet the revenger, it is one to which—in his appetite for drinking hot blood, his scheme for damning Claudius, his unjust murder of Polonius—he is gradually forced to accommodate himself. The revenger is linked to his victim not only by committing a similar violence; in doing so he takes the victim's place, incurs a similar guilt, and seems in turn to suffer proleptically the very punishment he metes out. Hence the strange tropes by which the conquering Pyrrhus is said to be taken prisoner by the sound of crashing Ilium or by which his sword, dripping blood, is described as itself bleeding. The terrible description of Pyrrhus,

> horridly trick'd
> With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,
> Bak'd and impasted with the parching streets, . . .
> Roasted in wrath and fire, (II.ii.453-7)

seems to consign Pyrrhus to hell already; it also perhaps glancingly associates this fate with the fate of old Hamlet, "confin'd to fast in fires". Certainly, the Pyrrhus speech looks forward to key moments in the course of young Hamlet's revenge. As Pyrrhus finds Priam unarmed and vulnerable to his attack, so Hamlet will find Claudius off his guard at prayer. As Pyrrhus drives at Priam but in rage strikes wide, so Hamlet will let his victim escape him, in his vengeful rage and futile aspiration to eternal revenge "striking wide" of the truth about Claudius.

Pyrrhus figures the guilty revenger; as he stands with raised sword, he strikes the traditional emblematic pose of choler. His counterpart in the player's speech is Hecuba, the hapless and incidental victim of revenge, and a traditional type of grief.[4] In the person of Hecuba, the speech represents the consequences of revenge, in the lives of the victim's loved ones, the innocent "fathers, mothers, daughters, sons" implicated in the train of multiplying violence. In relation to the play of *Hamlet,* the person of Hecuba is of course a mirror of the person of Gertrude. To Hamlet the revenger, the grief of Priam's widow figures the consequences of a successful revenge for Claudius's widow. It reinforces the admonition of the ghost—"nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven"—though it also implies the impossibility of obeying this admonition and still exacting vengeance. But Hecuba may mirror Gertrude in

4 For the emblem, see Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britanna,* facsimile edn, The English Experience, No. 407 (Amsterdam 1971), sig. T2. For Hecuba, see Jenkins, p. 481.

another way. As well as presenting a direct image of a Gertrude potentially grief-stricken, she presents a reverse image of the actual Gertrude, whose grief for her murdered first husband has fallen scandalously short of Hecuba's. Viewed from this angle, the mirror would tend to augment rather than diminish Hamlet's indignation at his mother. The coexistence of both possibilities exemplifies the way in which Shakespeare's dramatic mirrors register the complexity of understanding and judgment arising from the exaction of revenge. That this demonstration comes in a passage that is itself supposed to occur in a play prepares for the way in which the play of *The Murder of Gonzago* will itself mirror the play of *Hamlet* by failing to create (despite Hamlet's expectation) a perfectly assured clarification of experience.

Hamlet's soliloquy to end this scene ("O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!") does not, as we might expect, reflect on the significance for himself as revenger of either Pyrrhus or Hecuba. He adverts not to the substance of these mirrors of revenge but to the means by which they are created. Impressed by the player's submersion in his role—"all his visage wann'd, / Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect, / A broken voice"— Hamlet goes on to envisage the incredible potency of the player's performance if he were in Hamlet's own position—

> What would he do
> 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 appal the free. (II.ii.548-50, 554-8)

There is, however, no such direct correspondence between the two situations of eloquent player and impotent revenger. Hamlet forgets that, as the truest poetry is the most feigning, so is the truest playing. He forgets too his earlier words about his own display of grief:

> 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
> Nor customary suits of solemn black,
> Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,
> No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
> Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
> Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief.
> That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
> For they are actions that a man might play;
> But I have that within which passes show,
> These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (I.ii.77-86)

The player would not perform better by having an actual rather than a fictional stimulus to his performance. Hamlet's lines to

the queen confirm this: he could act the part of the melancholy man without feeling grief, and conversely he can feel a grief that defies outward expression. There is no necessary correspondence, in short, between the way a part is played and the disposition of the player: "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain". Hamlet seems to expect both too little and too much of playing. He is at first astonished that a mere player can feign a passion out of fictitious materials. By the end of his soliloquy he looks to the very cunning—the mere art—of a play to convict the king of murder, and so in effect to perform his revenge for him. Alongside these two disparate attitudes, the speech displays Hamlet himself as a player by nature. On this occasion, we witness the relish with which he casts himself in the part of the ignoble man: a rogue and peasant slave, a dull and muddy-mettled rascal, a drab or scullion cursing in the street. The mock feebleness of some lines, the high astounding terms of others, the contemptuous irony of others again, all show Hamlet's almost compulsive playing of parts. The purposive, observant revenger who materializes at the end of the soliloquy is thus himself absorbed to this repertoire of roles. Part of Hamlet's quandary is in turn clarified: Hamlet "delays" because he cannot settle on the role of revenger with the undivided enthusiasm that the role demands.

Nevertheless, a purposeful Hamlet does frame the plan for playing *The Murder of Gonzago,* using the play to establish the guilt of Claudius. Before that device is put into practice, however, Hamlet himself is put to a broadly similar test. He is brought face to face with Ophelia, the supposed cause of his distemper (as he plans to bring Claudius face to face with an image of his murder); his conduct is observed by Polonius and Claudius (as he plans to observe Claudius). The meeting with Ophelia is a mirror of *The Murder of Gonzago,* set up before that play even takes place. Hamlet opens this extemporal play-within-the-play with "To be or not to be"—that is, with his most gravely reflective and generalizing soliloquy. It reveals little about his personal feelings or the reasons for them, or at any rate it reveals little directly, and little that Claudius and Polonius can make much use of. Not the least fascinating aspect of this soliloquy is its position directly after the purposefulness with which Hamlet has concluded the preceding scene, and before his determined if nervous demeanour in the play scene that follows. To his concealed audience Hamlet opens his unknowing performance with an impeccable version of the melancholy man, and so unknow-

ingly thwarts their design to tent him to the quick, to get behind this role and discover its origins.

When he sees Ophelia, Hamlet's conduct reverts to the excited changeability of the earlier soliloquy. He opens in a tone of formal correctness:

> Nymph, in thy orisons
> Be all my sins remember'd. (III.i.89-90)

He turns a paradox in the manner of the witty satirist:

> the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness. (111-14)

The coolness of this warms to the heated disgust of self-reprobation:

> What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all, believe none of us. (128-30)

Self-accusation gives way to the indignation of the moralizing misogynist:

> I have heard of your paintings well enough. God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. (144-8)

Finally, the self-appointed legislator speaks in a tone both insanely impotent and darkly threatening:

> I say we will have no mo marriage. Those that are married already —all but one—shall live; the rest shall keep as they are. (149-51)

To the dizzying sequence of roles that Hamlet plays here must be added Ophelia's poignant evocation of a different prince:

> The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
> Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state,
> The glass of fashion and the mould of form. (153-5)

The mercurial Hamlet of this part of the scene thus continues to leap from role to role. In doing so, he eludes the obligations of revenge, or fulfils them in a bloodless and highly displaced fashion upon the most deject and wretched Ophelia. He also eludes the attempt of his stage audience—and for that matter, the theatre audience—to "tent him to the quick". Claudius's and Polonius's lack of success in this mirror of Hamlet's play scene suggests the difficulty, or perhaps the impossibility, of finding out the truth by this kind of observation. The espials learn no more from the scene than they brought to it: the mirror, in this

case, reveals only themselves. Polonius, who rejoices in the conventional categories of human types no less than of literary kinds, cannot see beyond the type of the rejected lover. Claudius, contemptuous of Polonius's naivety, sees beyond the appearance of melancholy to the secretly hatching danger; though he speaks of a madness in Hamlet to be cured, the Machiavel also discerns a Machiavellian design.

The events of the play scene are not, it is true, as impenetrable for Hamlet as the events of the nunnery scene are for Polonius and Claudius. The question at issue becomes simpler, and the means of answering it more apt. Accordingly, the scene as a whole seems to introduce a new clarity and certainty, in such things as Hamlet's discourse on playing and the play of *The Murder of Gonzago* itself. In the event, however, just as the king's betrayal of his guilt is not publicly decisive, so these other certainties turn, if not obscure, then problematic. As the play scene begins, we are again regaled with Hamlet's images of an ideal concert between player and part. Just so, Hamlet believes, the play will be the means by which the members of its stage audience are cast again in their true roles, and in particular the treacherous usurper revealed in his true self. For Hamlet, there exists in playing an ideal temperance. It consists in conformity with the "modesty of nature", and is to be contrasted with the varieties of grotesque misplaying—mouthing speeches like the town-crier, robustiously tearing a passion to tatters, strutting and bellowing, pitifully setting on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh. Hamlet's admiration for the man who plays his part temperately is not just a matter of aesthetic decorum. It is continuous with the admiration he goes on to express for the stoic Horatio:

> Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man
> As e'er my conversation cop'd withal . . .
> thou hast been
> As one, in suff'ring all, that suffers nothing,
> A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
> Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those
> Whose blood and judgment are so well commeddled
> That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
> To sound what stop she please. (III.ii.54-5, 65-71)

If Horatio plays his part as the good actor plays his, much of Hamlet's disgust at Claudius springs from a sense that he resembles Hamlet's incompetent actor grotesquely miscast in the role of king, "a vice of kings . . . A king of shreds and patches"

(III.iv.98-9).

The ideal clarity and orderliness that Hamlet rejoices in when he contemplates the world of the players are manifested in their play itself. *The Murder of Gonzago* begins with the evocation of time passing in a richly mythologized, elaborately enumerated round:

> Full thirty times hath Phoebus' cart gone round
> Neptune's salt wash and Tellus' orbed ground,
> And thirty dozen moons with borrow'd sheen
> About the world have times twelve thirties been
> Since love our hearts and Hymen did our hands
> Unite commutual in most sacred bands. (III.ii.150-55)

The language of this contrasts sharply with the abrupt surprise and harsh ironies of time's passing in Hamlet's world:

> For look you how cheerfully my mother looks and my father died within's two hours.
>
> *Oph.* Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord.
>
> *Ham.* So long? Nay then, let the devil wear black, for I'll have a suit of sables. O heavens, die two months ago and not forgotten yet! Then there's hope a great man's memory may outlive his life half a year. (III.ii.124-30)

Likewise, the Player King and Player Queen manifest a grave and leisurely thoughtfulness, a lucid and generous consciousness of human weakness, that contrast with the mental and moral turmoil, and the jejune certainties, of the inhabitants of Denmark. So the Player Queen's analysis of her fears:

> Now what my love is, proof hath made you know,
> And as my love is siz'd, my fear is so.
> Where love is great, the littlest doubts are fear;
> Where little fears grow great, great love grows there. (III.ii.164-7)

Or the Player King's reflections on the infirmity of human purposes:

> I do believe you think what now you speak;
> But what we do determine, oft we break.
> Purpose is but the slave to memory,
> Of violent birth but poor validity . . .
> Our wills and fates do so contrary run
> That our devices still are overthrown:
> Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.
> (III.ii.181-4, 206-8)

The stately couplets of these speeches, together with the hieratic stateliness of action that the language demands, complete the impression of an orderly, or at least self-aware, moral world.

The transparence of this play world, or rather the marvellous

smoothness of its surface, appropriated by Hamlet to catch the conscience of the king, does not prove perfectly amenable to this purpose, or cannot be confined to it. For its mirror throws back a fuller, more inclusive image of reality than the selective one Hamlet expects. *The Murder of Gonzago,* like the player's speech about Pyrrhus, turns into a multiplying mirror; its key images of life reflect more than one character, allow of more than one judgment, and produce unexpected reversals. For Hamlet, the Player Queen's speeches on second marriage can serve only as an inculpation of herself—and by extension of course, of Queen Gertrude. He takes a gloomy relish in the dramatic ironies that entrap the two queens: "That's wormwood"; "If she should break it now." But in the Player King's elaborate, charitable, and rational justification of remarriage the play equally offers the grounds on which their frailty might be exculpated. To this lesson of the play, however, Hamlet is not open. Yet there is every reason for him to be so, since the Player King's lines on purpose and action reproduce ideas that Hamlet has expressed in his own fashion about *his* failure to fulfil *his* oath, to avenge his father. The equivalence between Hamlet and Gertrude established by the mirror of the Player King's speech extends, we shall learn in the next scene, to Claudius, with his purpose to repent that likewise fails to issue in action. An even more surprising equivalence is adumbrated with the entry of the play's murderer. This villain, who is to poison the sleeping Player King as Claudius poisoned the sleeping King Hamlet, is identified by Hamlet:

> This is one Lucianus, nephew to the King . . . A poisons him i'th' garden for his estate. His name's Gonzago. The story is extant, and written in very choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife. (III.ii.239, 255-8)

The original crime of Claudius, and the act by which his nephew is to avenge it, are thus simultaneously mirrored. On one level, the correspondence is Hamlet's warning to the king. On another, it signifies that the act of murder and its retribution are bound by a kind of inevitability—"for us of course it must depict simultaneously crime and nemesis".[5] The revenger is doomed to repeat the crime of the murderer, and stepping into his place, to incur the same measure of guilt.

The play-within-the-play, in holding its decorous mirror up to nature, thus reveals a nature full of paradoxical likenesses.

5 Jenkins, p. 508.

This very fulness is partly what prevents the play from mounting against Claudius the indictment, proof, and public conviction that Hamlet envisages. The means by which Hamlet settles, in his mind and Horatio's, the king's guilt is equally the means by which Hamlet may plausibly be accused of a lunatic threat against the king's own person. This situation arises not only out of the play itself but also out of Hamlet's conduct during the performance. The polished surface of *The Murder of Gonzago* is not left by Hamlet to reflect the king's crime. "As good as a chorus," Hamlet constantly interposes himself between play and audience. He comments critically on play and performers: "Is this a prologue, or the posy of a ring? . . . Begin, murderer. Leave thy damnable faces and begin" (III.ii.147, 246-7). He directs pointed moralizations and hostile questions at his mother: "If she should break it now . . . Madam, how like you this play?" (219, 224). With the king, Hamlet's nervous excitability leads him to take over the action—and of course subvert its effectiveness: "This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna—Gonzago is the Duke's name, his wife Baptista—you shall see anon. 'Tis a knavish piece of work, but what o' that? Your Majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not" (232-7). The strange thing is how badly Hamlet plays his parts. His stream of interjections and explanations mars his performance as presenter; even more, his taunts and menaces cut across his part as the ingenious mousetrap-man, who places the bait and lets the victim betray himself. Over-delighted by his ingenuity, Hamlet departs from his own counsels of histrionic temperance—succumbs, indeed, to the pitiful ambition of those stage fools who speak "more than is set down for them . . . though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to be considered". The play's ironies of knowledge and self-knowledge thus undergo further development in this part of the scene—and again near the end, when Hamlet's refusal to be played on by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern mirrors, in a fashion he does not apprehend, Claudius's evasion of Hamlet's attempt to play on *him*.

This evasion is only partial, however. Hamlet fails in his device to have Claudius presently proclaim his malefaction, but he does at least succeed in catching the conscience of the king: how effectively, the prayer-scene reveals. The determining feature of this remarkable scene is a simple but arresting one, Shakespeare's choice to give Claudius a soliloquy of such length and intensity, at the point in the play when his guilt as a murderer has been

confirmed. Yet the soliloquy expresses not the conventional Machiavellianism that we expect from the revenger's mighty opposite, but something akin to the anguish of the Shakespearian tragic villain—a Richard of Gloucester near the end of his play, or a Macbeth. This choice creates between Claudius and the audience the bond that naturally accompanies soliloquy, the more so as it also shows Claudius vulnerable to the aroused and bloodthirsty Hamlet. In this scene, then, the protagonist and antagonist engage in an exchange of identities, as each becomes the mirror of the other. Claudius is transformed into the man of conscience agonizing over his duty, Hamlet into the ruthless man of violence seeking to condemn his victim to an afterlife of torment. The startling revelation of Claudius's mind throws up equally startling affinities with Hamlet's mind. In his frustrated determination to repent, Claudius echoes Hamlet (and the Player King, mirror now of them both) on the disjunction between will and act:

> Though inclination be as sharp as will,
> My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
> And, like a man to double business bound,
> I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
> And both neglect. (III.iii.39-43)

As Hamlet's first soliloquy railed against an unhealthily "rank" world, so Claudius at the beginning of his soliloquy recognizes his foully "rank" offence, and the audience knows the connection between the two diagnoses. The worldly Claudius even adopts Hamlet's tone of satirical indignation:

> In the corrupted currents of this world
> Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
> And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
> Buys out the law. (III.iii.57-60)

Both characters also entertain hopes of transcending this corrupt world that are rather pathetically at odds with their natures. Hamlet aspires to the copybook stoicism that he desiderates to Horatio—a state that he does embrace, but spasmodically and rather debilitatingly, in the play's later stages. Claudius longs for what he must most fear—judgment and the afterlife, where his present life of subterfuge may be gratefully laid aside:

> But 'tis not so above:
> 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. (III.iii.60-64)

As the king kneels in silent prayer, Hamlet enters, dressed in

the imaginative garb of the revenger that he had donned at the end of the previous scene:

> Now could I drink hot blood,
> And do such bitter business as the day
> Would quake to look on. (III.ii.381-3)

True to this role, he instantly draws his sword to take revenge. But in the event he does not, of course, incur the guilt of the revenger by killing the king. Yet he remains innocent only by virtue of formulating his monstrous intention to kill Claudius at a moment that will assure his damnation. If the king's scruples and frustrations are a mirror of Hamlet's, Hamlet's treacherous scheme is a mirror of the king's original crime.[6] The ghost has expatiated at the horror of such a murder:

> Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
> Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd,
> No reck'ning made, but sent to my account
> With all my imperfections on my head.
> O horrible! O horrible! most horrible! (I.v.76-80)

Hamlet's pose as he stands with sword drawn over the praying Claudius has been proleptically mirrored by another vengeful man of blood: the Pyrrhus of the player's speech in II.ii. This correspondence is one of the play's most direct and memorable deployments of mirrors of revenge. Curiously, at the point where the outward resemblance between Hamlet and Pyrrhus becomes closest, the meaning of the resemblance becomes most problematic. Pyrrhus's pause occurs at the moment when Priam's fall is answered and magnified by the fall of the Trojan citadel. Its immediate cause is the hideous crash of the citadel; by implication, it manifests Pyrrhus's astonishment at the magnitude of his act of revenge, which destroys king and city alike. A similar significance is attributed to the "cess of majesty" by Rosencrantz at the beginning of the prayer scene:

> The cess of majesty
> Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw
> What's near it with it. Or it is a massy wheel
> Fix'd on the summit of the highest mount,
> To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
> Are mortis'd and adjoin'd, which when it falls,
> Each small annexment, petty consequence,
> Attends the boist'rous ruin. (III.iii.15-22)

6 The issues raised by Hamlet's speech in the prayer scene are cogently treated in P. Gottschalk, "Hamlet and the Scanning of Revenge", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 24 (1973), 155-70.

It is open to us to detect in Hamlet's pause a similar consciousness of, and perhaps trepidation at, the magnitude of his own act of revenge. But the meaning of Hamlet's revenge—its religious, ethical and political ramifications—is put in another possible light by Rosencrantz's same speech. Though it arises immediately from the danger in which Claudius stands from Hamlet, the speech has another application, apparent to the audience and (as the audience will learn from Claudius's soliloquy) to Claudius himself. The royal death that presides over *Hamlet* is the death of old Hamlet, and the "boist'rous ruin" and "general groan" attending on that death are the result of Claudius's treachery. In this light, Hamlet's prospective revenge resembles less the brutal transgression of a Pyrrhus than the work of a scourge and minister sent by the gods, and the seeming mirror of Pyrrhus images an unlikeness, not a likeness. Perhaps the diversity is even more marked. Though the emblematic pauses of Pyrrhus and Hamlet have an external resemblance, and though Rosencrantz's speech suggests that they may be understood in comparable terms, it is nevertheless true that Hamlet's soliloquy over the kneeling Claudius has nothing to say about the dreadful consequences for the murderer and for the kingdom of killing a king. The dreadfulness of Hamlet's soliloquy resides elsewhere, and the proximity of Rosencrantz's speech may draw attention to the quite different tenor of Hamlet's. The mirror of revenge can thus be enigmatic or even deceptive, presenting an external similarity that conceals essential differences.

Whatever the significance of Hamlet's pause, the conclusion of the prayer scene—the king's weary revelation that his attempt to pray is fruitless—invalidates the premise of Hamlet's soliloquy. The strange indirectness of the confrontation between murderer and revenger—the sense of like minds operating in profound ignorance of one another—is heightened by Hamlet's misapprehension. The meaning of the king's kneeling person is in fact as obscure to Hamlet as the meaning of Hamlet's suspended sword is obscure to the audience. The deft irony of this conclusion to the scene is not merely that Hamlet's extravagantly vindictive scheme of revenge could after all have been fulfilled at the moment he formed it. It also resides in the fact that what thwarts Hamlet is the very success of *The Murder of Gonzago.* If the success is partial (Claudius does not publicly betray himself), Hamlet nevertheless does catch his conscience cunningly enough to drive him to prayer—and hence to save his life. Hamlet's ingenious exercise of wit in *The Murder of Gonzago,*

the governing factor in the play's central movement, outruns itself. No less than the treacheries of Claudius and Laertes later in the play, Hamlet's wit succumbs to "accidental judgments . . . and . . . purposes mistook / Fall'n on th'inventors' heads".

The meeting between Hamlet and Gertrude in the closet scene brings to a climax—in the murder of Polonius, in the remarkable intensity of Hamlet's speeches, and in the reappearance of the Ghost—the sequence centring on the play-within-the-play. In doing so, it supplies a last mirror of revenge. After the devious and enigmatic variations on the revenge theme in the preceding scenes, Hamlet now gives his most direct expression to his vengeful impulses, yet in circumstances where their fulfilment in action is forbidden. When Hamlet assumes with theatrical relish the role of revenger—" 'Tis now the very witching time of night"—it is when he is going to attend his mother; he reminds himself that he may "speak daggers to her, but use none". It is hard to resist the conclusion that Hamlet feels most comfortable in the role of revenger when it is displaced in this fashion. With the Queen, he demonstrates a complete assurance, in his refusal to be diverted long even by the alarm and dispatch of Polonius, in the insolent stichomythia of his entry lines, and in his insistent didacticism·

> Come, come, and sit you down, you shall not budge.
> You go not till I set you up a glass
> Where you may see the inmost part of you. (III.iv.17-19)

On Gertrude, but even more on Claudius, he mounts a verbal assault of overwhelming ferocity:

> Nay, but to live
> In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
> Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
> Over the nasty sty! . . .
> A murderer and a villain,
> A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe
> Of your precedent lord, a vice of kings,
> A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,
> That from a shelf the precious diadem stole
> And put in in his pocket. (III.iv.91-4, 96-101)

Hamlet seems to speak partly out of exasperation at his failure to exact revenge—when the ghost appears instantly after this speech Hamlet shows himself apologetically conscious of his tardiness. But he is also partly exacting his revenge by means of words—the verbal daggers with which he threatened the queen before the interview and in the face of which she in turn quails:

> O speak to me no more.
> These words like daggers enter in my ears.
> No more, sweet Hamlet. (III.iv.94-6)

The violence of Hamlet's language makes the closet scene an imitation of revenge, a verbal mirror of the violent reality. There is also another side to his language—an earnest intensity born of his determination to make Gertrude see and understand her weakness and the king's perfidy:

> Look here upon this picture, and on this,
> The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.
> See what a grace was seated on this brow . . .
> This was your husband. Look you now what follows.
> Here is your husband, like a mildew'd ear
> Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?
> Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed
> And batten on this moor? Ha, have you eyes? . .
> O shame, where is thy blush?
> Rebellious hell,
> If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
> To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
> And melt in her own fire. (III.iv.53-5, 63-7, 81-5)

In his determination to reveal the truth and inculcate virtue, Hamlet again succeeds in penetrating—for a time—the reluctant mind of the queen. There exists, of course, a parallel between this aim and Hamlet's aim in the play scene. But while the revelation of truth there is intended to unnerve and overcome the king, here it is intended to enlighten and win over the queen. Hamlet's procedure becomes not only an imitation of revenge but in effect an alternative to revenge. The mirrors of revenge set up by the closet scene thus vary the treatment of the subject not by magnifying its horrors, nor by showing the distortions enforced upon its practitioners, nor by multiplying the ramifications of its endless train of violence, but by sublimating it. As if to ratify this process, the configuration of experience changes, at least in the mind of Hamlet. The failure of will to issue in action, the decay of purpose with the passage of time—pervasive data of the play hitherto—are confidently reversed in Hamlet's advice to his mother:

> That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat
> Of habits evil, is angel yet in this,
> That to the use of actions fair and good
> He likewise gives a frock or livery
> That aptly is put on. Refrain tonight,
> And that shall lend a kind of easiness
> To the next abstinence, the next more easy;

> For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
> And either lodge the devil or throw him out
> With wondrous potency. (III.iv.163-72)

Hamlet himself also begins to present the changed aspect that prevails in the last phase of the play. The excitement and changeability of his speech give way to a more sober recognition of the revenger's quandary:

> For this same lord
> I do repent; but heaven hath pleas'd it so,
> To punish me with this and this with me,
> That I must be their scourge and minister . . .
> This bad begins, and worse remains behind. (III.iv.174-7, 181)

The mechanics of revenge he views with a grim but quite detached satisfaction:

> Let it work;
> For 'tis the sport to have the enginer
> Hoist with his own petard . . .
> O' 'tis most sweet
> When in one line two crafts directly meet. (III.iv.207-9, 211-12)

This Hamlet still has to play out the tragic conclusion he here foresees. In doing so, he and his revenge still have to be reflected in further mirrors, Fortinbras and Laertes. With the murder of Polonius, Hamlet stands to Laertes rather as Claudius stands to Hamlet. The last phase of the play thus enacts the process by which the chain of revenge lengthens inexorably, and Hamlet embodies even more clearly the ambiguity of the revenger's position as scourge and minister. Despite these developments, the sustained intensity of the play's central movement will not again be reached. The sense of anti-climax that sets in after the third act of *Hamlet* results partly from the hero's lengthy absences in the fourth act, partly from his subdued demeanour in the fifth. It also sets in, perhaps, partly because the central movement of the play continually promises to turn into its final movement, and appropriates much that conventionally belongs to the conclusion of a Renaissance revenge tragedy. The arrival of the players, and Hamlet's dealings with them, arouse expectations of an inculpatory play scene, the kind that culminates in the deaths of victim and revenger, and in the revenger's justification before the world. The appearance of the ghost suggests the conventional terminus of the revenge play, in which the opening demand for blood is answered by a gloomy satisfaction. The expectation of a conventional climax is supported, or at any rate not contradicted, by our sense of a normal playing time: the first three

acts of *Hamlet* would make a short, but not an impossibly short, Renaissance tragedy. In the event, of course, the play becomes audaciously long, renewing itself through new revenges, new madness—even a new Polonius-figure in the person of Osric. Our putative *Hamlet minor* would be theatrically a poor thing, a revenge play without the blood. Yet by sketching in, and rejecting the outlines of such a play, Shakespeare makes of it a mirror that theatrically parodies and ethically sophisticates the conventions of revenge tragedy.