

Prince of Denmark

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I

At the very end of *Hamlet* Fortinbras pronounces the following epitaph on the hero:

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royal; and for his passage
The soldier's music and the rite of war
Speak loudly for him.¹

What are we to think of this? Do we think it is true? Does it matter whether we think it is true or not? Shakespeare has been thought to be rather cavalier in ending his plays. Once the protagonist is dead, the play has to be wound up as quickly as possible, and someone must say the necessary things that will allow the remaining characters to get off the stage. In this case Fortinbras says what a Renaissance prince might be expected to say of another Renaissance prince. So, is the speech merely perfunctory? Or does Hamlet's princeliness matter? Does it rightly receive the final emphasis of the play?

If we turn back to the beginning of the play to re-read it in the light of this issue, we may be struck by an oddity which is not immediately intelligible. In I.i. it is quite clear that the old king named Hamlet (1.94) is dead, and that by implication there is a new king on the throne. In the same scene we are referred to someone who is called 'young Hamlet' (l. 181). The dialogue in this scene does not identify 'young Hamlet' as the new king. But if we are a first-night audience knowing nothing whatever about the play, we have

¹ *The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, ed. G. A. Wilkes (The Challis Shakespeare, Sydney University Press, 1984), V. ii. 416-421. All subsequent references are to the Challis edition.

no reason, in this scene, not to suppose that 'young Hamlet' is the new king, especially as Horatio and the others agree that 'young Hamlet' is the most appropriate person to whom to relate the appearance of the ghost. This first scene invites any ignorant audience to draw two inferences: (1) that 'young Hamlet' is the son of 'old Hamlet'; (2) that 'young Hamlet' is the new king. The first inference turns out to be correct, but the second inference turns out to be false: when we pass to I.ii. it is not Hamlet who makes the opening speech as king, but Claudius, uncle to young Hamlet, whom scene two now identifies, according to our inference, as the son of old Hamlet. So the question arises: why hasn't young Hamlet succeeded his father on the throne? And if we reflect further, we may ask ourselves the question: why does Shakespeare allow the first scene to mislead us into supposing that young Hamlet is in fact king?

That this misleading is not an accident is suggested by the fact that the first scene also misleads us in an identical way about Fortinbras. In I.i. we learn that there was an old Fortinbras, king of Norway, who is now dead, killed by old Hamlet, and that there is also a 'young Fortinbras' (1.105) who is preparing to attack Denmark. We have no reason not to suppose that young Fortinbras is both old Fortinbras's son, and the new king of Norway. But while I.ii. confirms the father-son relationship, it disproves the supposition that young Fortinbras has succeeded to his father's throne. We learn in the second scene that both young princes have been displaced by their uncles. Since two misleadings cannot be accident, but must be design, we have to ask ourselves: what is the point of this? Note: I am not asking, what is the point of the parallel political situations (two nephews displaced by their uncles)? I am asking the question: what is the point of the first scene misleading us about the young princes' situations?

We now have a query about Hamlet's princeliness at the end of the play, and another connected with his being a prince at the beginning of the play. Can this be a coincidence? My purpose in this paper is to argue that it is

not, and that the idea of Hamlet's princeliness is central to what happens in the play. What I have to do is to explain the process by which the oddity in the first scene is connected to the epitaph in the last.

My inquiry has two connected aspects: one concerns the substance of the play; the other concerns its design. The concern with substance can itself be divided into two branches, one psychological and the other ethical. But both the psychological and the ethical interests of the play turn upon Hamlet's political circumstances. This is how I intend to show the centrality of Hamlet's princeliness to the play.

The design of the play becomes relevant to the inquiry for two reasons. First, the oddity that we have observed in the first scene turns out not to be unique. *Hamlet* is filled with oddities, anomalies and puzzles, and most of them turn out to bear upon the issue of Hamlet's princeliness. There are so many of these anomalies that some commentators throw up their hands in despair, and declare them to be mere accidents, meaningless oversights on Shakespeare's part. I do not believe that Shakespeare was so careless in one of his greatest plays. The three most notorious examples are the suggestion in V.i. that Hamlet is thirty years old (ll.139-159), the revelation in V.ii. that Denmark is an elective monarchy (1.70), and at the very same moment the first clear and vigorous expression of Hamlet's anger against Claudius as a *political* rival ('Pop't in between th'election and my hopes'). These data cause commentators embarrassment (i) because the play continually refers to Hamlet as 'young', and many commentators feel that Hamlet doesn't sound older than, say, twenty-five; (ii) because the fact about the elective monarchy, it is thought, might have been given earlier, so its late occurrence looks like slipshod work on Shakespeare's part; (iii) Hamlet's expression of *political* rivalry with Claudius seems to have no connection with Hamlet's domestic preoccupations throughout the play — it looks like Shakespeare incompetently chucking one too many ingredients into the pot. These three examples are indicative of a major shift in what the play presents to us, a

shift that occurs in the middle of the play. In the first half of the play, the interest generated seems to concern Hamlet's inner life and personal relationships, and we learn almost nothing about his external life, except that he has been a student at Wittenberg, and, as we discover, has an interest in drama. Then, from III.i. onwards we are told he has been a soldier; he is reported to us as boarding a pirate ship single-handed; and he turns out to be an enthusiastic and expert fencer. As the culmination of this apparent redrawing of Hamlet's character, we are suddenly told that he's thirty years old, and has political ambitions. At the very least, we can say that the play seems to lurch into taking an interest in external data in its second half. But even more, it may seem that we are faced with two different conceptions of Hamlet in the play – one a young and ineffective scholar, the other an energetic soldier of mature manhood. At this point at least three responses are possible: (1) sentimental devotees may mumble in embarrassment about the unimportance of such details in the work of a great genius; (2) followers of L. C. Knights may dismiss such considerations of character, plot and externals as a misguided application to poetic drama of the canons of nineteenth-century realism; (3) the new textual criticism will gleefully throw up its hands, and cry, 'Revision!' having found more grounds to disintegrate Shakespeare's text. I do not intend to follow any of these lines, but I do intend to explain (or perhaps I should say, explain away) these apparent anomalies.

The second reason why the design of the play is relevant to my inquiry is a matter of genre: if it is true that our understanding of a literary work is, or ought to be, controlled by the form of the work itself, so that we experience what the play offers to us, and not something else concocted in our own imaginations, then we must orientate ourselves to the kind of play that *Hamlet* is. It is of course a tragedy, but it is a tragedy in the form of a thriller. And while *Hamlet* has been endlessly discussed as a tragedy, it has not received much attention as a thriller. Yet its thriller aspect is essential to an understanding of the problems raised by the anomalies and puzzles found in the play – and the anomalies and

puzzles, as I have said before, bear upon the issue of Hamlet's princeliness.

The lack of discussion of *Hamlet* as a thriller is probably due to the fact that we all know it far too well. It is one of the most prominent elements in Western culture's self-image. We are all too close to it, and also swamped in all the thoughts and speculations that it has generated. It is necessary, therefore – so far as this is possible – for us to imagine that we do not know what is going to happen in the play. Only in this way can the play become real to us as a drama that designedly poses questions, sets puzzles, induces false expectations, puts before us incidents that are not immediately intelligible, but which become intelligible in retrospect. If we thus see the play as deliberately setting out to be baffling (so that our bafflement is not merely a subjective phenomenon of ourselves as readers), then we shall be in a better position to judge to what extent the play dispels the bafflement it generates, how the play both induces bafflement, and dispels it by deliberately placed 'clues', and the extent to which we must compare, analyse and reflect upon what the play presents. By considering the form as well as the content of the play I hope to show how the oddity about Hamlet and Fortinbras in I.i. is connected to Fortinbras' epitaph on Hamlet in V.ii., and how the idea of Hamlet's princeliness is involved in this connection.

II

That *Hamlet* is a thriller at the level of external action is obvious: it continually generates suspense about what is to happen, or what is happening. Why has the Ghost appeared? Will it speak to Hamlet? Does it come from heaven or hell? Why hasn't Hamlet got the throne? Will there be a war with Norway? How will Hamlet respond to Ophelia's rebuff? Will the Ghost harm Hamlet? How will Hamlet go about avenging his father's death? Has Hamlet really gone mad (in Act II)? Will Claudius blench when *The Murder of Gonzago* is played? Will Hamlet commit suicide? How will Hamlet carry

out his task if Claudius sends him to England? And so on. Such questions are posed from the beginning of the play to the end because the play has an intrigue plot.

Most of these questions are not felt by us to be of any interest. Because we know the story so well we probably never think of them any more. Some of them we may never even have noticed: e.g. will there be a war with Norway? And if we do notice them, we dismiss them immediately as irrelevant to the real concerns of the play. Yet the intrigue plot and its corresponding questions form the framework for what we think of as those real concerns. Even in the abbreviated list of questions above there are some that lead us beyond the level of external action into the play's essential interests: e.g. where has the Ghost come from? Why hasn't Hamlet got the throne? How will Hamlet respond to Ophelia's rebuff? Has Hamlet really gone mad? These are questions that take us into the psychological and ethical significance of the events of the play. So we must conclude that the form of the thriller mediates what we think of as the real concerns of the play. In which case, we ought to study those concerns via the network of questions and answers, of false expectations and their falsification, and of incidents intelligible only in retrospect that is produced by the actual design of the play.

To begin with let us examine Act I.

I.i. poses the following questions: why has the Ghost appeared? Is the Ghost concerned about the state as Horatio supposes, or the war as Barnardo supposes? Why does the Ghost start guiltily when the cock crows?

The same scene induces the following false expectations: the appearance of the Ghost is connected with the Danish state, and the preparations for war with Norway; young Fortinbras is the new king of Norway; young Hamlet is the new king of Denmark; there is going to be a war between Denmark and Norway.

I.ii. poses these questions: why isn't Hamlet king of Denmark? Why isn't Fortinbras king of Norway? Why does

Claudius deal with Laertes' business before Hamlet's (Laertes is only the son of a councillor; Hamlet is the former king's son, and the present king's nephew)? Why does Claudius allow Laertes to return to Paris, but evidently does not want Hamlet to return to Wittenberg? Why is Hamlet suicidal in his soliloquy? Why is he so concerned with general 'rankness'? Granted that Hamlet feels disgusted, why is he so disgusted as to wish to die? Why has Gertrude 'declined' from old Hamlet to Claudius? – what is the real nature of these individuals? Was old Hamlet really as Hamlet idealises him? How is it possible for Hamlet to swing in his mood from suicidal melancholy to the apparently normal affability of his greeting to Horatio and his companions?

For I.ii. there is only one false expectation: Claudius' cajoling of Hamlet suggests that Denmark's monarchy depends on the hereditary principle ('You are the most immediate to our throne.') This of course reinforces our question: why isn't Hamlet king?

I.iii. poses one major question: does Hamlet love Ophelia, or is he trifling with her as Laertes and Polonius suggest?

But this scene produces two false impressions: Laertes and Polonius both suggest that Hamlet is 'young'; Laertes' speech to Ophelia again implies that Denmark's monarchy is hereditary (Hamlet is bound to become king, therefore he cannot choose his own wife). So we ask yet again: if so, why isn't Hamlet king?

I.iv. raises one major question: where is the Ghost from – heaven or hell? The same scene induces two false expectations: Hamlet's allusion to Claudius as the 'swagg'ring upspring' seems to imply that Hamlet considers Claudius to be a usurper (Hamlet of course does feel this) – but, as we subsequently discover, Claudius has been elected; we are invited to believe that the Ghost comes from heaven or from hell – in fact it comes from neither.

I.v. raises these questions: why is Hamlet at first eager to revenge his father's murder (before he knows the identity of the murderer), but in a state of demoralised collapse at the

end of the scene ('The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!')? Why doesn't the Ghost sound vindictive (it sounds indignant, and distressed, but not vindictive)? Why is the Ghost vague about the task of revenge ('But howsoever thou pursues this act'), but clear and vigorous about putting an end to the incest ('Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest.')? Why does Hamlet write down his aphorism on villainy in his 'tables'? – does not this seem abnormal? Why is Hamlet suddenly manic with Horatio and the others? Why won't Hamlet tell the others about the Ghost's revelations (later he tells Horatio)? Why does he pretend the Ghost is a drunk in the cellar? Why does Hamlet plan to put on an 'antic disposition' (he has no objective reason to do so – Claudius has no reason to suspect him)? Why does Hamlet give away the secret of the antic disposition, even in the act of trying to secure secrecy for it (he doesn't need to mention it at all)? Is it right for a ghost in purgatory to require revenge, or is vengefulness one of the sins which ought to be purged away?

The same scene produces these false impressions: the Ghost's address implies that Hamlet is a 'noble *youth*'; Hamlet resolves to forget everything except the Ghost's command (and yet in Act II we discover a considerable time has passed – III.ii. tells us two months – and he hasn't done anything); Hamlet's odd behaviour with the 'tables' suggests he might be merely an ineffectual, bookish scholar.

It will be apparent from the above summary that *Hamlet* is *designed* to be puzzling. All the psychological and ethical issues ever discussed by commentators are not just the arbitrary preoccupations of scholars misled by the canons of the realistic novel or the 'well-made play'. We may notice that the questions can be graded by degree of difficulty. Some are easy to answer: e.g. where has the Ghost come from? (It has clearly come from purgatory.) Others are more difficult, and require more examination and interpretation: e.g. does Hamlet love Ophelia? And there is a third group that are most difficult, and around which commentary has

continually revolved: e.g. why is Hamlet suicidal? What is the explanation of his mood swings? What is the explanation of his strange behaviour at the end of I.v.? It seems to me that this hierarchy of questions ought to persuade us that we *are* justified in asking the questions belonging to third group, no matter how difficult they may be, and that the recognition of such questions is essential to the experience of watching or reading the play.

There is not space in an essay to move through the other four acts tabulating questions and expectations in such detail. But this could be done. From this point on I summarise.

In Act II our puzzlement about Hamlet's behaviour (which commenced at the end of I.v.) now develops. We have to ask: is Hamlet mad, or is he assuming his antic disposition? Before Hamlet enters in Act II we are prompted to ask this question by Ophelia's report to Polonius about Hamlet's visit to her (II.i.). We ask it again, prompted by Claudius and Polonius' puzzlement, and by Polonius' reading of Hamlet's love-letter (II.ii.). When Hamlet enters, and speaks 'madly' to Polonius, we have to decide whether this is the antic disposition or not, and of course we conclude that it is.

But if Hamlet is acting, as his normality with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and later with the players, indicates (II.ii.), then why is he assuming the antic disposition at all (he has no obvious reason to do so)?

From the beginning of Act II we have to ask: how much time has passed since the end of Act I? A considerable time certainly, since Polonius is already dispatching Reynaldo to spy on Laertes (II.i.); Claudius and Gertrude have sent for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and now they have arrived (II.ii.); and the ambassadors to Norway, dispatched in I.ii., have now returned (II.ii.). But if some time has passed (actually two months - see III.ii. 128, compared with I.ii.140), this must prompt the further question: why hasn't Hamlet carried out his task? This question, prompted once in II.i., and twice in II.ii., eventually becomes explicit in the

play, when Hamlet himself articulates it in his soliloquy at the end of II.ii.

The whole development, then, of Act II – its whole point – is to prompt our inquiry into Hamlet’s behaviour. By the end of Act II we have specific issues to consider: Hamlet denounces himself for not feeling sufficiently passionate about his father’s murder (but if not, why not?); Hamlet wonders if he is a coward (is he?); Hamlet appears to have religious scruples about the Ghost (are these genuine?).

The question about the external situation persists: no one treats Claudius as a usurper in Act II – but if he isn’t a usurper, how does he come to have the throne, and not Hamlet?

Act II also offers us false expectations, and these now threaten radical misunderstanding about what is happening. First, if Hamlet is not really mad, but assuming the antic disposition, then one might infer that his reported visit to Ophelia was a case of that assumed lunacy, and that therefore Hamlet does not love Ophelia. Such a conclusion is effectively falsified by the interview with Ophelia in III.i. Second, Act II reinforces the false impression that we have begun to have of Hamlet from the ‘tables’ episode in I.v., viz. that he is an ineffective, bookish scholar – we are told he walks ‘for four hours together’ in the lobby, and we see him enter reading (II.ii.); we discover he has an interest in drama (II.ii.); and in his soliloquy in II.ii. he appears doubtful of his own physical courage, and he expresses religious scruples about the Ghost. It seems to me that Shakespeare is deliberately setting a trap for commentators like Coleridge and Goethe, and tempting us to adopt this view of Hamlet as an irresolute and oversensitive scholar – a view that the second half of the play will provocatively contradict with the soldiering, the pirates, and the fencing.

In the middle of the play (III.i. to IV. i.)² the puzzling nature of Hamlet's behaviour becomes even more difficult, because there is a rapid series of reversals that make his character seem so inconsistent as to be incomprehensible. At the end of II.ii. he was bustling and energetic in arranging *The Murder of Gonzago*; but in his soliloquy in III.i. he is suddenly suicidal again (I believe Kenneth Tynan once compared this to coming round a corner, and slamming into a brick wall). At the end of II.ii. Hamlet had religious scruples about the ghost; in his soliloquy in III.i. he seems to have become an agnostic ('The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn/No traveller returns' – this from a man who has seen a ghost!). If we surmised in Act II that Hamlet's reported behaviour to Ophelia must have been his antic disposition, this supposition is now destroyed by his rage against her in III.i. Having lapsed into hysteria with Ophelia in III.i., Hamlet is perfectly normal again with the players, and with Horatio in III.ii. Paranoid at the end of I.v., Hamlet has now in III.ii. told Horatio about the Ghost. In II. ii. Hamlet accused himself of dullness, i.e. lack of passion, concerning his father's murder, while in III.i. he becomes hysterical with Ophelia, and longs for temperance with Horatio in III.ii. When at the end of III.ii. Hamlet's anger against Claudius sounds like rant, his fear of being cruel to his mother sounds genuine. Ready, so he says, 'to drink hot blood' at the end of III.ii., Hamlet foregoes killing Claudius at prayer in III.iii. At the end of II.ii. Hamlet's sentiments were orthodoxly pious; in III.i. they were agnostic; in III.iii. they are diabolical. Having resolved not to kill Claudius in III.iii., he now tries to kill him through the arras in III.iv. In his interview with his mother in III.iv. he fluctuates between self-control and hysteria, and between tenderness and malevolence. Having tried to kill Claudius through the arras in III.iv., he nonetheless accuses himself of delay when the Ghost reappears in the same scene, and also in his soliloquy

² III. i. to IV. iv. according to the act/scene division commonly made (e.g. Signet, Arden, Oxford). The Challis edition comes back into line with this division at V. i.

in IV.i. Having produced the most diabolical justification for not killing Claudius in III.iii., he does not cite this justification in his own favour in his soliloquy in IV.i. In this same soliloquy he accuses himself of both 'bestial oblivion' (i.e. not thinking about his task), and 'thinking too precisely on th'event'. It should surely be obvious from the abundance of these anomalies, inconsistencies, paradoxes (however one wishes to describe them) that *Hamlet* is designed to be puzzling – it is a continual, and developing challenge to any audience or reader to work out what is going on.

The question about the throne persists. Rosencrantz says to Hamlet in III.ii.: 'How can that be, when you have the voice of the king himself for your succession in Denmark?' What kind of monarchy can this be, where everyone assumes that Hamlet will inherit the throne, despite the fact that he hasn't already inherited it, where Claudius is not treated as a usurper, and where the next king's accession depends on the present king's voice?

III.iii. and III.iv. also insist that we revive the ethical question we asked in I.v. when we realised that the Ghost had come from purgatory: is it right to seek vengeance within the Christian perspective? This is posed again by the diabolism of Hamlet's reason for not killing Claudius at prayer – wanting to damn him to eternal torment. The question is also posed by Hamlet's moral confusion in III.iv. – he sees himself as both righteous ('Forgive me this my virtue'), and sinful ('They must sweep my way/And marshall me to knavery').

The middle section of the play also continues the false impression that Hamlet is young ('this mad young man,' says Claudius in III.v.). And it provides the strongest evidence yet for the view of Hamlet as the mere scholar: viz. the irresolute, scrupulous meditation of the 'to be' soliloquy in III.i.; the amateur enthusiasm for drama in the discussion with the players in III.ii.; the fact that Hamlet chooses as his confidant not a soldier like Barnardo or Marcellus, but the scholar Horatio.

The remainder of Act IV, during which Hamlet is absent from the stage, prompts us to think about Hamlet's character and situation from the standpoint of external data. In IV.ii. Laertes leads a revolt against Claudius that leaves Claudius at Laertes' mercy, and Laertes' success depends upon his popularity with the common people. But in III.vii. Claudius has already testified to the fact that Hamlet also is loved by the common people – if so, Hamlet could just as easily, if not more easily, have led a revolt against Claudius. So why hasn't he? This significance of Laertes' revolt is reinforced for us in the immediately following scene (IV.iii.) when we are informed through Hamlet's letter to Horatio that Hamlet has boarded a pirate ship single-handed. If he is the man to do that, he must be capable of leading a revolt against Claudius. This new view of Hamlet the soldier is filled out again in IV.iv. when Claudius speaks of Hamlet's enthusiasm for fencing to Laertes. Apart from the fact that there has been no sign of this enthusiasm until now, when we reflect on Claudius' claim that two months previously Hamlet was envious of Laertes' skill at fencing, we must wonder how this account of Hamlet is compatible with what we must infer about Hamlet's grief at the time in question (the interval between Acts I and II) from his behaviour in Acts I and II. More generally, this new view of Hamlet as active and bellicose prompts us to ask how what it tells us of Hamlet is consistent with the impression conveyed to us so far of Hamlet the ineffective intellectual.

The ethical question about the rectitude of revenge continues to be posed by Laertes' impressive diabolism ('To hell, allegiance! Vows to the blackest devil! / Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit! / I dare damnation.') in IV.ii., and sacrilege ('To cut his throat i' th' church') in IV. iv.

In Act V the reversals continue. Having been reported as vigorous enough to board the pirate ship in IV. iii., Hamlet appears in the cemetery in V.i. world-weary and preoccupied with death. But this state gives way to the energy of the fight in the grave with Laertes, Hamlet striding forward, and declaring in a voice we have never heard before, 'This is I,

Hamlet the Dane!' This energy and self-affirmation do not last long, and Hamlet relapses into the sort of 'dullness' in which we saw him in Act II, an obliviousness manifested here by his surprising inability to understand why Laertes is hostile to him (he has remembered by the beginning of V.ii.!).

During the conversation between Hamlet and the gravedigger we are presented with the astonishing information that Hamlet is thirty years old. This in turn prompts the questions: how could a thirty-year-old soldier capable of the imperiousness expressed in 'I, Hamlet the Dane' have been prevented from inheriting his father's throne? And why does everyone speak of him as 'young'?

In V.ii. the new Hamlet, the self-affirming soldier-prince, predominates over the world-weary philosopher ('the readiness is all'). Hamlet recounts his plot against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with chilling callousness. For the first time in the play he really sounds vindictive towards Claudius. He proves his superiority to Laertes as a fencer. When Gertrude collapses, Hamlet assumes command (not Claudius). When Laertes tells Hamlet the truth, Hamlet assaults Claudius, not once, but twice, while the courtiers exclaim, cower, and do nothing ('You that look pale and tremble at this chance, / That are but mutes, or audience to this act' – timeservers!). Hamlet expresses a new interest in his fame, and discharges his responsibilities to the state by voting for Fortinbras. And it is upon this Hamlet, the imperious, self-willed Renaissance prince, that Fortinbras pronounces his epitaph.

Just before the final catastrophe we are told clearly for the first time that Denmark is an elective monarchy. This answers the question that has followed us through the play: why hasn't Hamlet got the throne? But in the very same moment that we receive this external datum, we listen to Hamlet expressing his political ambition in the new voice of 'I, Hamlet, the Dane'. So now at the end of the play we are faced with new questions: how is this political ambition connected with the puzzles of Hamlet's personality? How has

the irresolute philosopher of 'to be or not to be' turned into the commanding figure who takes control of the court when Gertrude is dead? Most of all, why didn't this new version of old Hamlet carry out his task on receiving it?

Also in V.ii. the ethical question remains with us: is it right for Hamlet to seek vengeance from the Christian standpoint of his world? His belief that Providence has helped him commit murder (ll. 4-59), his callous rejection of concern for the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (ll. 60-66), and Horatio's pious wish that Hamlet be conducted by angels to heaven (ll. 375-376) insist on the ethical question right to the end of the play.

The end of the play therefore forces us back to the beginning. The play has been structured to leave its audience and readers in a state of bafflement. It remains then to work out what has been going on. But one cannot carry out this task unless one accepts the reality of it. This is why it is essential to insist on *Hamlet's* form as a thriller, for it is the thriller form that produces the challenge. Scholars who dismiss the puzzles as oversights or 'considering too curiously' are not registering the real nature of the play.

If we accept the challenge of the thriller form, we can go on to ask the meta-questions: why has Shakespeare written the play in this form? Why are we offered two opposite impressions of Hamlet? Why is most of the external data not given to us until the second half of the play? Why are the facts about Hamlet's age and the elective monarchy delayed until Act V? We must try to answer these questions as well.

III

In this section I will discuss the psychological questions posed by the play, i.e. the questions concerning Hamlet's behaviour. I will also deal with the questions concerning the design of the play. In the following section I will deal with the ethical question.

On the psychological issue, part of what I have to say is unoriginal, since I think that the psychoanalytical account of the Oedipal nature of Hamlet's condition is correct. But the psychoanalytical account of the play usually restricts itself to the relation between Hamlet and his mother. This is certainly essential to the situation depicted in the play, but it is only one aspect of that situation. Equally important is Hamlet's relation to his father, and this relation does not usually receive much treatment. To neglect the relation between father and son is to give a deficient account of the play, because the relation to both parents is crucial to how the action of the play is worked out. Psychoanalytical criticism of *Hamlet* tends to diagnose Hamlet's condition from the first half of the play, and then stop, leaving the second half of the play as a mere external drama in which somehow or other Ophelia, Laertes, Gertrude, Claudius and Hamlet manage to get themselves killed. The play falls apart into a static psychological study on the one hand, and an ingenious plot mechanism to bring the action to a conclusion on the other. My first aim therefore is to show how the psychoanalytical approach is relevant right to the end of the play, how the relationship to both parents is essential, and how the psychological forces presented in the first half of the play work themselves out in a definite way through the action of the second half.³

My second aim is to show how the psychological interest of the play depends upon the precise external data offered to us by the play, especially the external data pertaining to Hamlet's political circumstances. By making this connection

³ Freud's brief but classic account of Hamlet's condition will be found in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, vol. 4 of 'The Penguin Freud Library' (Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 366-368 (ch. 5, sect. D, sub-sect. b.). See also *Art and Literature*, vol. 14 of 'The Penguin Freud Library' (1990), passim; Ernest Jones, 'Hamlet Psychoanalysed' in *Shakespeare's Tragedies: an Anthology of Modern Criticism*, ed. Laurence Lerner (Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 47-64. Peter Alexander's famous study *Hamlet: Father and Son* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955) is not psychoanalytic.

I will also offer to explain why the facts about Hamlet's age, political ambitions, and the elective monarchy of Denmark are not oversights on Shakespeare's part but essential postulates of the play.

The Oedipal nature of Hamlet's relation to his mother, and its connection with his failure to carry out his task can be briefly established. Hamlet's soliloquy in I.ii. shows in its pattern of emphasis that Hamlet's suicidal desire is conditioned less by the mere fact of his father's death, for whom Hamlet obviously grieves, than by his disgust and distress at his mother's hasty remarriage to his uncle. This remarriage he regards as incestuous, and the idea of incest is associated in his speech with an hysterical anger and loathing towards 'rankness' in general, and female sexuality in particular. This obsession with female lust, occasioned by his mother, is displaced on to Ophelia during the interview in III.i., and is revived again in its connection with the idea of incest in the interview with Gertrude in III.iv. The intensity and intemperance of the loathing of incest obviously suggest an unconscious projection from himself on to his mother, and this supposition is confirmed by the spirit of jealousy which blatantly informs his denunciation of Claudius during the interview with Gertrude.

The task of acting against Claudius does not rouse Hamlet to get rid of a rival for his mother's love. Rather it plunges him into a 'dullness', in which he does not so much as think of his task, and in which he feels no promptings of passion to carry it out. Since Hamlet's manifest jealousy of Claudius gives Hamlet a sufficient motive to act against Claudius, and yet Hamlet does not do so, but lapses into forgetfulness about it, we must suppose that there is a blockage in Hamlet's psyche. And since Hamlet himself evidently does not understand what this is, we must conclude that the blockage is unconscious. This interpretation is confirmed, first, when Hamlet's possible religious scruples about the Ghost are exposed as evasions by the rapid twists and turns in his religious consciousness in the middle of the play (piety in II.ii.; agnosticism in III.i., diabolism in III.iii.); second, when

the hypothesis of his cowardice is falsified by his exploit of boarding the pirate ship; third, when the hypothesis of external obstacles to carrying out the task is falsified by Laertes' revolt in Act IV. (There is an interesting contrast/parallel with Claudius in III.iii. – Claudius wants to pray, but can't. However, Claudius *knows* why he can't: his desire to pray is swamped by a stronger motive, his desire to keep his wife and crown. The difference between Hamlet and Claudius is that Claudius knows what motive is thwarting his conscious intention, whereas Hamlet does not).

When a son feels no prompting to carry out his father's will, despite the fact that he feels he ought to do so, and does not know why he feels no prompting to carry it out, the simplest explanation is that the son does not want to obey his father, and has repressed the knowledge of this unfilial revolt. Hamlet's jealousy for his mother suggests at least a partial motive for this revolt: Hamlet wants his mother's love for himself, not only against his uncle, but also against his father. The revolt against his father must manifest itself as a refusal to carry out his father's will, that is, a refusal to act against Claudius as his father has required. The rivalry with his father for Gertrude is suggested by the way that the incest-loathing is displaced not only on to Gertrude, but on to Claudius. This view of Hamlet's unconscious revolt against his father is confirmed by the movement in Hamlet's psyche in I.v. – Hamlet is eager to avenge his father ('Haste me to know't that I with wings as swift / As meditation, or the thoughts of love, / May sweep to my revenge.') *until he knows the identity of the murderer*. This knowledge leaves Hamlet in a state of collapse: it does so because Claudius has committed the incestuous revolt against old Hamlet, the idea of which Hamlet has to repress in himself. Hamlet cannot act against Claudius because Hamlet and Claudius are both in the same state of revolt against old Hamlet.

This is the classical psychoanalytic account of the Oedipal Hamlet, and as far as it goes, it is (in my view) perfectly convincing. But this is where the psychoanalytic account of the play usually stops, and the second half of the play, after

the interview with Gertrude, is left to look after itself. Moreover, this account of the play does not explain *why* Hamlet is in this condition. Hamlet's Oedipus complex is treated as just a 'brute fact' of the play. However, it seems to me that the play does provide material for an explanation of this fact about Hamlet's psyche. But to work out this explanation we must look at Hamlet's relation to his father. This is not a matter of speculation about Hamlet as a child, but of paying attention to the text of the play.

Hamlet's psychological relationship to his dead father exhibits two striking characteristics. The first of these is that the relationship is contradictory. Hamlet both identifies *with* his father against Claudius:

So excellent a king, that was to this,
Hyperion to a satyr

(I.ii. 141-142)

and aligns himself by implication with Claudius *against* his father:

[she] married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules

(I.ii. 153-155)

These two passages from the same soliloquy imply the following schemas:

- | | | |
|-----|------------------------------------|--------------------|
| (1) | Old Hamlet
Hyperion
[Hamlet] | Claudius
satyr |
| (2) | Old Hamlet
Hercules | Claudius
Hamlet |

Hamlet is thus on both sides of the divide; his feelings are contradictory; he is divided against himself. In the first identification, that with his father, Hamlet idealises and idolises his father. In the second identification, that with Claudius, the idealisation and idolisation imply Hamlet's sense of inferiority to his father.

The second characteristic of Hamlet's relationship to his father is empathy: repeatedly Hamlet feels precisely what his father, i.e. the Ghost, feels. In his soliloquy in I.ii. Hamlet judges his uncle to be vastly inferior to his father, and he obsessively judges the marriage of Gertrude and Claudius to be incestuous. In the Ghost's harangue in I.v. the Ghost also judges Claudius to be inferior to himself when alive:

O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there,
From me whose love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage, and to decline
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
To those of mine!

(I.v. 52-57)

And the Ghost displays the same obsessive attitude to Gertrude's second marriage as incestuous:

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast

(I.v.47)

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest.

(I.v. 86-87)

As I have remarked in section II the Ghost is also vague about the task of vengeance against Claudius ('But howsoever thou pursues this act'), but clear and vigorous about putting a stop to the 'incest' (see I.v. 86-87 above). This system of priorities is of course Hamlet's as well: he does nothing about his task for months, evades it when opportunity offers, and, when he has his interview with Gertrude in III.iv., his strongest purpose is to make Gertrude give up sleeping with Claudius. (When he enters in III.iv., after some cryptic hostility to his mother his first clear accusation is that of incest, this being accompanied by his recoil from her on account of it: 'You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife,/ And would it were not so, you are my mother.' This, incidentally, is one of the passages where Hamlet *sounds like* an adolescent.) During the interview with Gertrude, Hamlet expresses yet again the judgement that

Claudius is inferior to old Hamlet, the judgement that he and the Ghost have both already expressed:

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

(III. iv. 59-73)

When the Ghost reappears in III. iv., Hamlet immediately anticipates the Ghost's accusation of delay: 'Do you not come your tardy son to chide, / That lapst in time and passion, lets go by / Th' important acting of your dread command?' (ll.117-119). This is exactly what the Ghost does accuse him of: 'Do not forget. This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose' (ll.120-121). And most significantly, perhaps, Hamlet recognises the power of the Ghost to change Hamlet's feelings to conform with those of the Ghost:

Do not look upon me,
 Lest with this piteous action you convert
 My stern effects. Then what I have to do
 Will want true colour – tears perchance for blood.

(III.iv. 138-141)

From all these examples it is clear that Hamlet is disposed, without any kind of prompting, to feel exactly what his father feels.

This contradictory and empathic relationship of Hamlet's with his father is surely not very difficult to diagnose. Hamlet

passionately identifies with his father – this is manifested in the empathy – and this leads to jealousy for Gertrude *against Claudius*. But Hamlet also passionately feels inferior to his father, and this leads to jealousy for Gertrude *against his father*. The empathy, and the jealousy, therefore, conceal a contradiction, but Hamlet can never bring this to consciousness. His idolisation of his father, which is the obverse of his sense of inferiority to his father, must repress any recognition of an adversarial relation to his father. So far, all this is just the classical Oedipal situation.

But now we must realise that in the first half of the play Shakespeare is playing a trick on us. Repeatedly, we are misled into believing that Hamlet's idolisation of / sense of inferiority to his father is due to the fact that old Hamlet was a great warrior-king, while 'young Hamlet' is not only a youth, but an ineffective, irresolute, oversensitive scholar. When in III.i. Ophelia tells us that Hamlet has been a soldier, and when we learn that he has boarded the pirate ship, the play compels us to re-orientate ourselves towards Hamlet, to change our understanding of him. Disposed as we now are to do this, we do not have enough material to carry out this task until Act V. Then in V.i. we learn that Hamlet is thirty years old (in retrospect we realise that the thirty-year-old marriage of the Player King and Player Queen was a clue – see III.ii. 157-162). At first this information simply makes the problem of 'Hamlet in his situation' more difficult – how could he have been prevented from getting the crown? Finally, in V.ii. we learn that Denmark is an elective monarchy. Now we have all the pieces of the jig-saw puzzle, and it is merely a question of putting them together.

Hamlet is a thirty-year-old prince. He has reached his thirtieth year with his father still on the throne. He has nothing to do but to pursue a scholar's life at Wittenberg. His father dies at last, and because Denmark is an elective monarchy, Hamlet *still* doesn't get the crown! In this situation it is surely not very surprising that a thirty-year-old man should have an unconscious hostility to his father, or that his behaviour should exhibit signs of *regression*. Hamlet

is really thirty, but the stress of his crisis, both in waiting for the crown and not getting it, and in seeing his loathsome uncle marry his mother, pushes him back into the condition of adolescence, a condition in which he hero-worships his father consciously, and represses a revolt against that same father, precisely because the father is a hero, while Hamlet is a political failure. We conclude that Hamlet's sexual condition is grounded in his political condition.⁴

If it is objected that there are no signs of any political preoccupations in Hamlet, I reply that there certainly are. Hamlet's political aspiration comes out over and over again in the play. For most of the play it is expressed cryptically, usually in the form of Hamlet's sarcastic wit, but in Act V it is expressed openly. Thus:

(1) The King doth wake tonight and takes his rouse,
Keeps wassail, and the swagg'ring upspring reels
(I.iv. 9-10)

'Upspring' here primarily refers to Claudius as a dancer of the upspring (a German dance), but secondarily it suggests that Hamlet feels Claudius to be an 'upstart' or usurper.

(2) At II.ii. 416-433 Hamlet mocks Polonius by comparing him and Ophelia to Jephthah and his daughter in a ballad. At the end of this exchange Hamlet hints:

The first row of the pious chanson will show you
more, for look where my abridgement comes.
(II.ii. 432-433)

The 'more' to which Hamlet refers is the last couplet of the first stanza or 'row' of the ballad. This first stanza reads:

I read that many years ago,
when Jepha Judge of Israel,
Had one fair Daughter and no more,
whom he loved so passing well.

⁴ Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 63, minimises the political circumstance of Claudius' accession. Jones also speculates idly about Hamlet's life as a child.

And as by lot God wot
It came to passe most like it was,
Great warrs there should be,
*and who should be chiefe, but he, but he.*⁵
(my italics)

The 'more', a reference to Jephthah's political ambition, is a hit against Polonius' political officiousness as Claudius' chief minister. This allusion would appear to be an expression of political resentment on Hamlet's part.

(3) Hamlet to Ophelia:

I am very proud,
revengeful, ambitious ...
(III.i. 131-132)

This is exclaimed in rage, so we may take it to be genuine.

(4) Hamlet to Claudius:

I eat
the air, promise-cramm'd.
(III.ii.95-96)

This complaint is an allusion to Claudius' promise in I.ii. that Hamlet will be the next king (I.111.; cf. Rosencrantz's 'How can that be, when you have the voice of the king himself for your succession in Denmark?' (III.ii. 346-347)).

(5) Hamlet to Rosencrantz:

Sir, I lack advancement.
(III.ii. 345)

(6) Hamlet to Rosencrantz:

Besides, to be demanded of a sponge, what
replication should be made by the son of a King?
(III.vi. 10-11)

⁵ I quote the ballad from the Arden edition of *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 475-476.

(7) Hamlet to Laertes:

This is I,
Hamlet the Dane.

(V.i. 258-259)

(8) Hamlet to Horatio:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon –
He that hath kill'd my King, and whor'd my mother,
Pop't in between th' election and my hopes

(V.ii. 68-70)

(1) to (6) are the clues that indicate Hamlet's suppressed political ambitions in the first half of the play, ambitions that, for reasons that we will shortly examine, come to be openly expressed at the end of the play in (7) and (8). So while the first half of the play misleads us into supposing that Hamlet is a youthful and ineffective intellectual, there are nonetheless clues laid out for us that he is really a political animal. We must conclude that his political side is consciously suppressed (not unconsciously repressed) in the first half of the play because of the stress of his situation. What we have to do now is to trace out how that political side comes to assert itself in the second half of the play.

There are no psychoanalysts in the world of Elsinore. Hamlet cannot spend the revenues of the Danish kingdom on a course of therapy with specialists from Vienna. Are we to conclude then that Hamlet remains in the same psychological state to the end of the play? Or, if he does not, how is his state transformed?

From our previous examination of the play, we can pose this issue more concretely: how is the manic-depressive and theatrical enthusiast of the first half of the play transformed into the soldier-prince of the second half? How is it that Hamlet's political ambitions are suppressed in the first half of the play, and affirmed in Act V?

Hamlet is entangled unconsciously in an emotional knot with his mother and his dead father. His problem is to

extricate himself from this knot; more precisely, he has to achieve an emotional distance from both his father and mother so that he can be, as we might say, 'his own person', so that he can acquire his own emotional centre, instead of continually propelling himself through empathy into the personality of his dead father. His trajectory therefore is to break free from the idea of his father, and this involves paradoxically appropriating his father's personality for himself. However, this process of escape and introjection with respect to his father can only occur if he simultaneously breaks free from his mother. These two processes do occur in the second half of the play. But Hamlet achieves this freedom unconsciously: he does not think out his problems, or ever understand his situation, nor does anybody offer him adequate guidance. He *lives out* his problems, and extricates himself without realising it, through the process of interactions between himself and the significant other characters who are still living, i.e. Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia and Laertes. Shakespeare brilliantly constructs a dialectic in the action of the play, a dialectic whereby characters interact with each other consciously, and in so doing produce a new situation that none of them intended, and through this process Hamlet is changed, even though no one in the play, including himself, understands what is happening. On the face of it this may sound incredible. But let us return to the play, and see if we can trace out this process.

From the end of Act II Hamlet slowly but steadily begins to make Claudius his *own* enemy, so that Hamlet is no longer just his father's instrument against his uncle. Eventually this change in Hamlet's relation to Claudius will be essential to Hamlet's carrying out his task at the end of the play, for so long as Hamlet thinks of his task as action on behalf of his father, and performing his father's will, his unconscious revolt will not allow him to obey his father. But this transformation has two aspects: *objectively* Claudius must become Hamlet's own enemy, but also *subjectively* Hamlet must *feel* Claudius to be his own enemy. As we shall see, the objective side of this process develops before the subjective side, but when the subjective side of the change occurs (in

Act V) the change is very rapid, like the sudden loosing of a knot.

At the end of II.ii. Hamlet arranges *The Murder of Gonzago*. Subjectively, this is evasion on Hamlet's part, a way of not carrying out his task, and this is evident in the contradictory rationalisations of his soliloquy (his self-torment presupposes he believes the ghost; his arranging the playlet presupposes he doesn't). Objectively, the playlet confirms and clarifies Claudius' suspicions of Hamlet (already aroused by the overheard interview with Ophelia in III.i.), so that Claudius is strengthened in his resolve to send Hamlet to England (a decision taken at the end of III.i.). Claudius now clearly recognises Hamlet as his enemy. So on the objective side of the dialectic there is a definite advance.

Subjectively, however, Hamlet is not radically changed by the success of *Gonzago*, despite the exultation he feels at its success – the displacement has worked, he has done something *towards* the fulfilment of the task! However, when suddenly faced with the task itself in III.iii., with Claudius at his mercy, the underlying reality of his condition reasserts itself, and he finds a reason (sufficiently diabolical) not to do what he feels obliged to do.

At the beginning of the interview with Gertrude in III.iv. he does try to kill Claudius (as he supposes) through the arras. The explanation for this reversal is that here Hamlet acts *impulsively* and not deliberately, and he acts *for himself*: Claudius (as Hamlet thinks) is interrupting the most intimate moment between Hamlet and his mother, when the idea of Gertrude's incest has aroused all Hamlet's jealousy. And so Polonius dies. Objectively this moves on the dialectic, since the death of Polonius determines Claudius to have Hamlet executed in England (III.vii.). This determination is the precondition of the subsequent development in Act IV.

Subjectively, the error of killing Polonius leaves Hamlet where he was, and this is confirmed by the nature of the interview that follows with Gertrude. As we have already seen, in his rage against his mother Hamlet identifies with the

standpoint of his revered father (ll.45-73), and he empathises with his dead father when the Ghost returns (ll.113-149). Sharing his father's enthusiasm for putting a stop to Gertrude's incest, Hamlet wins Gertrude from Claudius' bed (ll. 169-212). But all this reproduces and reinforces Hamlet's Oedipal relation to his parents. So, despite the impulsive attack on 'Claudius'/Polonius, Hamlet's subjective condition remains unchanged. This is pointed up by the obsessive joke about father and mother being man and wife, and so one flesh in III.vii. (ll. 54-57), and the ranting self-torment of the soliloquy in IV.i. – this soliloquy emphasising the underlying lack of change in Hamlet's psyche by its conspicuous resemblance to the soliloquy in II.ii.⁶

At the end of III.iv. Hamlet again exhibits the signs of a desire to evade his task when he accepts his being sent to England, and displaces all his hostility towards Claudius on to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: Hamlet will not imagine any secret plot against Claudius, but he will imagine a secret plot against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (ll. 216-224)! This is a repetition of the evasion represented by *The Murder of Gonzago*. However, objectively this evasive desire in Hamlet leads him to open Claudius' letter on board the ship, and to put into operation his counterplot against the two courtiers. This action completes the objective process whereby Hamlet takes Claudius as his *own* enemy, for as Horatio points out at V.ii. 76-77, news must shortly come from England of the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and then Claudius and Hamlet must face each other openly as enemies.

Nonetheless, subjectively Hamlet still has to be extricated from his Oedipal relation to his parents. This has not yet occurred in the first half of V.i., as Hamlet's preoccupation with death in the cemetery suggests (recapitulation of the preoccupation with death in I.ii. and III.i.). Hamlet acquires

6 It is therefore inappropriate, to put it mildly, for the Oxford edition of *Hamlet* (1987) to cut the soliloquy of IV. i. (IV. iv. in Oxford) from the text, and place it in an appendix! The editorial policy of this edition of the play is misguided in my view.

his freedom suddenly in the second half of V.i. The turning-point is of course Ophelia's funeral. When Hamlet realises whose funeral it is, when he hears Laertes' rant, and sees Laertes' histrionics of leaping in the grave, Hamlet strides forward, crying out in the voice he has never before used in the play:

What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis? Whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wand'ring stars, and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,
Hamlet the Dane.

(V.i. 255-259)

'I, Hamlet the Dane' means that Hamlet is affirming himself *as king*. True to the general procedure of the play, this self-affirmation is not immediately intelligible – how can Hamlet suddenly express himself in this way? As usual, the moment becomes intelligible in retrospect. Within a few lines, Hamlet is exclaiming, 'Why, I will fight with him upon this theme/ Until my eyelids will no longer wag.' Gertrude responds with 'O my son, what theme?' And Hamlet replies with the words that signify his already achieved freedom:

I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not with all their quantity of love
Make up my sum.

(V.i. 272-274)

At last Hamlet expresses unequivocally his love for Ophelia. This is the decisive moment in the play. Hamlet achieves his emotional freedom when he realises Ophelia is dead, and he is compelled to express openly, both to himself and to everyone else, his love for her. Significantly, this expression is made directly to his mother.

Hamlet breaks the bond with his mother when he is compelled to recognise the power of his love for another woman. Freed from his mother, he is simultaneously freed from his father, and asserts himself, inevitably, as the rightful new king: 'This is I, Hamlet the Dane.' Hence, the new voice.

Poor Ophelia! Unable to help Hamlet while she was alive, despite all her love (because of her obedience to her father's will!), she can help him when she's dead. Her living conscious will cannot free him, but her corpse can. I suppose this is a kind of tragedy – that of the exercise of a power that is predicated on death.

We can now see why the Hamlet who speaks in V.ii. is a new Hamlet, 'a new version of old Hamlet'. We may think of the play as depicting the process whereby 'young' Hamlet becomes a man like his father – a man no longer wholly attractive like the Hamlet of Acts I and II, and definitely morally ambiguous. The new Hamlet is at least partly an arrogant and callous Renaissance prince. When Horatio indicates his doubts about the plot against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom, incidentally, Hamlet has sent to their deaths 'not shriving time allowed' (1.50) – so they are going to hell or purgatory – Hamlet replies:

Why, man, they did make love to this employment!
 They are not near my conscience. Their defeat
 Does by their own insinuation grow.
 'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
 Between the pass and fell incensed points
 Of mighty opposites.

(V.ii. 61-66)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were little men; Hamlet and Claudius are big men. Princes count, mere courtiers don't. Critics who think of Hamlet as uniformly adorable should remember these lines.

'King Hamlet' now announces his political intentions in a rhetorical question which does not expect (and does not get) an answer:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon –
 He that hath kill'd my King, and whor'd my mother,
 Pop't in between th' election and my hopes,
 Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
 And with such coz'nage – is't not perfect conscience
 To quit him with this arm?

(V.ii. 68-73)

Notice that Hamlet doesn't say 'killed my father'. Old Hamlet is now distanced from young Hamlet: Old Hamlet is merely 'my king'. Notice also the order of the charges. The less important come first: 'kill'd my King, and whor'd my mother'. The series builds up in a crescendo, putting more emphasis on 'Pop't in between th'election and my hopes', but reaches its climax in 'Thrown out his angle for my proper [i.e. own] life'. 'Claudius has actually had the impudence to try to murder *me!*' When Hamlet is freed from the identity of being an appendage to his father, his free self-affirmation is unrestrained egotism. We see here the convergence of the objective side of the dialectic, whereby Claudius becomes Hamlet's enemy, with the subjective side of the dialectic, whereby Hamlet *feels* that Claudius is his own enemy.

As we have already seen, it is in this speech that Hamlet expresses his political rivalry with Claudius clearly and vigorously for the first time. And now we can see why. This speech testifies to Hamlet's political ambitions when his father died ('my hopes'). But those ambitions Hamlet suppressed under the stress of the crisis brought on by Claudius' accession, and the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude. Now that Hamlet has acquired his independence from his parents, those political ambitions can revive. And as they revive, the thirty-year-old prince escapes from his regression, and no longer sounds like the maladjusted adolescent who hero-worshipped his father, and complained of his mother's behaviour.

From this point on, Hamlet does not evade his task. The conversation between Hamlet and Horatio is interrupted first by Osric, then by the Lord, and Hamlet is swept up into the fencing match which immediately follows. When Gertrude falls, Hamlet assumes command. Informed by Laertes, Hamlet kills Claudius deliberately. And the time-servers of Claudius' court stand frozen in fear and trembling, while the new 'great one' enacts his absolute will.

Dying, Hamlet tries to secure his fame through Horatio's life, and gives his voice to his Norwegian counterpart.

Fortinbras' epitaph on the Hamlet who 'was likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royal' is now intelligible. The soldier-prince is farewelled by 'the soldiers' music and the rite of war'. This cannon-fire is the first cannon-fire in the play that is *not* a sign of Claudius' drunken exhibitionism.

Why does Shakespeare deal with his subject-matter in this play in the form of a thriller, or, more precisely, in the form of a play that poses questions, induces false expectations, and provokes bafflement?

The immediate answer to the question is that the subject-matter of its very nature lends itself to such a treatment: the core of the subject-matter is a mystery, a hidden condition – what is going on in Hamlet's head? Why doesn't he carry out his task? And Hamlet's psychological development is such that, suppressing his political aspirations owing to the stress of his situation, he must at first appear only in his scholarly identity, and with all the evasions that his condition produces. His regression must make him seem younger than he is. And his mature identity can only emerge at the end of the play when he is freed from his disabling relations to his parents.

However, this is not an adequate answer, since Shakespeare could have depicted Elsinore before the death of Old Hamlet, and made everything clear about Hamlet's age, his mixed identity as scholar, courtier and soldier, and the nature of the elective monarchy. Such a play would still have been a psychological study, and an exciting play of action, but it would not have been mysterious, or at least much less so. But Shakespeare does not do this. Instead, he emphasises the mystery by piling on the false impressions that the play induces, some of these false impressions being wholly unnecessary at the level of the narrative: e.g. in I.i. that Hamlet and Fortinbras are the kings of Denmark and Norway, and that the appearance of the Ghost must be connected with the coming war between the two states. We are even invited to speculate that the Ghost will reveal something that bears upon the famous duel between Old Hamlet and

Old Fortinbras, and that this will somehow affect the outcome of the war that is soon to occur between young Hamlet and young Fortinbras. All this turns out to be a chimera, but it is nonetheless what the information in the first scene might lead any reasonable, ignorant audience to suppose.

So the real answer to the question must be that Shakespeare wants to direct our attention to the mysterious nature of the subject-matter, i.e. the mystery of Hamlet's behaviour, and that this is because this mysterious subject-matter cannot be explained in the usual concepts of Renaissance discourse. Shakespeare is exploring human nature beyond the bounds of what is usually recognised, and understood. Where there are no concepts for abstract thought to carry out this exploration, dramatic representation can nonetheless provide the means for intuitive understanding of the processes involved. Shakespeare may not have had the benefit of psychoanalytic concepts, but he could certainly understand intuitively the processes denoted by such terms as regression, projection, introjection, rationalisation, displacement, emotional dependence, etc. The evidence for this claim is simply the plays themselves.⁷

Hamlet, then, poses questions, and sets up false expectations in order to compel us to give up our commonsensical views about the world, and to recognise that there are in human nature potentialities that go beyond the simplicities of our conventional ideas. The first false expectation set up by I.i., viz. that Hamlet and Fortinbras are

7 Shakespeare's interest in pathological mental processes is manifest in Othello's rationalisation of his jealousy, Lear's madness, Macbeth's hallucinations and self-haunting, Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking, Antony's self-destructiveness, and Coriolanus' emotional dependence on his mother.

Shakespeare's particular interest in characters who 'do not act their age' is apparent in Cassius (in the quarrel scene with Brutus), Lear (childish self-will), Antony and Cleopatra (middle-aged infatuated teenagers), and Coriolanus (the veteran of eighteen campaigns who is also a 'boy of tears').

the new kings of Denmark and Norway, is to make us wonder why, in fact, they are not, more particularly, why Hamlet isn't king of Denmark. The play revives this question over and over again, so that we still have it in mind, when the answer to it is given in V.ii. We are, then, to be led to connect the mystery of Hamlet's personality with his political circumstances, for without the fact of the displacement from the throne of the thirty-year-old prince, our inquiry into his failure to carry out his father's will cannot begin. The next false expectation, viz. that the appearance of the Ghost is connected with the coming war, is to force us away from the public sphere with which the ghosts of kings may be conventionally associated (as is borne out by the conjectures of Barnardo and Horatio) into the domestic sphere. Once our interest is located here, Shakespeare compels us in Act II to ask ourselves why Hamlet hasn't carried out his task. And now Shakespeare has us where he wants us, wondering what is going on in Hamlet's head. (Shakespeare even provides role models for us in Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, all puzzling themselves with the mystery of Hamlet's behaviour). The antic disposition induces puzzlement, because Hamlet (unlike the hero of the original source-story) has no objective reason to feign madness. This issue is complicated by its association with that of whether Hamlet loves Ophelia or not. Shakespeare now offers us conventional but false explanations for Hamlet's delay—Hamlet is too young; Hamlet is too bookish. But these explanations are not sufficient to explain the strange reversals of mentality and behaviour in Act III. (religiosity—agnosticism—diabolism; refusal to kill Claudius—attempt to kill Claudius through the arras). Now come the new external data about the soldiering, the pirates, and the fencing, and these leave the problem even more mysterious. The new Hamlet appears in Act V with his new voice and manner, and we have to digest the information that he's thirty years old, and resents Claudius' having the throne not just on account of his father, but on his own account. Almost at the end of the play the item about the elective monarchy is conveyed to

us; our attention is focussed — off we go again, back to the beginning of the play.

Thus, Shakespeare has made *Hamlet* a 'dark conceit', a deliberate puzzle to stimulate inquiry. If only we had a copy of the *Ur-Hamlet*, the play written by somebody else - probably Kyd - that was performed in the 1590s! If it were extant, I conjecture that we would find that it followed the source story much more closely, that in it Hamlet only faced external obstacles to carrying out his task, and feigned madness only to protect himself. If this should be the truth, it would be clear that Shakespeare was deliberately flouting the expectations of an audience familiar with the *Ur-Hamlet* — instead of external obstacles, an internal obstacle; instead of a rationally feigned madness, an 'antic disposition' that is itself the irrational symptom of a pathological condition; instead of a mere cunning warrior, a soldier-intellectual. Unfortunately, the *Ur-Hamlet* is not extant, so all this remains a conjecture. Even so, we can still say more generally that Shakespeare has written an anti-conventional revenge play, a revenge play in which the avenger consistently evades his task almost to the end of the play, but is brought to perform it by processes that no one, including himself, understands, so that the audience is left with a psychological mystery, and not just the satisfaction of watching an 'action-drama' brought to its inevitable bloody conclusion.⁸

IV

It remains for us to consider the ethical question: is it right for Hamlet (or his father, or Laertes) to seek revenge within

⁸ An audience familiar with an *Ur-Hamlet* that depicted Hamlet's uncle as a usurper according to the source story would still be puzzled as to how in Shakespeare's play Claudius has succeeded to the throne, since Claudius is clearly not a usurper (I mean outwardly), despite Hamlet's feelings. Any audience that believed that Claudius was a usurper would be even more inclined to be misled into thinking of Hamlet as a wimp.

the Christian world presupposed by the play? This question is only one aspect of the religious and moral interest of the play, but it is central.

So far I have treated the psychological interest of the play separately from the ethical interest. This is merely a convenience for discussion, since it is the same characters and events that can be examined psychologically from one point of view, and ethically from another. Nonetheless, the separate treatment of the two kinds of interest is so far justified, in that the play encourages two different kinds of activity from audience or readers in relation to the two kinds of interest. With the psychological interest we are looking for explanations: e.g. why does not Hamlet carry out his task? But with the ethical interest we are not just looking for an answer to a question. The answer to the question, is it right from the Christian standpoint to seek revenge? is sufficiently obvious from the play – no, it isn't. The play continually draws one's attention to the contradictions between the spirit of vengeance, and the New Testament ethic. However, the play is not designed to preach Christian doctrine. It is rather designed to problematise the ethos of the Renaissance court, to expose the contradictions between the social order of the court, and its official Christian and aristocratic-military ideologies. The activity on the part of the audience and readers here is not just to produce a simple answer, but to register these contradictions in their fullness and variety.

The social order of Elsinore is both regal-aristocratic, and patriarchal. Both aspects are implicated in the human turmoil depicted in the play, and both are factors connected to the problematical situation of Christianity in this social world.

That there is a potential conflict between the regal-aristocratic ethos and Christianity is suggested to us almost at once in the play by the presentation of the idea of Old Hamlet, the warrior king. Old Hamlet's warlike chivalry is evoked by the armour and majestic gait of the Ghost (I.i. 53-56, 69-70) and by the account of the duel with Old Fortinbras for the Norwegian and Danish territories (I.i. 90-

105). But this chivalry can lapse into brutal and treacherous violence:

So frown'd he once, when in an angry parle
He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.

(I.i. 71-72)

That is, during a truce between the Danish and Polish armies tempers flared, and Old Hamlet attacked his enemies without warning.

Already in I.i. the subordination of the world of chivalry to the cosmic order of Christianity is suggested by the Ghost's guilty start (l. 159), by Horatio's belief in the compulsion upon ghosts to return to purgatory at day-break (ll.160-167), and by Marcellus' account of the confinement of all beings associated with hell or purgatory during the Christmas season (ll. 168-175).

That Old Hamlet is not simply the idealised hero of his son's imagination ('Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself, / An eye like Mars, to threaten and command, / A station like the herald Mercury' (III. iv. 62-64) – note the divinities are pagan) is indicated clearly by the fact that his spirit is in purgatory, having its sins purged away. Hamlet's speech

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

(I.iv. 25-40)

arises by analogy from the preceding reference to the drunkenness of the Danish nation, and there is no reason to suppose that Hamlet is thinking of anyone in particular. (certainly *not* Claudius, who couldn't have any virtues from Hamlet's point of view). However, what *immediately* follows this speech is 'Enter Ghost', and in the next scene the Ghost tells Hamlet that he, the Ghost, is in purgatory because he died without being shriven (I.v. 13-26, 78-83). God's judgment, then, resembles the human judgment outlined in Hamlet's speech: in God's sight also vices will destroy any reputation, however virtuous. So if Old Hamlet represents the ideal of warrior-chivalry, that ideal is 'placed' within the Christian perspective as something defective. Moreover, perhaps it is from this point of view that we can explain why the Ghost does not sound really vindictive. The Ghost is outraged, and distressed, certainly, but its speech in I.v. corresponds in feeling to Horatio's description of its face in I.ii: 'A countenance more in sorrow than in anger' (1.243). The Ghost is much more concerned that the 'incest' should stop, and that Gertrude should not be harmed than that Claudius should die. So it seems as if the aristocratic code of revenge is weakened by the fires of purgatory.

That the patriarchal aspect of Elsinore's social order is also called in question by the play is evident from the domestic situation of Polonius, Laertes and Ophelia, and from Hamlet's relation to Ophelia. In I. iii. Laertes and Polonius try to induce in Ophelia fear and distrust of her own sexual inclinations by warning her against Hamlet's expressions of love (ll. 6-47, 93-141). We see here how the patriarchal subordination of women tends to work against openness, frankness, generosity of spirit and mutuality – all aspects of the aristocratic ethos – by encouraging women to be fearful and suspicious both of themselves and of men. In this social world female sexuality becomes a problem because it is not so easily brought to comply with the interests of family property and honour. It becomes an unintegrated force in social life, threatening to disrupt the regularity of the patriarchal order. This exclusion of female

sexuality as an unruly element is also seen in the Petrarchism of Hamlet's love-letter, where the woman is spiritualised and elevated as an object of devotion: 'To the celestial, and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia' (II. ii. 115–116). It is hardly surprising that Hamlet the Petrarchist should have problems with the idea of his mother's sexuality.

That it is not just aristocracy and patriarchy that are the problem, but that Christianity itself is a problem is indicated in various ways. It is of course Christianity that provides the notion of incest, the taboo against a man marrying his brother's wife, this being one of the two basic cultural conditions of Hamlet's self-division (the other being the ethos of kingship and aristocratic honour). Christianity also provides the means whereby Hamlet can evade his task, and rationalise his evasion. We see this in his doubts about the Ghost in II.ii., his perverse diabolism when he refuses to kill Claudius in III.iii., and in his diabolising of his mother's sexuality in III. iv.:

You cannot call it love, for at your age
The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble,
And waits upon the judgement...

What devil was't
That thus hath cozen'd you at hoodman-blind?..
Rebellious hell,
If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones...

(III.iv. 74-76, 82-83, 88-89)

So it seems to me that while Christianity judges the other ideological elements in the play, it is also judged itself. It is also partly responsible for the tragic situation.

As the play develops, the contradiction between Christianity and the aristocratic ethic of revenge is sharpened, and repeatedly presented to us: Hamlet's diabolism in refusing to kill Claudius in III. iii.; Laertes' diabolism in IV. ii.; Hamlet's belief that divine providence has helped him to commit murder (V. ii. 4–57); Hamlet's sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, 'not shriving time allow'd.' (V. ii. 50). And at the end of the play there is a suggestion

in Hamlet's language that aristocratic revenge corresponds to the superseded Old Testament ethic of 'an eye for an eye':

is't not perfect conscience
To *quit* him with this arm?

(V. ii. 73, my italics)

We can also see that as Hamlet becomes entangled in the necessities of his task he becomes increasingly morally confused. In II. ii. he uses Christian scruples about the Ghost to justify himself in postponing vengeance until *Gonzago* has confirmed Claudius' guilt. After the energy of arranging the playlet he relapses into lethargy, and in the soliloquy of III.i. he pushes the whole situation away from himself by an agnostic refusal to believe in ghosts at all. In III.iii. his religiosity takes diabolical form. In III.iv. he swings violently between thinking of himself as a representative of virtue (ll. 164-167) and thinking of himself as driven into villainy (ll. 218-219). In V.ii. with Horatio he repents his estrangement from Laertes (ll. 80-83), but brutalises himself into indifference about the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (ll. 61-65). Dying, Hamlet 'exchanges forgiveness' with Laertes, and Horatio expresses the pious hope, 'flights of angels sing thee to thy rest'. However, only a dozen or so lines later the English ambassador announces that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead – according to Hamlet's malevolent plot, 'not shriving time allowed'. We may wonder whether Hamlet is indeed bound for heaven, or whether it is not much more likely that he is about to join his father in another place. For a play that insists on shrift, ie. confession and absolution, as necessary to salvation, it is perhaps worth noting that Old Hamlet, Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Gertrude, Claudius and Hamlet all die unshriven.⁹

⁹ I think we have to say that the religious ethos of the play is definitely Catholic, and not just Christian. This seems to be indicated clearly by the suggestion that the Ghost comes from purgatory, and the assumption of the practice of shrift.

So Hamlet is eventually freed from his disabling relation to his parents, and achieves his independence, but the state into which he is released is morally ambiguous. His stature in the last act depends upon both his ability to control the court, and his willingness to be reconciled with Laertes on the one hand, and also on the arrogance and callous egotism of his attitude to his social inferiors, and former childhood friends [!], Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, on the other. His tragedy, therefore, is not just that of a great power that is destroyed, but also that of a great power that is corrupted. If Horatio's last Christian blessing is ironised, we may perhaps think that Fortinbras's martial epitaph is ironised as well.

But it is not only Hamlet (or indeed the other characters) who is judged. His world is judged also. If it is possible to solve the psychological problems posed by the play, it is not possible to resolve the contradictions of the world of Elsinore that the play exposes. The tragic vision of *Hamlet* is of a world where the material and spiritual conditions of life are in conflict, and the conflict is worked out with rigorous necessity – even (or perhaps one should say, especially) in the person of a Renaissance prince. This is Shakespeare's equivalent of fate.¹⁰

10 Although Hamlet succeeds in distancing himself from his parents, it can hardly be said that he achieves the temperance he longs for in III.ii. In Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) it is claimed that temperance is a virtue peculiarly appropriate to rulers (see the discussion of the princely graces in the fourth book).