

**English 366: Studies in Shakespeare**  
**Introductory Lecture on Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

[A lecture prepared for English 200 and revised for English 366: *Studies in Shakespeare*, by Ian Johnston of Malaspina-University College, Nanaimo, BC. It was last revised slightly on February 27, 2001. This entire text is in the public domain and may be used free of charge and without permission]

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## **A. Introduction**

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, written around 1600, is one of the most problematic texts in all of literature. With the exception of certain Biblical texts, no other work has produced such a continuing, lively, and contentious debate about how we are supposed to understand it. In fact, one could very easily construct a thorough and intriguing history of modern literary criticism based upon nothing other than various interpretative takes on *Hamlet* (a task which has already been carried out by at least one historian of ideas).

Given this critical confusion, we might as well admit up front that we are not going to arrive at anything like a firm consensus on what the play is about and how we should understand it. However, wrestling with this play is a very important and stimulating exercise, because it puts a lot of pressure on us to reach some final interpretation (that is, it generates in us a desire to make sense of all the elements in it, to find some closure), and, even if that goal eludes us, we can learn a great deal about reading poetic drama and interpreting literature from a serious attempt to grasp this most elusive work. If one of the really important functions of great literature is to stimulate thought-provoking conversations which force us to come to grips with many things about the text and about ourselves, then *Hamlet* is a particularly valuable work.

I should also add that many of the difficulties we wrestle with (like the age of the characters, for example) can only be temporarily resolved by witnessing and responding to a production of the play. Because there is so much ambiguity and uncertainty about many key elements, *Hamlet* offers a director a great deal of creative scope, and hence the variety in productions of this play is unmatched in all of Shakespeare, perhaps in all tragic drama.

In this introductory lecture (and I stress the word introductory) I would like to discuss three things: (a) first, I would like to outline what the "problem" with this play is, the source key of the disagreement, (b) second, I would like to review some of the attempts to resolve this initial problem, and (c) third, I would like to outline three of the main issues raised by the play, matters which any coherent and reasonably complete interpretation has to deal with. If there is time, I might offer a few suggestions along the way about the approach which I personally find particularly persuasive.

## **B. *Hamlet*: What's the Problem?**

So what is the source of the difficulties with this play? Well, we can begin by acknowledging that *Hamlet* is a revenge play. That is, the story is based upon the need to revenge a murder in the family. In a typical revenge plot, there are no authorities to appeal to, either because the original criminal is too powerful (e.g., has become king) or those in a position to act do not know about or believe in the criminality of the original villain. Thus, the central character has to act on his own, if any justice is to occur.

*Hamlet* clearly falls into this conventional genre. There is a victim (Hamlet Senior), a villain (Claudius), and an avenger (Hamlet). Early in the play the details of the murder become known to Hamlet, he vows to carry out his revenge, and eventually he does so, bringing the action to a close. The major question which arises, and the main focus for much of the critical interpretation of *Hamlet* is this: Why does Hamlet delay so long? Why doesn't he just carry out the act?

Now, revenge dramas, from the *Oresteia* to the latest Charles Bronson *Death Wish* film, are eternally popular, because, as playwrights from Aeschylus on have always known, revenge is something we all, deep down,

understand and respond to imaginatively (even if we ourselves would never carry out such a personal vendetta). The issue engages some of our deepest and most powerful feelings, even if the basic outline of the story is already very familiar to us from seeing lots of revenge plots (for the basic story line doesn't change much from one story to another).

Typically, the avenger assumes the responsibility early on, spends much of the time overcoming various obstacles (like having to find the identity of the killer or dealing with the barriers between the avenger and the killer, a process which can involve a great deal of excitement and violence of all sorts), and concludes the drama by carrying out the mission, a culmination which requires a personal action (usually face to face). The revenge, that is, must be carried out in an appropriate manner (just getting rid of the villain any old way or reporting the villain to the authorities is not satisfying). This formula, which is very old, popular, and, if done well, a smash at the box office, was a staple of Greek theatre (not just in Aeschylus), common in Elizabethan drama before Shakespeare, and characterizes an enormous number of Western movies and detective fictions, among other genres. So there's nothing new about that in this play.

The puzzle here is why Hamlet just does not go ahead and carry out the revenge. He vows to do so as soon as he hears the news of his father's murder in Act I and repeatedly urges himself on to the deed. But it takes him many weeks (perhaps months) before the revenge is carried out. What's the problem? The attempts to deal with this question have sparked a huge volume of criticism.

### **C. Why the Delay? A Survey of Answers**

Some critics attempt to resolve the difficulty by magically waving it away. They maintain, for example, that there is no delay, that Hamlet carries out the murder as soon as he can conveniently do so (e.g., Dover Wilson). Others (e.g., E. E. Stoll) argue that the delay is simply a convention, something we are not supposed to get hung up on, because if there's no delay, there's no play (obviously the carrying out of the revenge is going to be the final action of the story, so if that occurs very quickly, the play will last only a few minutes).

Whatever plausibility one might find in such interpretations is seriously undercut by many parts of the play. Hamlet himself is constantly calling attention to the delay; he worries about it all the time. The ghost has to remind him of it. In other words, the delay is not a concept of our imagination, something we impose on the play; it is, by contrast, an issue repeatedly raised by the play itself. So it cannot so simply be conjured out of existence.

In addition, although we do not know the exact time frame of the play, it does seem that a long time goes by between the opening act and the conclusion. There is always a lot happening; that's one of the most theatrically appealing aspects of the play (Dr Johnson call it Shakespeare's most "amusing" play, by which he meant, not that it was funny, but that it always held our attention with its speed and variety). At the same time we get unequivocal signals that time is passing: the envoys have gone to Norway and come back, Hamlet has sailed away and returned, we are told at the start that it is two months since the funeral of Hamlet Senior and in the play within the play that it is now twice two months since the funeral, and so on.

Given these details (and there are others), I would conclude that these first two approaches to the problem are unacceptable.

In this connection, we should note that the play has two other revengers: Fortinbras and Laertes, both of whom have to avenge insults to or murder done on their fathers. They act immediately, with effective resolution and courage. Given that they are about the same age as Hamlet, it would seem that we are invited to see in Hamlet's response to his father's murder something quite different from what a normal prince with a sense of honour might do. Hence the play itself puts a lot of pressure on us to recognize in Hamlet's conduct an unusual problem.

Others maintain that, as in many conventional revenge dramas, Hamlet has external obstacles to overcome in order to carry out the revenge. There is a delay, but only because Hamlet is not in a situation where he can easily carry it out. He has to wait for an opportune moment.

This position, too, is hard to sustain, given the facts of the play. Hamlet has ready access to Claudius, he even meets him in an unguarded moment (at prayer), and there is no suggestion from Hamlet himself that there are any such external difficulties. In his fretting about his delay, Hamlet never mentions the existence of such external obstacles. And, as if to underscore the point, when Laertes returns to avenge his father, he has no trouble in confronting Claudius instantly in a situation where he might easily have killed him. If Laertes can so quickly put Claudius's life in jeopardy, why cannot Hamlet do the same? So this line of inquiry does not seem all that helpful.

The vast majority of critics on this play have agreed with the analysis on this point, and have thus argued that, in the absence of any serious external obstacles, Hamlet's troubles must be internal, and the major debates about the play thus turn into a character analysis of the young prince. What is going on inside of him to make the carrying out of this revenge so difficult?

There are many suggestions concerning what this internal condition might be. And the possibilities range from the silly to the intriguing. I would like to review some of these, beginning with some fairly implausible suggestions and moving at the end to some serious possibilities.

Some have maintained that Hamlet is a coward and that his delay is a manifestation of his fear of getting hurt. This seems inherently unlikely. He's capable of very decisive action when necessary (as in the killing of Polonius, the confrontation with the ghost, or the duel scene). So I think we can safely lay that suggestion to rest. There are too many occasions when Hamlet reveals a spontaneous and active courage, even, in the eyes of his companions, a foolhardy valour.

Certain medically minded interpreters have suggested that Hamlet's problem is physical, perhaps an excess of adipose tissue around the heart (hence his reference to having trouble breathing) or that he is just mad. Such suggestions do nothing to resolve our desire to understand this character. If he is clinically abnormal, then so far as I am concerned he is of little interest to me, except as a clinical specimen. To paste a convenient abnormal label over Hamlet is to explain nothing, it is to beg the question which we are seeking to answer. If one of the chief attractions of the this play is the quality of Hamlet's intelligence, which comes through in many of his soliloquies and in his verbal dexterity and so on, then simply writing him off as a bit of a mental freak is inherently unsatisfactory. If we are tempted to see, as many are, that there is something strange or significant about Hamlet's emotional state, then we need to explore that further, rather than just writing him off as crazy. The task is to find some emotional coherence in his thoughts and actions, some illuminating insight into his behaviour. Casual medical terms which close off such an explorations are of no analytical use.

If we stray into the realm of off-the-wall suggestions about Hamlet, we might want to consider the idea that Hamlet is really a woman raised as a man. Her troubles stem from the fact that she is in love with Horatio. We probably wouldn't pay any attention to this interpretation if there was not a film based upon it, an early silent movie. In the concluding scene, as Horatio grasps the dying Hamlet in his arms, he inadvertently clutches her secondary sexual characteristics. At that point the written script reads something to the effect "Ah, Hamlet, I have discovered your tragic secret."

If you find that suggestion interesting you might want to investigate the suggestions that the key people in the play are Horatio's wife or girl friend Felicity ("If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,/ Absent thee from felicity a while" the dying Hamlet urges Horatio) or Hamlet's invisible Irish companion, Pat (to whom Hamlet is clearly speaking when he sees Claudius at prayer, "Now might I do it pat. . ."). And so on.

In my view the realm of serious possibilities begins with the claim that Hamlet has great trouble in carrying out this revenge because he is too good for this world, he is too sensitive, too poetical, too finely attuned to a difficulties of life, too philosophically speculative or too finely poetical. This line of criticism has often been offered by people who feel themselves rather too finely gifted to fit the rough and tumble of the modern world (like Coleridge, for example). A particularly famous example of this line of interpretation comes from Goethe:

Shakespeare meant . . . to represent the effects of great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it. . . . A lovely, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks

beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away. All duties are too holy for him; the present is too hard. Impossibilities have been required of him; not in themselves impossibilities, but such for him. He winds and turns, and torments himself; he advances and recoils; is ever put in mind, ever puts himself in mind; at last does all but lose his purpose from his thoughts; yet still without recovering his peace of mind.

This view has a good deal to commend it. After all, Hamlet is much given to moody poetical reflections on the meaning of life, he is a student (and therefore by definition too good for this world), and he seems to spend a great deal of time alone wandering about Elsinore talking to himself or reading books. He has a tendency to want to explore large universal generalizations about life, love, politics, and the nature of human beings. From his first appearance on stage, it is quite clear that he doesn't much like the political world of Elsinore; he is displaced from it. Again and again he talks about how he dislikes the dishonesty of the world, the hypocrisy of politics and sexuality and so on. So there is a case to be made that Hamlet is just too sensitive and idealistic for the corrupt double dealing of the court and that his delay stems from his distaste at descending to their level.

Against this view, of course, is the very clear evidence that Hamlet is quite capable of swift decisive action should the need arise. He kills Polonius without a qualm and proceeds to lecture his mother very roughly over the dead body. He can dispatch Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, without a scruple. He is very gifted at dissembling, at playing the Machiavelli-like figure. And he has no hesitation in taking Laertes on in a duel. In addition, there is a violent streak in Hamlet (especially where women are concerned). So on the basis of the evidence there is a good deal to suggest that the vision of Hamlet as a soul too good for this world might be problematic. However, that is one you might like to consider.

Allied to this view of Hamlet as too poetical is the idea that he is just too weak willed to make the decision to undertake the revenge. Again the evidence does not seem to bear out the contention that Hamlet is, by his very nature, incapable of making decisions. Once he sets his mind to the play within the play or tricking Rosencrantz and Guildenstern or undertaking the duel or facing the ghost he can act quickly and decisively.

Then, too, there is the ever popular notion that Hamlet has to delay because he's not sure whether or not the ghost is from heaven or hell. That is, he must confirm the validity of the ghost's information and his mission, and his delay is therefore a necessary part of the revenge plan. In assessing this idea you have to be prepared to sort out the complex issue of whether what Hamlet says on the point is sincere or whether it is just one more excuse for delay. For the fact is that Hamlet entertains absolutely no doubts about the ghost's honesty when he first encounters it, and the idea of testing it more or less pops into his head when he is wrestling with his own failure to carry out the deed. Moreover, even after he has confirmed the truth of the ghost with the play within the play he does not carry out the murder, although immediately after the play and the confirmation of the ghost's story he has a supreme opportunity to do so. In addition, of course, if the motive of checking out the ghost's credentials is the major motive for the delay, then how do we account for the anguish that Hamlet seems to go through in thinking about the delay? Why isn't that reason more in evidence?

This, in fact, is a crucial point and one that makes Hamlet so very interesting. Why is he himself so insistently guilty about not being able to go through with it? Any interpretation of the play which suggests either that there is no delay or that there is a perfectly justified reason for it comes crashing on one overwhelming fact of this play, which we have to confront again and again, especially in the soliloquies: Hamlet himself agonizes over his inability to carry out the deed and is constantly searching for reasons why he is behaving the way he is. He doesn't himself understand why he cannot carry out the revenge. That point, I would suggest, is one of the main reasons we are interested in the prince--he is in the grip of something that he cannot fully understand, no matter how much he rationalizes the matter.

And in this connection I really want to repeat a critical question that you are going to have to wrestle with in order to sort out where you stand with the prince. When Hamlet says something, does he really mean it or is he deliberately inventing another reason for the delay? Is, for example, his concern about the validity of the ghost a real concern or just a convenient rationalization for his strong emotional reluctance to carry out the deed? Similarly, is his excuse for not killing Claudius at prayer a convincing reason or just one more excuse? Such questions are crucial to an understanding of Hamlet's character, yet they are not easy to answer on the basis of the text itself. I mention this point here in order to stress that one has to be very careful before

accepting whatever Hamlet says as an up front truth--it may be an evasion or evidence that he very poorly understands himself and the world around him.

All of these suggestions (and I'm cutting a long story short) drive one to a tempting conclusion put forward most famously by Ernest Jones, the famous disciple of Freud. Jones argues that Hamlet has no doubts about the ghost, is perfectly capable of acting decisively, and yet delays and delays and agonizes over the delay. Why? If he has motive, opportunity, the ability to act decisively, and a strong desire to carry out the action, then why doesn't he? Jones's conclusion is that there's something about this *particular* task which makes it impossible for Hamlet to carry out. It's not that he is by nature irresolute, too poetical or philosophical, or suffers from medical problems or a weakness of will. It is, by contrast, that *this particular* assignment is impossible for him.

That leads Jones to posit the very famous and very persuasive suggestion that Hamlet cannot kill Claudius because of his relationship with his mother. He has (now wait for it) a classical Oedipus Complex: he is incapable of killing the man who sleeps with his mother because that would mean that he would have to admit to himself his own feelings about her, something which overwhelms him and disgusts him. Jones's argument in the book *Hamlet and Oedipus* (especially in the first half) is a very skillful piece of criticism, always in very close contact with the text, and it is justly hailed as the great masterpiece of Freudian criticism. Just to point out one salient fact: Jones indicates, quite correctly, that Hamlet can kill Claudius only after he knows that his mother is dead and that he is going to die. Hence, his deep sexual confusion is resolved; only then can he act. Up to that point, he constantly finds ways to evade facing up to the task he cannot perform, because to do so would be to confront feelings within himself that he cannot acknowledge (by killing Claudius he would make his mother available and be attacking the ideal nobility of his real father).

I'm not going to put forward a defense of the Jones's thesis, except to suggest that the initial logic of his argument seems quite persuasive: Hamlet does have a very particular inability to carry out *this* action and that this inability is not a constitutional incapacity for action but stems from some very particular feelings within Hamlet, feelings which he himself has trouble figuring out and which he often thinks about in explicitly sexual terms (whether we follow Jones in identifying these feelings with an Oedipus Complex is another matter), terms which insist upon a pattern of disgust with female sexuality.

So for me the question of Hamlet's delay boils itself down to trying to answer the following question: What is it about this situation that turns an intelligent, active, and often decisive person into some emotional paralytic? Where are we to locate the source of the difficulties Hamlet is constantly acknowledging?

In order to answer this question, we have to take into account some important facts of the play, that is, first of all, we have to acknowledge the particular evidence we have to work with. In this play, that is not always easy. But the test of any interpretation of the key question is going to depend upon its ability to coordinate in a plausible way what we are given. So at this point, let me review three of the more salient facts. However you interpret this play, you are going to have to take into account these issues.

Please note that I am not suggesting that these are the only important facts one has to account for. However, they are of central importance and, it seems to me, present the major challenges to any interpretation.

#### **D. The Facts of the Case**

##### **Hamlet's Language**

One of the most obvious features of *Hamlet* is that the hero is a compulsive talker, who processes experience and wrestles with his feelings and copes with other people primarily through language. In the context of that earlier lecture about *Richard II*, Hamlet has many of the characteristics of a chatterer, a person who uses words to protect himself from coming to grips with the reality of his situation and the need for action. Hamlet, among some critics, has acquired a reputation as something of a philosopher, a profound thinker. But how profound are Hamlet's inner speculations? He tackles big issues, to be sure, but where do his thoughts take him? Does the philosophical content of his speculations ever move very far beyond the platitudinous? Might it be the case that he is *merely* talking in order not to have to act (rather like Richard II)?

I raise this as a question because one's response to Hamlet's soliloquies (and he has more than any other Shakespearean character) will shape our understanding of him more than any other factor in the play.

Hamlet's use of language, in fact, is obviously a crucial key to his character. Having introduced a comparison with Richard II (and one could include Jaques from *As You Like It* in any list of Shakespearean chatterers), one needs to remain alert to the distinctions as well as the similarities. For Hamlet's language reveals that he is constantly wrestling with something inside, something which torments him, something at times he clearly would not like to think about but which he cannot dispel from his thoughts. This quality sets him apart from Richard and Jaques, both of whom use language very complacently to close themselves off from external complexities, to impose upon the world their own given sense of what it all means or of what really matters and what does not (and to drown out any competing understanding which might come to them from outside). Hamlet's language, in that sense, does not reassure him or calm him down: it is an expression of and a contribution to his suffering. That's the reason the emotional quality of his language commands so much more attention than does the emotional quality of anything Richard or Jaques say.

For Hamlet is not quite like these two in how his language registers. If, like them, Hamlet shows little inclination to listen to other people sensitively and to learn from their conversations with him and if there is a sense that he frequently uses language as a shield to protect himself from interacting with the world (as he clearly does with his often nonsensical patter), Hamlet is also at times trying to find some way of expressing what he feels and is constantly frustrated by his inability to formulate exactly what it is that is troubling him. In that sense, his habit, for example, of summing up issues with sweeping reductive generalizations about the world (and women in particular) is linked to serious inner turmoil and registers as, in some sense, a desperate way to hold in check the pressures of his inner contradictions (rather than as some fixed and firmly held opinion).

That point helps to explain the curious and significant pattern of Hamlet's soliloquies, which are marked by sudden changes of subject, self-urging to put something out of his mind accompanied by an inability to do so, attacks on himself for all his verbalizing, and a sense of despair that all this talk is getting him no closer to any sort of answer which will clarify the world sufficiently to enable him to act. It may also account for his habit of lashing out verbally (and sometimes physically) when the world presses against him too closely (and for the fact that such lashing out characteristically occurs in the face of those who love him most or who are most concerned about him, e.g., Gertrude and Ophelia).

In addition to these characteristic rhythms in Hamlet's language (especially in his soliloquies) there is the matter of the images he fixes upon to express his inner turmoil. From his very first soliloquy in 1.2, these images typically insist upon the wholesale corruption of the world. As often as not, they carry with them a sense of powerful disgust with sexuality, especially women's sexuality (a view which clearly issues from his feelings about his mother), a revulsion so powerful that it fills him with a desire for suicide in the face of the worthlessness a life which reduces all of us to an empty skull, dust, and a foul smell.

Allied to this feature, of course, is Hamlet's vocabulary, which characteristically features short colloquial words evocative of a mood of exhaustion, contempt, disgust—a range of feelings of extreme unpleasantness: "fardels," "grunt," "sweat," "nasty sty," "vicious mole," "rank and gross," "slave's offal," and so on. How we determine what such a language has to reveal to us about Hamlet's maturity, intelligence, emotional sensitivity (especially in relation to his situation) will play a major role in how we resolve some of the interpretative difficulties of the play.

However we explore the details of Hamlet's character and seek to find some ways of describing it, we need to account for these prominent features of his language, which are hard to reconcile with the idea of a settled, noble, philosophical frame of mind. And a central issue in our evaluation will almost certainly be trying to determine if the language indicates a morbid over-reaction to a set of harsh circumstances or is in some ways a worthy response which can be justified without an appeal to serious deficiencies in the prince's emotional make up.

## **The Politics of Machiavellianism**

Any assessment of the prince's character, however, has to take into account his setting, the royal court of Elsinore, simply because Hamlet thinks of himself very much in relation to the political life around him. We can easily acknowledge that Elsinore is a very political place, in a very Machiavellian sense. In this court, we are in a political realm based on duplicity, power, and fear, and the outcome of the political actions is serious: the security of the kingdom. Everyone is constantly eavesdropping on everyone else (behind the arras, outside a door, on a battlement above). This spirit is best exemplified in the person of Polonius, the most important and successful courtier, who is a master spy, subordinating all the concerns of life to a quest for knowledge and the power which knowledge brings.

Polonius's instinctive response to any problem is to spy out the solution. If that means running the risk of dishonoring his son or using his daughter as bait, that doesn't bother him. If one has to spread lies abroad in order to gain the knowledge necessary for power, then that is quite acceptable, as he tells Reynaldo:

See you now--  
Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth;  
And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,  
With windlasses and with assays of bias,  
By indirection find directions out. (2.1)

Polonius's operating principle is fear. If one doesn't attend to finding out what is going on, if one is not very careful, then trouble will come quickly. One needs to be constantly on guard, vigilant, and careful of any serious consequences of any action:

This must be known; which, being kept close, might move  
More grief to hide than hate to utter love. (2.1)

This ethic of Polonius is prepared to ride roughshod over any emotional problems. When Ophelia confesses her love for Hamlet and his for her, Polonius dismisses the matter as rubbish: all Hamlet's romantic declarations she must treat as simply tricks to get her into bed to satisfy his lust. Love, for Polonius, like everything else, can be understood in the lowest common denominator of human activity as a power struggle. Hence, Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet is potentially dangerous politically and must be stopped. He tells Ophelia she's to stay away from Hamlet, because he's not telling the truth. The implication is clear: in the power political world of Polonius, love has no place. That's why he can simply manipulate her into trying to engage Hamlet in conversation while he and Claudius listen in while concealed. The fact that at the end of that conversation Ophelia is crying in great distress he hardly notices--his daughter's emotional dismay is inconsequential; what really matters is the political implication of what he and Claudius have witnessed: "How now, Ophelia?/ You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said./ We heard it all" (3.1.178).

It's significant, I think, that in sorting out what must be done about Ophelia's confessions about Hamlet's relationship to her, his immediate response is a military metaphor:

Set your entreatments at a higher rate  
Than a command to parley. (1.2)

For Polonius all of life, including love, is a power struggle, and the operative principle is fear. Human beings are motivated only by self-interest; thus, Ophelia's notion that Hamlet may be in love with her is simply the immature response of a foolish adolescent, unaware of the brutal competitiveness of a world in which the basic rules of human interaction are what's in it for me and fear of what someone with power might do to you.

Similarly in his famous speech to his son, there is a remarkable absence of a certain kind of advice. Polonius's words have acquired for some reason the reputation of being good moral advice, but the most remarkable thing about the speech is the absence of any moral exhortation. What he says is good hard-headed practical advice for success in a rough and dangerous public world: avoid trouble, conceal feelings and intentions, and control one's environment through one's appearance. The most frequently quoted part of the speech one needs to consider very carefully:

This above all--to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man. (1.3.78)

Think about this for a while. It is not a sound piece of *moral* advice--and Polonius's conduct makes that clear throughout the play: in serving his own interests, in following his vision of being true to himself he is prepared to hurt anyone, even members of his own family. Polonius, I think, cares deeply about his family. That is not the issue here. It is the quality of the care, the characteristic manner in which he shapes his understanding of what are the problems in life and what must be done about them. That is what seems curiously narrow. The fact that he does not believe that dealing with people in this way is not being false to them tells us a great deal about Polonius and about the world in which he functions with such apparent success.

In exploring this issue, we need to acknowledge that Polonius does not appear to be interested in his own personal power. He sees himself as a loyal servant of the royal family and as a loving parent. And he is both of those. But in serving both his royal masters and his family, Polonius interprets the world as a dangerous place where one needs to have one's wits about one and walk carefully, without taking any unnecessary chances of giving anything away.

Many people are deceived by Polonius's external pose as something of a doddering old fool. After all, in many scenes, he plays the role of someone who is a bit silly. But we have to keep asking ourselves what's going on underneath. And there we can sense a shrewd and hard-headed political imagination for whom the all important issue of life is political survival in a complex and deceptive world. An essential part of that is a deceptively innocent external mask.

Polonius, we should note, is an important political figure, the executive arm of the king. And his position (and Claudius's endorsement of Polonius in words of high praise) tell us clearly that Polonius's tactics work in Elsinore; they bring success. Moreover, as I have mentioned, he is not an evil man. He has the best interests of his family and his monarch at heart and puts his talents to work on their behalf. He has no agenda to capture or wield more power than he has already. In a sense, he is a recognizably normal person, quite at home in the adult world of business and politics.

Claudius, too, is a very shrewd and successful political operator, who understands, like Polonius, that the political world requires deception and betrayal. He employs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet, agrees readily enough to Polonius's various spying suggestions, and finally is prepared to deceive Hamlet into going to his own death.

This Machiavellian quality in Polonius and Claudius makes them very effective political operators. When Polonius challenges Claudius to name one occasion on which he has been wrong, Claudius concedes that Polonius is unmatched in his ability to find out the truth of a situation. Claudius, we know (especially from his superb performance in 1.2, when we first meet him), is no fool, and this firm endorsement of Polonius should alert us to recognize that the frequently foolish pose is just that, a pose. We should note, too, that Claudius has the full support of the court. That is a mark that he is recognized as an effective, perhaps even a popular leader. No one in the play, except Hamlet, ever makes the suggestion that Claudius is not an effective monarch (and Shakespeare in other plays typically allows us to see growing discontent in quiet conversations between malcontents). In fact, during the course of the play we see his policies about the political problems with Norway work to the evident approval of those around him.

In this connection, it's important to pick up on the fact that the monarch in Elsinore has been elected by the council. So Claudius is king because he was chosen by the senior politicians in Elsinore. And, equally important, as he makes clear very early on, there has been no political opposition to the marriage with Gertrude. If he had wanted to, Shakespeare could obviously have provided clear evidence that people in general think that this remarriage was immoral. The fact that there is no such suggestion, that by and large everyone has approved of the remarriage is an important fact when we consider the extreme language with which the ghost and Hamlet describe it. For example, if the remarriage is truly incestuous, then there would have been hostility to it (we see that the clergy here are not above challenging the court). So the general harmony of the court, which we witness in the first scenes tells us that Claudius is perceived as an effective

and perhaps even a popular ruler and that, so far we can tell, the people in Elsinore see nothing wrong with the marriage.

One final point about the political world of Elsinore. It does not seem to be a place where women matter very much, where they have much of a say in anything. The movers and shakers in this world are all men, and where necessary they are prepared to use women, even their own family, in the power political game. The chief example of this, of course, is Ophelia, who spends much of the play bewildered about what is happening around her, as she tries to follow what her father, brother, and Hamlet tell her to do. Gertrude, too, initiates very little from any political power base. In Elsinore, Claudius and Polonius call the shots.

But Claudius does love Gertrude and respects her opinion. He clearly has all the power, but he often involves her in the conversations, asks her advice, and defers to her. Early in the play, the stand together as equals. Gertrude appears to have very little political imagination (she is not a power player and at times is clearly out of the loop), and we don't get any suggestion that she knows anything about the murder of her first husband. The fact that Claudius makes so much of her is one of those qualities that makes Claudius, in some ways, a more sympathetic character (much here obviously depends upon how they behave together, so that we have to witness a production to make an informed judgment).

And both women die. Ophelia's death is particularly significant, because she is clearly driven to it by events over which she, as a young woman, has no control. In this connection it might be worth asking some pointed questions about Ophelia as a victim of life in Elsinore and, in particular, of Hamlet himself. If we see her, as I think most people do, as an innocent young girl trying to sort out her feelings about people in a complex and difficult world where she is constantly told what to do and how to think by various men (Hamlet, Polonius, and Laertes), and if there is some substance to the love between her and Hamlet, there may very well be an explicit sexual edge to the frustration which drives her into madness. That seems certainly possible in the light of the sexual bullying (not too strong a term) which seems to be such a constant feature of the advice men around constantly direct at her, and the sexual innuendo in her lunatic songs lends support to the idea. Such a view gives some weight to Robert Speaight's remark that no part in Shakespeare has suffered more than Ophelia from the sentimental evasion of sexuality (a comment recorded in *Peter Brook: A Biography* by J. C. Trewin, London, Macdonald, 1971, p. 92).

We don't have to see Ophelia this way, of course, but if we give her behaviour that edge (something entirely consistent with the evidence of the text) her destruction acts as a powerful indictment of the corrupting effects of the male-dominated political realm of Elsinore, which simply has no room in it for love.

### **Appearance and Reality**

Given this nature of Elsinore, which is impossible to ignore, we come to a second important fact of the play, namely, that people in this world have to live two lives, the one they present to the world and the inner world of their own thoughts and feelings. For Elsinore is a world where the appearance of things does not always or often mesh with the inner reality. Claudius, for example, is on the outside a smooth, popular, and effective political operator; inside he is tormented by his own guilt and carries, as he puts it, the most serious sin of all, a brother's murder. Polonius appears to be something of a bumbling fool; inside he is a capable Machiavel always unerringly on the trail of new information. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are apparently Hamlet's university friends; but in reality they are spies in the service of Claudius, especially commissioned to ferret out the truth about Hamlet. And so forth.

This is a deceptive world. One can never be sure whether someone is spying or eavesdropping. Elsinore is full of nooks, arrases, upper galleries where someone may be lurking in secret. It's a place where you have to keep your wits about you if you want to survive. When someone approaches you with a smile on his face, you can never be sure whether he is a friend or a foe, whether what he is saying to you is what he really means or whether it is all just a temporary role he is playing in this dangerous and duplicitous game.

In this connection, I think one of the most important moments is the very first line of the play. In the first scene we see someone whom we don't know alone, wandering about in the dark, cold and lonely and scared in a foggy night, where one has difficulty seeing clearly. Suddenly a figure emerges out of the mist. The first response is defensive: "Who's there?" And figure hailed is equally suspicious: "Nay, answer me. Stand and

unfold yourself." And if you read the scene aloud, you notice in the short, choppy lines a nervous intensity, a jitteriness, which sets the mood for the world of Elsinore. In one way or another that question "Who's there?" shouted out into a fog which makes clear perception impossible haunts the play.

Who in this play is not acting a role? Well, those that do not seem to be, that is, Ophelia and Gertrude and perhaps Horatio, stand rather on the sidelines or get pushed around by the action. Ophelia, in particular, is a really pathetic victim of so many people in the play, because she is so innocent, so naive, so ill equipped to understand, let alone deal with, the world around her. In this world, as in so much of Shakespeare, innocence is never enough, and those who have only that to guide them in a complex political world, who are not able to develop a survival strategy of some kind, are going to suffer. Gertrude, too, appears much of the time painfully bewildered. Those two ladies are poorly equipped to deal with Elsinore, in part because they cannot hide their feelings in an effective public role.

One key element in the roles people play is the language they use to interact with others. In public, Claudius is smooth, polished, confident; in private or with Gertrude he is a troubled spirit; in public Polonius is frequently something of a verbal buffoon; in private he is matter of fact and shrewd. Hamlet plays all sorts of roles, shifting gears from one scene to the next, using language as a survival tool to keep the people he interacts with off guard, puzzled, on the defensive. His famous "antic disposition" is part of a world where you have to play a public role in order to guard your innermost thoughts and plans. He clearly uses his famous "wit" to erect a defensive barrier between himself and others and at times to lash out cruelly at them. That is the reason why, in reading *Hamlet*, we have to be very careful about immediately believing what people say to each other: they may not be telling the truth.

That may also be the reason why everyone enjoys the arrival of the actors so much. Hamlet is never happier in this play than when he is with the actors. He gets excited and, for the first time, displays a passionate and joyful interest in something going on around him. With the actors we do get our only strong sense of what a giving and amusing character Hamlet might be. And this has nothing to do with his plans for the play within the play (that comes later). No, the suggestion is clearly that he can in some ways deal with the actors differently from anyone else. With them, and this is very noticeable in the scene, Hamlet can relax and let his imagination, wit, and intelligence play without worrying about the consequences. And I would suggest that in a world like Elsinore, where almost everyone is playing various roles in a dangerous game, the professional actors are a huge relief because you know exactly where you stand with them. They do not conceal the fact that they are taking on roles; there is thus nothing duplicitous about them. Those who professionally pretend to be other people are, in a sense, the only ones in this play whose actions one can clearly sort out, because they are what they appear to be, with no inner agenda working against the role they play.

### **Hamlet's Relationship to Elsinore**

The third fact about this play which I would like to consider is particularly obvious: that in some fundamental way Hamlet feels alienated in the court of Elsinore. He physically and emotionally refuses to take part in the proceedings, and generally acknowledges to others that he is profoundly dissatisfied with the court, with Denmark, and even with life itself. This is made very clear to us before he learns anything about the ghost, the murder, and the need for revenge. The first soliloquy (in 1.2) makes the initial stance of Hamlet clear enough (while raising some important questions about the cause of this behaviour, given that he's much more upset about the remarriage of his mother than the murder of his father). The behaviour of Hamlet towards the normal business going on at Elsinore is a source of great puzzlement to his mother and to Claudius.

Now, a great deal of the interpretation we favour about this play is going to turn on how we deal with this displacement of Hamlet from the normal world around him. *Prima facie*, it strikes me that there are three immediately obvious possibilities. My description of these is going to be oversimple, but I think it will be enough to make the point and perhaps get your interpretative imaginations working.

### **E. Some Interpretative Possibilities**

Given these facts, there are a number of routes we might explore (and which have been explored) to seek to find some interpretative unity in this frequently ambiguous work. The following list is not meant to be exhaustive, but it does chart some of the main paths interpreters have followed:

### **Hamlet as a Noble Prince in a Corrupt and Evil World**

First, we can see Elsinore as an essentially corrupt place, an environment in which the nobler aspects of human life have been hopelessly compromised by the excessive attention to duplicity, double dealing, and Machiavellian politics, that, in a sense, Claudius and Polonius are clearly the villains of the place and wholly responsible for the unsatisfactory moral and emotional climate there; they are the source of the something rotten in the state of Denmark. If that is so, if, that is, we see Elsinore and the prevailing powers in it, Claudius and Polonius, as in some sense degenerate specimens of humanity, then Hamlet's rejection of that world becomes something with which we can sympathize. He is right to feel about that world the way he does; his inability to adjust to an evil environment is a sign of his noble nature. He is being emotionally hammered by a cruel and corrupt world, and he is trying to hang onto his integrity.

Such an approach would make much of Hamlet's apparently "philosophical" nature, his intellectual superiority which enables him to place the actions of Elsinore in a much wider and fairer context. And it would emphasize the degenerate nature of Claudius and Polonius. Given this quality, we readily enough understand why Hamlet cannot accept a world of deceit, compromise, and short-term power grabs. He has to displace himself from this world in order to survive, in order to protect himself from the general rottenness, while he tries to sort out how he is to act in a world which he finds so morally unacceptable.

Such an initial displacement would of course be powerfully reinforced by the news about the murder, since it would simply confirm for Hamlet the nature of the world he does not want to enter. So his anguish comes from the inner conflict of a spirit who wants to understand the ultimate significance of human actions, especially his own, before acting in a world empty, so far as he can see, of significant value. He has looked at life in Elsinore and has become disgusted by what he sees, and we can sympathize with that because Elsinore is, thanks to the actions of particular people, an evil place.

This stance, one might maintain, is the source of Hamlet's cruelty (and he can be very cruel, especially to Ophelia). Once he suspects that she is complicit in the corruption around her, he lashes out. Whatever hopes he might have entertained about there being an alternative to the world he sees around him have been disappointed; she is part of the problem and must be pushed away. Similarly Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in his view, betray his friendship and thus deserve to be dealt with harshly. His rough treatment of his mother, too, may well stem from a sense that she has collaborated in the murder of his father (he virtually accuses her of the deed, although it seems clear to us from her reply that that is the first she has heard of that matter), and her remarriage is a constant reminder of the emptiness of promises and honest relationships in the world of the court.

In this connection, it's worth remarking that Hamlet never finally decides to kill Claudius, formulating a plan and carrying it out. Whatever it is that is holding him back from acting decisively in the political world retains its hold over him until the very end when he learns that his mother is dead and that he has only a few minutes to live. Then he kills, just as he killed Polonius, with a spontaneous speed that does not pause to ground itself in reason. What this establishes about the moral quality of the Prince's character, I'm not sure, but it is a significant fact of the play.

### **Hamlet as a Death-Infected Source of the Rottenness in Elsinore**

A second possibility concerning Hamlet's estrangement from the goings on in Elsinore is that the source of the problem is not the corruption in Elsinore but some deep inadequacy in Hamlet himself. The world of Elsinore is indeed full of compromises and evasions and political intrigue. But it is a recognizably normal adult world, and it does possess some important worth in the love of Gertrude and Claudius, in the respect and popularity of Claudius, in his political effectiveness, and perhaps in the loyalty of Polonius to the King and in his concern for his own family (even if we find that concern often overly pragmatic and emotionally limiting). Hamlet's displacement from that world is thus, not so much an indication of his noble, sympathetic

character, as a sign of his emotional or intellectual inadequacy. He is, more than anyone else, the source of something rotten in the state of Denmark.

In exploring this possibility we might like to consider, for example, that Hamlet is a multiple killer, who takes seven lives for one. He kills without any compunction, a response that surprises even Horatio. He has what one critic (Wilson Knight) has called a "death infected" imagination, always dwelling on the futility, aridity, and pointlessness of life. Far from having an uplifting philosophical or poetical nature, he is morbidly obsessed with the fact that he can find no adequate reason for living in the he world. He is also, in a very real sense, the biggest liar in the play. For all his talk of the deceptive world of Elsinore and the tactics of Polonius, Hamlet himself is always acting, deceiving, lying, shielding himself from people and using people to promote his own ends. And most significant of all, he has a very warped sense of female sexuality, talking of it always in gross terms which indicate an enormous disgust. Hamlet's actions are destructive of others and ultimately self-destructive. For example, in any comparison between Claudius and Hamlet as moral creatures, it would not be hard to make the case that Claudius is clearly the superior of the two, with a much more intelligent sense of personal responsibility and a searing sense of his own sinfulness.

This line of interpretation would encourage us to see in Hamlet's cruelty to Ophelia, to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and to Gertrude the expression of a sensibility corrupted by its own inadequate feelings. His disgust for female sexuality, for example, would stem from a basic immaturity rather than from a sense of betrayal. Hamlet cannot accept that his mother is a creature with an active sexual life. And he cannot accept that because he has come to see sexuality as something depraved, animal like, and disgusting. The response to such feelings is to lash out at her verbally and perhaps even physically.

It's particularly interesting that the only other person to talk with such disgust about sexuality is the ghost. And if we are interested in the origins of Hamlet's emotionally insecure nature, that scene with his father is of pivotal importance. We know that Hamlet idealizes his father excessively (constantly comparing him to a god), and in the similarity of their sentiments on some things and even in their manner of frequently speaking in triplets ("Words, words, words," "Remember me, remember me, remember me," and so on), there seems to be a strong link between the two, as if to underscore the idea that for the deficiencies of Hamlet's character, his father bears a major responsibility.

Those who favour this sense of a significantly corrupting quality in Hamlet's character and who wish to link it to his parentage often cite as the "theme" of the play a particularly interesting passage which comes just before the appearance of the ghost:

So oft it canes in particular men  
That, for some vicious mole of nature in them,  
As in their birth,-- they are not guilty,  
Since nature wherein cannot choose his origin.--  
By the o'er growth of some complexion,  
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,  
Or by some habit that too much o'er leavens  
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 e'il  
Doth all the noble substance often dout  
To his own scandal.

*Enter Ghost (1.4)*

Hamlet is here, as usual, making a generalization about human nature or about one particular character type. The fact that he makes this speech just before the encounter with his father would seem to underline the fact that there might be a vicious mole of nature in the character of Hamlet Senior or Hamlet junior or both (this

device of making the speech immediately before the entry of a character carry a strong ironic implication about that character is very common in Shakespeare)..

I should mention here that one very important decision one has to make in one's imaginative interpretation of these two possibilities is Hamlet's age. For that is going to determine to a large extent whether we see his reaction to Elsinore as something with which we can readily sympathize or as something fundamentally immature or emotionally inappropriate. Now, we are told Hamlet's precise age by the gravedigger, of course, but that piece of specific information is often overlooked in the interests of a particular interpretation. After all, if Hamlet is, say, eighteen years old, then his disgust with the political world, with its hypocrisy and double dealing, with his mother's sexuality and apparent betrayal of his father, is much easier to accept as a natural reaction by an intelligent and sensitive personality. If, on the other hand, he is in his mid-thirties then this response might seem an overreaction, something about which we would expect someone at that stage of life to have reached a more mature understanding. He might still find it very distasteful, but it would not paralyze his emotional faculties in quite the same way as in an adolescent, unless there were something wrong.

### **The Real Villain: The Condition of the World**

A third possibility to account for Hamlet's odd relationship with the court at Elsinore (there are others), and the one I tend to favour, is that this is a particularly bleak play in which all the characters, in one way or another, fail, because in the world of Elsinore there is no possibility for a happy fulfilled life; the conditions of life are loaded against the participants and, in a sense, they are all victims of a world which will just not admit of the possibilities for the good life in any creative and meaningful sense.

I find, for example, that in the world of Elsinore my sympathies are constantly aroused and then canceled out in various ways. I admire and respect Claudius at first, I respond with admiration to his evident love and affectionate and courteous treatment of Gertrude, but I recognize that he is an evil man, guilty of a horrible crime, and then I see him wrestling with an enormous guilt, which is a factor only because he is a deeply religious person who believes in his own damnation and will not take an easy way out. This is not a simple villain, but a complex human being locked into a situation where there is simply nothing he can do.

Hamlet, similarly, constantly arouses conflicting responses. One of the great attractions of this play is the protean quality of the Prince's character. His mind is always interesting, and his suffering is very genuine. Like Claudius he is wrestling with the world, and he is not being very successful. He does not see any way out of his distress, and when he reflects on the final meaning of everything, he can reach no joyful conclusion. All of this makes Hamlet an immensely interesting and sympathetic character. On the other hand, he is so often brutal, in language and deed, especially to those who love him, he is so deceitful and vacillating, that again and again I find myself questioning his moral sensitivity.

Gertrude also is in a similar situation. She genuinely loves Hamlet and Claudius. But the two men in her life are on a downward spiral and so is she. Life is too much for her. What she seems to want is something very basic: a happy family. But life is denying her that, no matter how she tries.

In this play, it doesn't matter how people try to deal with life: they all fail. Life is too much for them. Whether they embrace the conditions of Elsinore, like Polonius, and seek to operate by the Machiavellian principles of the political world, or seek for love, like Ophelia or Gertrude, or try to find some intellectual understanding of things, like Hamlet, life defeats all of them. They all die in the mass killing at the end. The two main survivors, Horatio and Fortinbras, are interesting exceptions. The first is essentially a spectator of life, a student, perhaps even a Montaigne like figure, a friend of Hamlet but unable to offer any useful insights into what might be done and someone who initiates nothing. The other is a mindless romantic militarist, who defines his life in terms of pointless conquests in the name of glory. Life does not seem to trouble him because he comes across as an unreflecting man who asks nothing of life except that it provides him with some barren ground which he and his troops can fight over in the name of military glory.

Who is happy in this play? Who has life figured out? I can see only one character leading a fully realized happy life, and that is the gravedigger. He spends his life surrounded by death, by the disintegrating remains of his friends and companions. And what does he do? He sings, he jokes, he turns what he has into a joyous

acceptance of the world. He is the only person in the play with a creative sense of humour, using language and wit, not to protect himself from encounters with life but to transform the horror of his surrounding into an affirming human experience. It's important to note that his humour is quite different from Hamlet's. The latter is essentially a rhetorical defense, often bitter and caustic, an expression of an unwillingness to engage the world. The gravedigger's humour, by contrast, is affirming and transforming, something playful, healthy, and creative. I don't think it's an accident that the gravedigger is the only person whose humour is clearly superior to Hamlet's. But he is only a gravedigger, and his spirit is entirely absent from the court.

When Fortinbras takes over Elsinore at the end of the play, what has been resolved? What sense of moral order does he bring with him? None whatsoever. This is a world which does not admit complex, peaceful, and satisfying visions of the good life. It answers only to the realities of military power. And those who try to demand more from life, as Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, and Polonius do, end up destroying each other and becoming victims in their turn.

I sense that Fortinbras's triumphant entry at the end is a reassertion of the world of Hamlet Senior, who was, we know, also a warrior who devoted his life to military glories. My own sense of the ghost is that Hamlet Senior was something of a nasty piece of work--an egocentric, hard, and unforgiving misogynist--successful in the very narrow terms of this armour-plated world, which has little room in it for love, understanding, forgiveness, or anything but those pointless power exercises which increased his own glory. Once I have seen Hamlet Senior and heard him talk, I have immense sympathy for Gertrude and no difficulty at all in understanding how she could really love a man like Claudius. It also makes very suspect the extraordinarily idealized vision of the dead king which Hamlet carries around. The fact that Hamlet Senior is consistently motivated more by a desire to hurt Gertrude for loving another man than to avenge his own murder simply confirms in my mind the overwhelmingly hard egocentricity and misogyny of the famous king.

It may well be that Hamlet's distress stems, in large part, from a desire to see his father in an idealized light when part of him knows well enough that that's a fiction. As an obedient son, he wants to carry out the old warrior's commands; he is desperate to follow his father's wishes. But that requires him to see his mother as the guilty party, and part of him surely knows that the moral balance of his parents' marriage was not that simple. That's why he just will not listen to his mother. He will lecture her, but he doesn't give her much of a chance to reply. If he starts to listen to her, he is going to have to rethink entirely his relationship with his father.

The one moment, in my view a decisively significant one, when Gertrude almost gets a chance to answer Hamlet's suspicions comes in 3.4, her bedroom, when his aggressive verbal attack on her drives her to shout "No more." I sense here that there's only one place for this conversation to go, that is, Gertrude will reply to Hamlet's charges with some important confessions about her past life, some truths about herself and Hamlet's father. This does not happen, of course, because the ghost enters at ends that part of the conversation.

There are two things about this entry of the ghost of Hamlet Senior I find intriguing (apart from the timing of his entrance). The first is that Gertrude cannot see him. How are we to interpret this point? My assumption is that the Ghost has some control over who sees him and who doesn't, and for some reason he does not want to confront his wife in their old bedroom. The second point is the stage direction, "in his nightgown." The authority of this stage direction is disputable, but I find it a fertile suggestion. He has abandoned his armour, the symbol of his warrior status, and is now dressed for bed. But he is not going to face his wife, let her see him and exchange words with her. Perhaps this is a place where he knows his authority is suspect, where he has failed. And he certainly does not want some revelation of his relationship with Gertrude to be given to his son Hamlet, the agent (let us remember) of his revenge. It's important, at this point, to recall that the Ghost also wants revenge against Gertrude. He may tell Hamlet not to harm his mother, but he also makes it clear that, as a result of the revenge against Claudius, Gertrude will have to sleep alone or, to use the Ghost's own language, that the only "prick in her bed" will be her conscience.

Why then has he come? The reason is clear. He wants to stop the conversation between Hamlet and Gertrude and get Hamlet back on the focused track of revenge. And his intervention is effective. Gertrude loses her growing emotional intensity (a quality which might well have led her, as I say, to answer Hamlet with some telling indication of her past life), and for most of the rest of the scene lets Hamlet do the talking.

I often wonder what might have happened (a fruitless but intriguing exercise) if Hamlet and Gertrude had been allowed to have a *real* conversation where Gertrude really confronted her son with the truth of her feelings about Hamlet Senior and Claudius, where she had at least once tried to make him see her side of the story and where Hamlet actually listened carefully. The fact that the Ghost makes sure that doesn't happen suggests to me that the results would not have been particularly flattering to him and might have acquainted Hamlet with some facts of life which would have made the revenge impossible.

My own view is that the ghost of Hamlet Senior and what that symbolizes are, more than anything else, responsible for the conditions in Elsinore and for the climate which makes everyone in this play a victim. Claudius and Gertrude tried to create a different form of life, Hamlet tries to sort out just where one might find a different form of life, but the ghost is ultimately too much for them. Hamlet Senior, together with his reincarnation in Fortinbras, is the spirit of the world, and Hamlet's suspicions were right: the Ghost comes from the Devil, who is responsible for the world of Elsinore against which no one can struggle successfully.

I'm not suggesting that this particular reading of the play is especially privileged over any other. As I have said repeatedly, this is a very complex and ambiguous work which admits of many possibilities. But I like this third main possibility because it answers to my immediate response to the play, that combination of sympathy and distaste which every main character in it elicits from me, the sense that they are all in the grip of something which they cannot fully understand or fight successfully against. That interpretation makes this play a particularly bitter and despairing vision of life, without the potential affirmations of traditional comedy or tragedy. But for me it makes the best sense of the puzzling ambiguities at the heart of our most elusive literary work.

### **One Postscript: A Caveat**

The view sketched out above sees the Ghost as a (perhaps *the*) key to understanding a great deal of what matters in this play. In dealing with this character, one has to be careful about appeals to context, explaining away the complexities by references to James I's interest in the supernatural or to what people in Shakespeare's time believed, and so on. Such appeals can be used to prove almost anything about the Ghost, as William Empson reminds us:

The official Protestant position was that all apparent Ghosts are devils trying to instigate sin; also that Purgatory does not exist, so that this Ghost in saying it has come from Purgatory must be lying. . . . From the point of view of James I, as I understand, any usurper once legally crowned had the Divine Right, and only a devil could supernaturally encourage murder of him. ("Hamlet" in *Essays on Shakespeare*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 111)]

This may be true enough, but we have no idea whether Shakespeare subscribed to such a view or whether his audience were all orthodox. Nowadays, of course, we have a different "official" view of witches, ghosts, and devils, but that doesn't stop artists from using them very successfully in fiction or the audience from entering fully into the world of that fiction. The challenge in *Hamlet* (as in all of the plays) is to let one's understanding of the character arise from the details of the text, not to make up one's mind and then impose that view upon the text with some contextual reinforcement. What matters is not the Jacobean view of the supernatural but our response to *this* Ghost as a dramatic character.