SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

# Hamlet's Two Fathers

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MY PURPOSE HERE is to revisit the psychoanalytical explanation proposed by Sigmund Freud, and elaborated by Freud's disciple, Ernest Jones, in his *Hamlet and Oedipus*, for Hamlet's famous delay in revenging the death of his royal father by killing Claudius. That thesis, briefly, is that Hamlet is in the grip of an oedipal crisis as a result of the emotional shock he has suffered from the sudden death of his father and his mother's hasty marriage to Hamlet's uncle, Claudius. In ways that Hamlet cannot himself perceive, because the hidden truth about himself is too terrible to acknowledge consciously, Hamlet yearns to possess his own mother and is jealous of his uncle-rival. But how can he punish Claudius for the thing that he, Hamlet, secretly and unconsciously desires for himself? The result is a paralysis of the will. Hamlet is capable enough of forthright action on other fronts, and indeed slays or is responsible for the deaths of a number of people in the play, notably Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Laertes, and can be said to contribute at least partly to the deaths of Ophelia and Gertrude. Only the prospect of slaying Claudius prompts him to stall and to berate himself as a 'rogue and peasant slave', 'an ass', 'a coward', who, though

> Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
> Must like a whore unpack my heart with words

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> And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,
> A scullion! (2.2.585–8)[1]

We have Hamlet's own words for an admitted failure to act as circumstances require. This view of the play was much popularised by Laurence Olivier's 1948 film, which begins with the camera panning past the window of Gertrude's bedchamber while a sepulchral voice, that of Olivier himself, informs us that 'This is a story about a man who could not make up his mind.'[2]

I hope to argue that, whereas the Freud–Jones thesis is deeply flawed in its analytical explanation of the cause of delay, the oedipal and pre-

[1] Quotations in this essay are from David Bevington (ed.), *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (New York, 2003, 2008).

[2] Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus: A Classic Study in the Psychoanalysis of Literature* (first pub. 1949; Garden City, New York, 1954), chap. III, 'The Psycho-Analytical Solution', pp. 51–79. Jones expands on a hypothesis suggested by Freud in a footnote to his '*Die Traumdeuting*' (*The Interpretation of Dreams*), published in November 1899 but dated 1900, S. 183. See Peter Gay, *The Freud Reader* (New York, 1989), pp. 129–72, and Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York, 1988), pp. 104–17. Freud read the manuscript of Jones's essay when the two were together at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1909; see Nathan G. Hale, Jr., *Freud and the Americans: The Beginnings of Psychoanalysis in the United States, 1876–1917* (New York and Oxford, 1995), p. 204. See also Gilbert Murray's classic essay on 'Hamlet and Orestes' in *The Classical Traditions in Poetry* (Cambridge, MA, 1927); Frederic Wertham, 'The Matricidal Impulse: Critique of Freud's Interpretation of *Hamlet*', *Journal of Criminal Psychopathology*, 2 (1941), 455; and Leonard Shengold, *'The Boy Will Come to Nothing!' Freud's Ego Ideal and Freud as Ego Ideal* (New Haven, 1993), p. 32, on Freud's view of 'the displacement from father-murder to brother-murder' in *Hamlet*. Shengold, p. 33, n. 7, calls attention to the Scylla and Charybdis episode in James Joyce's *Ulysses* in which Stephen Daedalus sees *Hamlet* as representing Shakespeare's reaction to having been cuckolded by his brothers Edmund and Richard, with both King Hamlet and young Hamlet as Shakespeare's own composite self-portrait. Cf. Joyce's portrayal of himself as both Bloom and Stephen in *Ulysses*. Peter Gay, 'Freud and the Man from Stratford', *Reading Freud* (New Haven, 1990), pp. 5–53, has some astute things to say about what Shakespeare, and *Hamlet* particularly, meant to Freud, in the English original as well as in Schlegel's German translation. Freud's interest in the authorship question in his late years was stimulated by his admiration for J. Thomas Looney's *Shakespeare Identified* (London, 1920–1; rpt. Port Washington, NY, 1975), a work that in Freud's view seemed to bring to light heretofore unperceived truths about Shakespeare much as Freud saw himself as the discoverer of the psychic unconscious. Looney's chapters on *Hamlet* struck Freud as rich in psychological penetration and authorial self-delineation. On Olivier's 1948 film, see Norman Holland, *Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare* (New York, 1964, 1966), p. 166 and Olivier's Foreword to his '*Hamlet*': *The Film and the Play*, ed. Alan Dent (London, 1948). Jaques Lacan's analysis differs from that of Freud and Jones, but still the argument is posited on the assumption that Hamlet cannot, for psychological reasons, raise his arm against Claudius; see 'Desire and the interpretation of desire in *Hamlet*', translated by James Hulbert, with French text edited by Jacques-Alain Miller from transcripts of Lacan's seminar, in Shoshana Felman (ed.), *Literature and Psychoanalysis, The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, Yale French Studies, 55–6 (1977), 11–52.

oedipal nature of Hamlet's dilemma is indeed a key to understanding. A psychological reading can validate the larger claim of Freudian analysis, that the play of *Hamlet* offers a subtext for which a psychological reading offers a text, bringing to the surface the dilemmas and challenges of emotional conflict that are latent in the original but not immediately apparent for lack of an analytical vocabulary and method, and because the nature of the dilemma is concealed from the protagonist himself. Janet Adelman's essay on '*Hamlet* and the Confrontation with the Maternal Body', to which this present essay is particularly indebted, offers a powerful model of just such an investigation; other critics who seem to me especially useful include Avi Erlich, K. R. Eissler, Norman Holland, C. L. Barber and Richard Wheeler, René Girard, and Joel Fineman.[3] The failure of the Freud–Jones analysis to come up with a satisfying explanation for Hamlet's delay should not turn us away from other attempts to make use of the same method.

The Freud–Jones analysis runs into several problems. For one thing, people do often punish other people for desires they cannot admit in themselves. And in fact Hamlet does attempt to kill Claudius. When Hamlet kills Polonius hidden behind the 'arras' or tapestry hangings in the Queen's private chambers, he does so with every good reason to think that he is killing his uncle. (Perhaps not seeing his victim on this occasion helps.) Hamlet has just passed up an opportunity to kill Claudius at prayer, unguarded and presumably unarmed. Ostensibly, at least, this delay on Hamlet's part is motivated not by scruples of conscience or morality.[4] Hamlet says nothing about how unfair or ungentlemanly it

[3] Janet Adelman, 'Man and wife in one flesh: *Hamlet* and the confrontation with the maternal body', *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, 'Hamlet' to 'The Tempest'* (New York and London, 1992); Avi Erlich, 'Psychoanalysis as a critical method for *Hamlet*' and 'Freud's Misleading Hunch about *Hamlet*', *Hamlet's Absent Father* (Princeton, 1977), pp. 3–18 and 19–42; K. R. Eissler, *Discourse on Hamlet and 'Hamlet'* (New York, 1971), pp. 7 ff.; Norman Holland, *Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare*; C. L. Barber and Richard P. Wheeler, *The Whole Journey: Shakespeare's Power of Development* (Berkeley, 1986); Richard P. Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies: Turn and Counter-Turn* (Berkeley, 1981), pp. 161, 190–200; René Girard, 'Hamlet's dull revenge', *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, ed. Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore, 1986), pp. 280–302; and Joel Fineman, 'Fratricide and cuckoldry: Shakespeare's doubles', in Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (eds.), *Representing Shakespeare* (Baltimore, 1980). See also below, n. 4.

[4] An ambivalent reading is of course possible, and is argued for by Girard, 'Hamlet's Dull Revenge', p. 297: 'When Hamlet does not seize the opportunity to kill Claudius during his prayer, it could be a failure of the will or a supreme calculation; it could be instinctive humaneness or a refinement of cruelty.' My point is that the text is far more plain on the side of a calculated desire for a punitive revenge.

would be for him to attack a defenceless opponent, no matter how loathsome; to the contrary, he insists to himself (and to us as audience) that he spares Claudius's life at this moment because he does not wish to send Claudius's soul to heaven. To do so, he says, would be 'hire and salary, not revenge' (3.3.79). Claudius took Hamlet's father 'grossly, full of bread, | With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May' (80–1). This confirms what the Ghost has told Hamlet about his fate in the afterlife: that he is

> Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
> And for the day confined to fast in fires,
> Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
> Are burnt and purged away. (1.5.11–14)

Having died 'Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled' (78)—that is, not having received the sacrament of Extreme Unction and with it the remission for the ordinary but 'deadly' sins of pride, covetousness, gluttony, etc., to which all mortals are prone in their daily lives—Hamlet senior must now, for a time, inhabit a realm of 'sulfurous and tormenting flames' (3). Hamlet worries that if he were to kill Claudius now he would send his soul to heaven and his revenge would have failed dismally. The audience or reader knows that Claudius's prayer is not working, and that his soul is in torment, so that Hamlet is misled by the outward appearance of pious devotion, but that does not gainsay the logic of Hamlet's determination to seek a suitable revenge. He will instead kill Claudius

> When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
> Or in th'incestuous pleasure of his bed,
> At gaming, a-swearing, or about some act
> That has no relish of salvation in't—
> Then trip him, so that his heels may kick at heaven,
> And that his soul may be as damned and black
> As hell, whereto he goes. (3.3.89–95)

Nor need Hamlet wait long. Summoned to his mother's chambers, he goes there at once, hears a man's voice behind the arras, and stabs him. Who else but Claudius would be in the Queen's private chambers? Hamlet strikes the wrong man, but it is not for lack of resolute action intended against Claudius.

I will come back to the issue of delay and to the complex matter of sorting Hamlet's decision-maker's process of when he should act and when he should pause, only noting here that the issue is inherently puzzling and does not depend on an emotional incapacity to make a decisive

move.[5] To be sure, Hamlet flails himself for procrastination, so that we cannot dismiss this problem, but we should remember that the thesis of morbid or excessive delay on Hamlet's part is an early Romantic notion, having been put forward even before Goethe and then in England by Coleridge, and that it says at least as much about the Romantic age and about those writers as it does about Shakespeare's play.[6] Coleridge especially was victimised by his own drug addiction and melancholic indolence; he is talking partly about himself when he speaks of Hamlet as one who suffers from 'an overbalance in the contemplative faculty' and who

[5] Maynard Mack observantly points to 'the play's emphasis on human weakness, the instability of human purpose, the subjection of humanity to fortune—all that we might call the aspect of failure in man'. Given these intractable problems surrounding the nature of action in an imperfect world, 'The ghost's injunction to act becomes so inextricably bound up for Hamlet with the character of the world in which the action must be taken—its mysteriousness, its baffling appearances, its deep consciousness of infection, frailty, and loss—that he cannot come to terms with either without coming to terms with both' ('The world of *Hamlet*', *The Yale Review*, 41, 1952, 502–23). Meredith Skura similarly argues of Hamlet's world that 'it is no wonder he is sick of action, sick of sexuality, sick of everything that means becoming an adult in such a world . . . there are impurities enough in what we see of the world and of Hamlet's current motives without having to invoke unconscious motives from a past world' (*The Literary Uses of the Psychoanalytic Process* (New Haven, 1981), pp. 42–3). The idea goes back at least to Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*: 'Not reflection, no—true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action, both in Hamlet and in the Dionysian man' (originally pub. in 1872; in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1968), pp. 59–60). The matter is ably discussed by John Russell in his *Hamlet and Narcissus* (Newark, London and Toronto, 1995), pp. 39–41. Roy Walker, *The Time is Out of Joint: A Study of 'Hamlet'* (London, 1948), similarly argues that 'great evils threaten the little world of Elsinore', in which context we are to understand that Hamlet 'did *not delay*' (pp. 8, 152).

[6] Goethe says of Hamlet: 'A beautiful, pure, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes the hero, sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off; every duty is holy to him—this is too hard' (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 1778, translated by Thomas Carlyle, quoted in Claude C. H. Williamson, compiler, *Readings on the Character of Hamlet, 1661–1947* (London, 1950), p. 24. See also A. C. Bradley in *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1904, 2nd edn., 1924), p. 109). On the history of the 'delay' thesis even before Goethe, see Brian Vickers, 'The emergence of character criticism, 1774–1800', *Shakespeare Survey 34* (1981): 11–21, and Vickers, *Returning to Shakespeare* (London, 1989), pp. 197–211. Coleridge, like Goethe and Schlegel, regards Hamlet as 'thought-sick', being possessed of 'an overbalance of the contemplative faculty' carried to 'morbid excess' and 'a great, an almost enormous, intellectual activity, and a proportionate aversion to real action consequent upon it' (*Notes and Lectures upon Shakespeare*, 1808, quoted in Williamson, *Readings*, pp. 31–2; see also Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 103). Cf. A. W. Schlegel, *Dramatic Art and Literature*, 1810: with Hamlet 'the poet loses himself in labyrinths of thought, in which neither end for beginning is discoverable' (quoted in Williamson, *Readings*, pp. 38–9). See also Morris Weitz, *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Chicago, 1964), pp. 4–5. Weitz's own view is that 'Shakespeare contrasts in *Hamlet* a grief that seeks consolation with a grief that remains inconsolable and thereby results either in dullness and loss of memory (the sin of sloth) or in hasty anger and rashness (the sin of ire)', p. 84.

'vacillates from sensibility and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve'. Coleridge sees this aspect of Hamlet in himself; we all tend to do the same, since Hamlet is so compellingly drawn and so adept at universalising his philosophical ideas. At the same time, Coleridge downplays aspects of Hamlet's character that do not suit Coleridge's own temperament.

The characters in Shakespeare's play also read Hamlet through their own eyes. To Polonius, the diagnosis of Hamlet's affliction is easy: he suffers from the same sort of love melancholy that Polonius himself knew as a callow youth. 'And truly in my youth I suffered much extremity for love, very near this', he assures us (2.2.189–91). Polonius is utterly confident of his own diagnostic skills: 'If circumstances lead me, I will find | Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed | Within the center', he promises Claudius (157–9). Ophelia obediently shares her father's view, all the more so since it casts her in the role of the desired yet unattainable young beauty of the Petrarchan sonnet tradition, for lack of whom Hamlet has fallen into his malaise:

> I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
> That sucked the honey of his music vows,
> Now see that noble and most sovereign reason
> Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh,
> That unmatched form and feature of blown youth
> Blasted with ecstasy. (3.1.158–63)

To Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet is suffering from frustrated political ambition. How could they think otherwise? Gertrude knows only too well what the problem is from her perspective: 'I doubt it is no other but the main', she says to her new husband, 'His father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage' (2.2.56–7). She is of course partly right; so are they all.

Claudius probably is closest to the truth, since he alone knows what it is that he has done and why Hamlet is intent on revenge; Claudius alone perceives that Hamlet is not mad. That they are all partly right and yet misled by partiality should warn us that analysis of Hamlet's character is apt to be an unwitting exercise in self-revelation. Hamlet himself is contemptuous of simplistic attempts at diagnosis. 'Why, look you now', he expostulates to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, 'how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery' (3.2.363–5). If they cannot even play upon the recorder that he has just handed them, how can they hope to sound Hamlet 'from my lowest note to the top of my

compass'? ''Sblood', he exclaims, 'do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?' (365–9). Part of Hamlet's appeal, indeed, is that he cherishes a view that humans are infinitely complex and unique. We all share that sense that no one really understands us. Hamlet is our model.

Given these formidable difficulties of wondering what motivates Hamlet, my suggestion is that we search in the area of psychological fantasy—not just Hamlet's fantasy, but also that of the play and of the playwright. Shakespeare has reconfigured the story he found in his chief sources, the *Historica Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus (1180–1208) and the French redaction by François de Belleforest (*Histoires Tragiques*, 1576) to a remarkable degree, and nowhere more so than in the portrayal of Hamlet in relation to his father and his uncle: the two sexual partners of Hamlet's mother, Gertrude. Shakespeare supplies his protagonist with the image of two fathers, one a true father and the other a stepfather, one revered and virtually disembodied, the other opportunistic and incestuously carnal. To view these two men, one now dead and the other all too manifest in 'this too too solid [or sullied, or sallied] flesh' (1.2.129), as antithetical projections of Hamlet's imaginings about male parentage is to explore Hamlet's reasons not for delaying, but for deciding how he should go about fulfilling his father's command in a world where action is so deeply problematic—a world that, in his view, is 'an unweeded garden | That grows to seed'; 'Things rank and gross in nature | Possess it merely' (135–7).[7] That perception, once Hamlet has sorted out carefully

[7] On the *Historica Danica*, see William F. Hansen, *Saxo Grammaticus and the Life of Hamlet* (Lincoln, NE, 1983), esp. pp. 66–91. Avi Erlich contrasts King Hamlet and Claudius, and disagrees with Ernest Jones as I do, but still holds to the proposition that Hamlet delays indecisively. Erlich's hypothesis is that Hamlet identifies strongly with his father, as most men do; in this case he 'wants his father back more than he wants to have been the one who killed him', and is 'unable to acknowledge this because it means accepting that his father was finally weak and victimized. On the conscious level, Hamlet must pretend that his father was strong and good, a "radiant angel", but on the unconscious level he has incorporated an image of a weak father who "steals away". This results in ambivalence, indecision, and a secret wish that his father kill Claudius himself and thereby give his son a clear model of purposeful action in the world' (*Hamlet's Absent Father*, p. 23). Hamlet 'fantasizes a primal-scene castration of his father'; he also 'fantasizes his own castration, or, at least fears his failing to remain erect' (p. 64). Eissler's view is that though Hamlet is held back for a long time 'by inner forces of whose nature he [i]s ignorant', he eventually, 'through his maturation', becomes 'capable of performing the deed' (*Discourse on Hamlet and 'Hamlet'*, pp. 148; see also pp. 122 and 379). See also Theodore Lidz, who notes, as have other psychoanalysts, that 'in *Hamlet* the father figure is split into an idealized King Hamlet, whom Hamlet can love, and a bad Claudius, whom Hamlet can hate and find disgusting because of his sexuality'. But Lidz too clings to the traditional explanation of Hamlet's purported delay by positing that 'Hamlet may have had difficulty in disposing of the father figure he needs as a barrier between his mother and his recrudescent oedipal fantasies'. Lidz's explanation

who is innocent and who is guilty, constitutes a call to action, not to emotional paralysis. And act he does, taking great care to distinguish how to proceed against a less guilty mother on the one hand and a confirmedly evil uncle on the other.

Janet Adelman, in a brilliant essay, also portrays Hamlet as choosing between two fathers. She sees this phenomenon in *Hamlet* as going beyond Shakespeare's earlier studies of the relations between a son and two father figures (especially in the *Henry IV* plays and *Julius Caesar*) by the introduction of the mother. Gertrude, by being a sexual partner first for Hamlet's biological father and then for his hated uncle, 'threatens to annihilate the distinction between the fathers and hence problematizes the son's paternal identification'. Moreover, because Gertrude and Ophelia now replace the nurturing young heroines of Shakespeare's romantic comedies of the 1590s, 'the play conflates the beloved with the betraying mother, undoing the strategies that had enabled marriage in the comedies'. Adelman argues further that the structure of *Hamlet* 'is marked by the struggle to escape from this condition, to free the masculine identity of both father and son from its origin in the contaminated maternal body'. I agree wholeheartedly with Adelman's analysis of how the father is split in two, just as the image of the mother is also bifurcated into the

for the delay is that Hamlet has suffered two serious traumas, Ophelia's rejection of him and his father's revelations of the murder, as a consequence of which 'Hamlet's world falls apart', causing him to decline into something pathologically close to real madness. The pretence of madness is a mechanism 'to retain a modicum of self-control' (*Hamlet's Enemy: Madness and Myth in 'Hamlet'* (New York, 1975), pp. 54–9, 111). John Dover Wilson, while insisting that 'It is entirely misleading to attempt to describe Hamlet's state of mind in terms of modern psychology at all', nonetheless opts for the common view that 'In *Hamlet* Shakespeare set out to create a hero labouring under mental infirmity' (*What Happens in 'Hamlet'* (New York, Cambridge, 1935, 2nd edn., 1937), p. 218). Wilson sees the procrastination as especially predominant in the last two and a half acts (pp. 202–3). Meredith Anne Skura, *The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process* (New Haven, CT, 1981), has some fine perceptions on the oedipal world in which Hamlet finds himself; she argues well that Hamlet is 'sensitive but not neurotic' in his response to the dismaying events surrounding him, all of which provide an 'objective correlative for his behavior in a world fallen in his idealistic eyes' (pp. 41–3). See also pp. 46–53, 97–9, and 233–7.

For an astute summary of these and other positions on the question of Hamlet's purported delay, and on the potential of psychoanalysis for literary interpretation, see Holland, *Psychoanalysis and Literature*, pp. 173–206, and Russell, *Hamlet and Narcissus*, pp. 13–38 and 183–204. Russell's particular emphasis is on Hamlet's resolution of his predicament by 'his surrender to one of the deepest and most powerful of narcissistic fantasies, the fantasy of death' (p. 38).

familiar Freudian opposites of 'virgin and whore, closed or open, wholly pure or wholly corrupt'.[8]

I do wish to resist, however, Adelman's critical endeavour to collapse the two fathers into each other. The claim that Hamlet senior's 'foul crimes done in [his] days of nature' suggest a common sinfulness linking the two brothers is, I think, a misreading of late medieval Catholic theology. Hamlet senior is in Purgatory because he was 'unhousled' and 'unaneled' at the moment of his death, not having received Extreme Unction (1.5.78); his 'crimes' were those to which, in the traditional Christian view, any human being is prone in the course of daily existence. When Hamlet later describes how Claudius 'took my father grossly, full of bread, | With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May' (3.3.80–1), he invokes a proverbial truth about the inherent sinfulness to be found even in the best of men. We learn nothing else of a supposed criminality in Hamlet senior. Surely it is an oversimplification to claim, as does René Girard, that 'the old Hamlet, the murdered king, was a murderer himself'.[9] Presumably Girard has in mind the old Hamlet who, 'in an angry parle . . . smote the sledded Polacks on the ice' and, having been 'Dared to the combat', vanquished old Fortinbras in a contest for their two kingdoms (1.2.66–88). But to label these deeds as murder is to overlook the context in which they are presented by Horatio as the mighty achievements of a chivalric warrior, a demigod among men. I will argue that the images of the two fathers remain sharply delineated in Hamlet's consciousness from first to last, and that the contrast has objective support

[8] Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, pp. 14–19. Peter Erickson, *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama* (Berkeley, 1985), astutely argues that when Hamlet's actual mother fails him through her inconstancy to the memory of her dead husband, the son 'finds an image of his "true mother" in the speech he selects for the player's recitation'. Hecuba mourns for Priam with so great a sorrow that it induces 'a sympathetic response in the cosmos, the gods themselves holding up the mirror to her maternal nature' (p. 74).

[9] Girard, 'Hamlet's dull revenge', p. 283. Margaret Ferguson is similarly too ready to argue that old Hamlet's references to the 'blossoms of my sin' and the 'imperfections on my head' are evidence of a guilt more or less equating him as a sinner with Claudius ('*Hamlet*: letters and spirits', *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York and London, 1985), pp. 292–309, esp. p. 297). Much more convincing, to me, is the argument of Barber and Wheeler, *The Whole Journey*, pp. 249 ff., that the Ghost is for Hamlet an image of the 'heroic male identity' that Hamlet longs to find in himself. The Ghost is 'a fully heroic embodiment of legitimate paternity', whose appearance invites Hamlet 'to undertake again the process of becoming a man' (p. 253). On the other hand, I cannot go along with Barber and Wheeler in their insistence of a parricidal wish in Hamlet directed against his father (see p. 266). Such an unconscious wish, posited by Freudian criticism, would seem to be rendered moot by the death of old Hamlet. Hamlet is saved from any such unconscious prompting by the fact that his father has been unjustly murdered.

elsewhere in the text, even if Hamlet is admittedly inclined to idealise his dead father. Of course Hamlet sees much of himself in both fathers; he too is a sinner, being human, and freely acknowledges to Ophelia that 'we are arrant knaves all' (3.1.130). 'Use every man after his desert', he lectures Polonius, 'and who shall scape whipping?' (2.2.529–30). To acknowledge that the human spirit is caught up in an eternal battle between good and evil is not, however, to minimise the difference between good and evil. Hamlet's problem is not to overcome any emotional paralysis of the will in confronting the image of two fathers, but instead to figure out what to do in order to avenge his father's death on Claudius, and at the same time recover his mother from her deeply offensive and (in Hamlet's view) self-destructive behaviour. The task is not easy.

Hamlet's dead father is imagined by the mourning son to be a perfect model of wisdom, restraint, and compassionate caring for his spouse. Claudius, conversely, is a sexual monster and a murderer. The contrast is extraordinarily polarised in Hamlet's imagination: it is to juxtapose 'Hyperion to a satyr' (1.2.140), that is, the god of the sun as contrasted with the spiteful and lecherous half-goat, half-human creature of classical mythology.[10] This polarisation would seem to offer material for reflecting on a radically divergent view of fathers, not just in Hamlet's view but in the dramatist's imagination as well. Nothing in Shakespeare's sources for this play could have pointed him in this direction.

'Look upon this picture, and on this', Hamlet instructs his mother in the so-called 'closet' scene as he shows her two likenesses, of Hamlet senior and of Claudius—perhaps contained as miniature paintings in two lockets, one of his father worn around his neck by Hamlet, the other of Claudius now worn by his new bride. The pictures are '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,

[10] Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, p. 19: 'The identification of Old Hamlet with Hyperion makes him benignly and divinely distant, separate from ordinary genital sexuality and yet immensely potent, his sexual power analogous to God's power to impregnate the Virgin Mother (often imagined as Spirit descending on the sun's rays) and to such Renaissance mythologising of this theme as the operation of the sun on Chrysogonee's moist body (*The Faerie Queene*, 3.6.67). Ordinary genital sexuality then becomes the province of Claudius the satyr: below the human, immersed in the body, he becomes everything Hyperion/Old Hamlet is not, and the agent of all ill.'

> 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 on this fair mountain leave to feed
> And batten on this moor? (3.4.54–68)

What was Hamlet senior really like? When he is given a chance to speak in his own person (unless one posits the untenable position that he is merely a phantom in Hamlet's imagination), we learn several things. Hamlet senior speaks throughout with the sensibility of a spirit moved by human feelings of revenge, disappointment, and regret; he is integrally the spirit of the man who has died. He was, and still is, infuriated at his brother's murderous perfidy, and is deeply unhappy about the falling off of his 'most seeming-virtuous queen' from himself to 'a wretch whose natural gifts were poor | To those of mine' (1.5.47–53). As his son Hamlet will do throughout the play, Hamlet senior posits an impassable gulf between a virtue that cannot be moved and a lustfulness that will 'prey on garbage', even when offered the opportunity to be linked 'to a radiant angel'. Father and son thus denounce Gertrude as having entered into a sexual partnership with an 'incestuous' and 'adulterate beast' who has won her to his 'shameful lust' (42–6).

The words 'incest' and 'incestuous' resonate throughout the play, in the speeches of both Hamlet and his dead father. Even before Hamlet encounters his father's ghost on the battlements, he grieves in soliloquy that his mother has employed such 'wicked speed, to post | With such dexterity to incestuous sheets' (1.156–7). The Ghost bids Hamlet not to 'Let the royal bed of Denmark be | A couch for luxury and damnèd incest' (1.5.84). Hamlet resolves, as we have seen, to kill Claudius not at prayer but when he is drunk or asleep or, most of all, when he is 'in th' incestuous pleasure of his bed' (3.3.89–90). And when Hamlet finally achieves the fervently desired goal of killing his uncle-stepfather, he underscores the crime of incest as an ultimate justification of the homicide: 'Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damnèd Dane, | Drink off this potion. Is thy union here? | Follow my mother' (5.2.327–9). With his grim pun on 'union' as referring both to the pearl that Claudius has thrown into the poisoned drinking cup (270) and to the sexual and marital union

of Claudius and Gertrude,[11] Hamlet wryly consigns Claudius to an eternity of incestuous embrace. 'Follow my mother.'

Today we are apt to regard marriage with a deceased brother's wife as outside the proscription against incest, but clearly this has not always been the case; witness the prolonged and at times hysterical debate in the British Parliament during the late nineteenth century against marriage with a deceased wife's sister—a phenomenon that Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe* could refer to as 'that annual blister'. Henry VIII, famously, had married his deceased brother's wife—unless, of course, one considers that previous marriage of Katharine of Aragon to Arthur as invalid. In *Hamlet*, the words 'incest' and 'incestuous' appear with a frequency that is highly marked in the Shakespeare canon: they appear five times, as also in *Pericles* (where incest figures in the plot), and otherwise only three scattered metaphorical instances in *Measure for Measure* (3.1.141)*, King Lear* (3.2.55), and *The Rape of Lucrece* (921). The unusual emphasis in *Hamlet* underscores a point: father and son are as one in denouncing Gertrude's marriage as a morally offensive act. Perhaps we should say that the 'father' here is as the son identifies with and idealises him; the Ghost does appear to be real in his appearing to Horatio and the men on watch, but the character as Shakespeare presents him blends so imperceptibly into the King Hamlet of young Hamlet's memory that we have trouble distinguishing what is fact from what is filial idealisation.[12]

Certainly King Hamlet is a figure of the past, identified throughout with a kingdom of Denmark that no longer exists under Claudius. King

[11] See Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (Oxford, 1959), p. 98.

[12] When the Ghost accuses Claudius of being not only an 'incestuous' but also an 'adulterate beast' (1.5.43), a possible inference is that the Ghost suspects Claudius and Gertrude of having been lovers before the murder took place. Bertram Joseph's attempt to explain away the word 'adulterate' as applying to sin generally in late medieval and Renaissance texts (*Conscience and the King: a Study of Hamlet* (London, 1953), pp. 17–18) has won some adherents, including Rebecca Smith, 'A Heart Cleft in Twain: the Dilemma of Shakespeare's Gertrude', in Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (eds.), *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (Urbana, 1980), pp. 194–210, but has also been cogently refuted by Adelman (*Suffocating Mothers*, pp. 15 and 38, n. 7). More simply, the Ghost may regard Gertrude's hasty desertion of him as 'adulterous' in the sense of being flagrantly disloyal to his memory and to their marriage bed. The marriage, in the Ghost's view, should have lasted eternally or at least more than 'a month'. The word 'adulterate' and its various cognates do not appear elsewhere in *Hamlet*, unlike 'incest' and 'incestuous', which are repeatedly applied to Claudius. Wilson, *What Happens in 'Hamlet'*, pp. 292 ff., points out that in Belleforest's version of the story, Hamlet's father declares of the murderer 'that before he had any violent or bloody hands, or once committed parricide upon his brother, he had incestuously abused his wife'. Wilson is convinced of Gertrude's infidelity before her husband's death, but Shakespeare's text leaves that possibility very much in doubt, and, in my mind, quite improbable.

Hamlet, the embodiment of ancient chivalry, 'smote the sledded Polacks on the ice' and slew Fortinbras of Norway in an armed combat in which the two contestants wagered their whole kingdoms on the outcome (1.1.67–99). We can scarcely imagine Claudius accepting such a challenge, and indeed today we can perhaps admire his choice of astute diplomacy over military intervention. Claudius disarms the threat of an invasion by young Fortinbras with a negotiated deal that saves face and leaves everyone happy except Poland, whom young Fortinbras is now licensed to invade instead of Denmark. King Hamlet may seem today to be something of a cowboy, to use the phrase picked out these days for President Bush, but in Horatio's view and that of Denmark generally he is remembered and mourned as 'our valiant Hamlet' (88). The point here is that King Hamlet is remembered and idealised as a heroic figure, brave, resolute, incorruptible.

Another important memory of the dead King Hamlet is that he was protective of his wife, even while privately aware of what the play poses as her weaknesses as a woman and hence her need for his firm male guidance and his gentle forbearance. Again, the attributes can be identified both in Hamlet's idealisations of a dead father and in verifiable spoken testimony. Hamlet remembers a father who was 'so loving to my mother | That he might not beteem the winds of heaven | Visit her face too roughly' (1.2.140–2). This is no doubt as a son should remember his father, but the Ghost too remembers his marriage to Gertrude as one of exalted and mutual respect: his love for Gertrude, he tells his son, 'was of that dignity | That it went hand in hand even with the vow | I made to her in marriage' (1.5.49–51). The play called 'The Murder of Gonzago', which the travelling players put on before Claudius and Gertrude and all the court, offers further suggestions as to the kind of husband we are to perceive in the dead King Hamlet, granted of course that this evidence is by way of an indirect analogy in a play put on at Hamlet's specific request. Since Hamlet has also asked the First Player if he and his company could, 'for a need, study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines which I would set down and insert in't' (2.2.540–3), we may find ourselves wondering if the play-within-the-play's pointed observations on fatherly wisdom and motherly lack of self-knowledge are embodied in Hamlet's additions.[13] Certain it is that the play-within-the-play, though designed in the final instance to 'catch the conscience of the King' (2.2.606), devotes

[13] See Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, p. 25.

a great deal of its emotional intensity to the portrait of a royal marriage and to the moral failures of the wife. The Player King, knowing that he will die soon, offers his wife the comfort of looking forward to another marriage. When the Player Queen protests that she could never do such a thing, and that re-marriage would be tantamount to murdering her first husband ('A second time I kill my husband dead | When second husband kisses me in bed', 3.2.182–3), her wisely compassionate husband offers her forbearance for the yielding to circumstance that he knows will be her destiny. 'Our wills and fates do so contrary run | That our devices still are overthrown', he concludes (209–10), in a typically sententious observation to which his age and male authority give him special access. As Hamlet remembers and idealises his parents in their marriage, his father was nearly godlike in his capacity for the compassionate understanding of human weakness, even in his wife.

The Player King in 'The Murder of Gonzago' is, like Hamlet's own father, old and near death. His prediction of his own imminent demise is unconsciously and ironically proleptic of the murder; it also speaks to the sense in which King Hamlet was old. Hamlet remembers that 'His beard was grizzled', and Horatio confirms this feature from his own observation of the Ghost: 'It was, as I have seen it in his life, | A sable silvered' (1.2.245–7). The Player King lays stress on the fact that 'My operant powers their functions leave to do' (3.2.172). A feature of this remembering on Hamlet's part is that it imagines a father who is old enough to be thought of no longer as a sexual partner for Hamlet's mother. Even when Hamlet recalls how Gertrude 'would hang on him [old Hamlet] | As if increase of appetite had grown | By what it fed on' (1.2.143–5), the image is notably decorous and even chaste when we contrast it with Hamlet's imaginings of Claudius as the grotesque and satyr-like possessor of Gertrude's body. Kenneth Branagh's four-hour film of *Hamlet* offers a persuasive glimpse of old Hamlet's fatherly aging: in a flashback, we are shown Gertrude and a trimly athletic Claudius enjoying a game of shuffleboard, visibly comfortable in each other's company, while a rose-cheeked and roly-poly older King Hamlet sits to one side, beaming genially and unjealously on the companionable activity of his wife and brother.

The relationship of Hamlet's parents is thus remembered and expurgated in Shakespeare's play in the chaste vein of Joachim and Anna, for example, the legendary parents of Mary. In this account, Joachim was regularly thought of as long past childbearing, so that the birth of Mary

could be understood as miraculous and essentially parthenogenetic.[14] And of course the same is true of legends about Mary and her husband Joseph. In the medieval cycle plays, Joseph is the comic *vieux jaloux* no longer capable himself of siring a son and disturbed by his wife's pregnancy until he is visited by the Angel with the good news of the Incarnation.[15] The comparable de-sexualising of old Hamlet offers a significant psychological defence for the son, enabling him to identify with the imagined saint-like father as a means of warding off those aspects of Claudius that Hamlet wishes to deny in himself. Not coincidentally, perhaps, Hamlet thinks of Polonius as very old; he is, after all, the father of the young woman with whom Hamlet has been emotionally engaged. Polonius calls to Hamlet's mind the 'satirical rogue' who says 'that old men have gray beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with the most weak hams' (2.2.197–201). Old age can be daunting, even disgusting, but in the case of King Hamlet it also insures against potency.

Hamlet is no less aware of, and concerned about, his mother's continued sexual activity at a time of life when, in the son's anxious view, erotic desire should no longer be operant. 'At your age | The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble, | And waits upon the judgment', he lectures her (3.4.69–71). Gertrude may be all of fifty; we do not know. In Zeffirelli's film of *Hamlet*, Glenn Close portrays her as a vibrantly sexual woman, erotically attracted to Alan Bates, appropriately enough for modern audiences in which the expectation is of continued sexual activity well past menopause. Hamlet is strongly of the opposite view. 'O shame, where is thy blush?' he hurls at Gertrude.

> Rebellious hell,
> If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
> To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
> And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame
> When the compulsive ardor gives the charge,
> Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
> And reason panders will. (3.4.82–9)

In Hamlet's opinion, a woman like Gertrude, in her middle years, should understand that sexuality is no longer appropriate when one is past childbearing, and indeed is indecent. It offers a horrendous model to younger

[14] See for example the play of 'Joachim and Anna' in the N-Town cycle.
[15] See 'Joseph's Trouble about Mary' in the York cycle, or 'Joseph's Doubt' in the N-Town cycle.

women; if desire can 'mutine in a matron's bones', then, *a fortiori,* young women cannot be expected to offer any defence against lustful desire. The deep puritanical mistrust of carnality that Hamlet imagines himself to share with his father is immeasurably reinforced by the prospect of a mother who, Hamlet may well suppose, is newly sexually active with her new partner in a way that she was not in her own lawful wedlock of many years. (Perhaps we should recollect at this point that Anne Hathaway was eight years older than Shakespeare when they conceived a child in 1582, that their marriage was hastily arranged because of the pregnancy, that he lived apart from his wife and family for most of his adult life, and that he and Anne had no more children after the birth of their twins in 1585.)

Boys and young men are generally uncomfortable thinking about their parents as sexual partners, as Freud observes; the same can certainly be true of young women, but Freud is interested in the young male, and so, in *Hamlet*, is Shakespeare.[16] If this is generally true, how much more so is it true in Hamlet's feelings about the incestuous coupling of a murderous uncle and stepfather with Hamlet's mother! In every way, Claudius is depicted as the monstrous opposite of King Hamlet. It is as though Shakespeare creates two images of the father for Hamlet, two divided sensibilities of the same awesome and frightening figure, of whom one is safely dead and therefore idealised and desexualised to keep him from becoming a rival for the mother, while the other continues to possess the mother as a hated rival. Shakespeare transforms the raw material of his source story into a fable of divided and ambiguous feelings about the father. Hamlet's loathing of his own sexuality intensifies his hatred for the uncle and stepfather who embodies the promptings that Hamlet longs to disown and suppress in himself.

'Look here upon this picture, and on this.' To turn from King Hamlet to Claudius, as Gertrude has done, and as Hamlet now bids her direct her gaze from one portrait to the other, is to turn from a loving and almost saintlike older husband to one who, in Hamlet's imagination, is the incarnation of lust. Having averted his gaze from any suggestion of sexual activity on the part of his true father, Hamlet now positively wallows in the images of animalistic coupling between Claudius and Gertrude. 'Nay', he upbraids her, 'but to live | In the rank sweat of an enseamèd bed, | Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love | Over the nasty sty!' (3.4.93–6). 'Enseamèd' here means saturated in the grease and filth of

[16] See Lidz, *Hamlet's Enemy,* pp. 10–12.

passionate lovemaking. To be 'stewed' in corruption is to be soaked and bathed in it, with the suggestion of a 'stew' or brothel, and perhaps too with the suggestion of soaking in a hot tub as a treatment for venereal disease. Part of what is so distressing about this image in Hamlet's mind is that he is now picturing his mother as co-partner in a grotesque coupling that is both lubricated and cemented by the mingling sweat of their two bodies.[17]

Even when Hamlet exhorts his mother to stay out of Claudius's bed, he does so in negative terms that again conjure up the sexual act in all its primal vigour and horror. When Gertrude asks what she should do now, Hamlet replies,

> Not this by no means that I bid you do:
> Let the bloat king tempt you again to bed,
> Pinch wanton on your cheek, call you his mouse,
> And let him, for a pair of reechy kisses,
> Or paddling in your neck with his damned fingers,
> Make you to ravel all this matter out
> That I essentially am not in madness
> But mad in craft. (3.4.188–95)

Hamlet need not have dwelt on this sexual foreplay in order to beg her to keep his secret. Hamlet is obsessed with the forbidden image of his mother as a sexual object being avidly groped at the neck and breasts by her sexual partner. The sexuality that Hamlet loathes in himself is scapegoated onto the hated uncle, the false father who has supplanted Hamlet's blood father by killing that good angel and taking his place as the seducer. Whether Hamlet unconsciously desires his mother is not clearly enunciated in the text; perhaps we catch a hint of this, as Janet Adelman has suggested to me, in Hamlet's description to Horatio of how Claudius has 'killed my king and whored my mother, | Popped in between th'election and my hopes' (5.2.64–5), where 'popped in' has possibly migrated from the political to the material domain.[18] The standard Freudian oedipal explanation, of course, is that Hamlet's disgust is a recoil from his own forbidden and unconscious desire. Whether or not that is a plausible

[17] For Linda Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men* (Stanford, 1982), pp. 71 ff., *Hamlet* is, of all Shakespeare's tragedies, 'the one in which the sex nausea is most pervasive'. She analyses 3.4 as the scene in which Hamlet's loathing 'comes to its climax'. Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Drama* (Madison, 1960), sees this revulsion in *Hamlet* as integrally related to the pathology of the age (p. 17).

[18] Janet Adelman, in private conversation. I am greatly indebted to her for a careful reading and much assistance in this project, in addition to what she has written so cogently on the subject.

explanation, the fact that any such erotic desire for the mother is so concealed or simply absent in the text of *Hamlet* is interesting in itself; Shakespeare does not take his exploration of Hamlet's character in that direction. Instead, he focuses on the monstrosity of Claudius's pawing over his wife's body. Claudius becomes in this scapegoating imagery a 'paddock' or toad, a 'bat', a 'gib' or tomcat (197), a loathsome animal who is all the more to be expunged and repudiated because he embodies the lust that Hamlet hates in himself.

What is Hamlet then to do? The Freud–Jones hypothesis of emotional fibrillation leading to a paralysis of the will is plausible enough in the abstract, but, as I've already suggested, runs into difficulty in the play when Hamlet does indeed make a concerted attempt to kill Claudius, managing instead to kill Polonius. The consequence of that act prompts Hamlet to reflect on the very nature of forthright action. His attempt to fulfil his father's behest has led to the death of a foolish but innocent man, innocent at least to the extent of not deserving to die thus. 'For this same lord, | I do repent', Hamlet tells his mother, and then goes on to explain what he thinks the event must mean: 'heaven hath pleased it so | To punish me with this, and this with me, | That I must be their scourge and minister' (3.4.179–82). Even if Polonius is, in Hamlet's view, guilty of snooping, Hamlet sees that he too has erred rashly and will have to suffer the consequences. As Fredson Bowers has acutely shown, this analysis proves to be prophetic, for the rest of the play devolves by intricate logical steps from this pivotal event.[19] Ophelia goes mad. Laertes returns from Paris, furiously intent on revenge against the slayer of his father, and enters into a conspiracy in which the underhanded method of a secret poison is to be used to murder Hamlet. Laertes becomes an instructive example, for Hamlet and for us, of the often unintended consequences of rash and precipitate action: he is right in identifying Hamlet as the slayer of Polonius, but fatally misled in not understanding Claudius's greater villainy as the cause behind it all. And so Laertes goes to his death begging forgiveness from Hamlet.

Hamlet well perceives that rashness has its honourable place in human action. 'Rashly', he says to Horatio in recounting his adventures at sea,

> And praised be rashness for it—let us know
> Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well
> When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us

[19] Fredson T. Bowers, 'Hamlet as Minister and Scourge', *PMLA*, 70 (1955), 740–9.

> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will. (5.2.6–11)

This passage, that so inspired Melville in writing the mat-weaving episode in *Moby Dick* (chap. 47), helps explain a number of Hamlet's finer improvisations during his absence from Denmark: his discovery of the packet of materials being conveyed by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to England bidding the English king to execute Hamlet, Hamlet's substitution of their names for his own, and so on. (Michael Almeyereda's 2000 film *Hamlet* presents us with a brilliant updating of this episode: on an overnight flight to England, Hamlet finds the incriminating death sentence in the laptop of his travelling companions and simply back-spaces the computer message in order to change the names.) At the same time, Hamlet wishes to understand the essential role of rashness in the larger providential context of a 'divinity that shapes our ends'.[20] In the case of the substituted message to the King of England, 'even in that was heaven ordinant' (48) by seeing to it that Hamlet had his father's signet in his purse so that he was able to seal the packet with a royal impression and thereby make the delusion entirely successful. Rashness thus has a purpose, but one that must be seen as sublimated to a greater plan—a plan that will find a way to bring about the play's resolution by means of an event like the killing of Polonius that was, in its own terms, a miscalculation.

Increasingly, as the play draws toward its close, Hamlet comes to terms with his psychological dilemma about two contrasting father figures by appealing to divine will, to a heavenly father, about whose oneness and perfection there can be no doubt. The image of old Hamlet as idealised father is subsumed into this heavenly father, although in a curious way, since Hamlet now senses that carrying out the literal instruction of his fleshly father must yield to the promptings of a 'divinity that shapes our ends' and that will somehow provide an opportunity for revenge more rich and appropriate that Hamlet could himself devise. Even in these things is heaven 'ordinant' (5.2.48). Hamlet's dead father is scarcely mentioned in the last scenes of the play; providence takes his place in *Hamlet*.[21]

[20] William Beatty Warner, *Chance and the Text of Experience: Freud, Nietzsche, and Shakespeare's 'Hamlet'* (Ithaca, 1986), argues throughout against the long history of criticism of *Hamlet* that has 'minimized the import of what we have found so much of in the drama, the virulent force of chance and the constitutive role of language' ( p. 164). Wilson (*What Happens in 'Hamlet'*, p. 141) observes that 'The idea of having a play was a sudden inspiration on Hamlet's part; as ever, when he acts, he acts on impulse.'

[21] This point was made to me in private conversation by Janet Adelman.

How then is an individual to steer his or her way between rash or forthright action and a passive acquiescence to the will of providence? Hamlet greatly admires Fortinbras's self-confident ability to get on with what he determines to do, even while savouring the irony that Fortinbras's marching against Poland will lead to

> The imminent death of twenty thousand men
> That for a fantasy and trick of fame
> Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
> Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
> Which is not tomb enough and continent
> To hide the slain. (4.4.61–6)

All this brave achievement is 'Even for an eggshell' (54). Hamlet's wise perception of what is so ultimately ironic and even absurd about such forthright action helps us to understand too that the active choice is not unequivocally the right choice in a given situation. The essential rightness of that perception is another reason for mistrusting an analysis of the play that ascribes Hamlet's inactivity (and his own impatience with his delay) to psychological vacillation.

The play's ending is a riddle in these terms. Hamlet discovers, after having flailed himself ceaselessly for inactivity, that his best clue is to await the call of providence—a providence that will surely not fail the individual who is properly attuned to its benign larger intent. 'There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow', Hamlet tells Horatio. 'If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all' (5.2.217–20). The riddle is that this resolution seems wholly out of harmony with the ethic of revenge, which, as embodied in unadulterated form in Shakespeare's source, sees nothing problematic with boldly resolute action.[22] Indeed, Saxo Grammaticus's saga valorises such action in an ending that is purely and simply one of satisfying the hero's need and desire to avenge the death of a father. Shakespeare's play chooses a path that provides a far more aesthetically satisfying picture. If Hamlet were to kill Claudius in cold blood, at prayer or otherwise, what would we think of him? Vengeance, when successfully carried out, has a chilling effect, as in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, for example, or Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy. Hamlet* is unique among Elizabethan revenge plays, and it is so precisely because the protagonist finally offers himself as a passive instrument of

[22] Levin, *The Question of Hamlet*, pp. 23–4.

providence rather than as the avenger. Providence sees to it that Hamlet is not disappointed: he kills Claudius not in cold blood but as a justifiable response to a threat on his own life, and he achieves the surcease of death for which he has so fervently longed. At least this is Hamlet's interpretation of his own story. Horatio has quite a different and more stoic reading

> Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
> And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
> Fall'n on the inventors' heads. (5.2.383–6)[23]

We hear these divergent interpretations arguing with one another as the play ends, just as Hamlet and Horatio have shared a loving friendship in which they have disagreed about many things.

King Hamlet, in commanding Hamlet to kill Claudius, is careful to specify that Hamlet is not to harm Gertrude. 'Leave her to heaven', he exhorts Hamlet, 'And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge, | To prick and sting her' (1.5.87–9). Does Hamlet proceed accordingly with his mother? He speaks to her so sharply in the closet scene, even brutally, that she fears at first for her life, and the Ghost of the father is prompted to intervene as well; he feels the need to 'whet' Hamlet's 'almost blunted purpose', and urges that the son 'step between her [Gertrude] and her fighting soul' (3.4.115–17). Yet Hamlet has promised himself (and us) that he will never allow 'The soul of Nero' to 'enter this firm bosom'; he will 'speak daggers to her, but use none' (3.2.393–5). This uncertainty about Hamlet's intent is instructive. It offers us two radically different and yet complementary readings of the closet scene. In one, Hamlet is the caring son and moralist who is seriously worried that his mother is heading straight for hell; hence his preaching to her, 'Confess yourself to heaven, | Repent what's past, avoid what is to come' (3.4.156–7). Arguably, he succeeds in his attempt to coach her in how to overcome the deleterious and pernicious effects of surrendering to 'custom' and 'habit' (168–9).[24] The other Hamlet is the angry and fearful child caught in an

[23] Eissler sees Horatio as a superego figure in the play (*Discourse on Hamlet and 'Hamlet'*, p. 382). He also proposes that Yorick 'is a thinly disguised father image', 'the only person in the entire play of whom Hamlet speaks with unreserved tenderness' (pp. 84–5). In this he agrees with Norman Symons, 'The graveyard scene in *Hamlet*', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 9, 96–119, at 101.

[24] See Warner, *Chance and the Text of Experience,* pp. 255–6. The unauthorised 1603 quarto of *Hamlet* offers a strong case for the Queen's coming around to Hamlet's side, at least in that version of the play. After the Ghost has left them together in her chambers (3.4), the Queen says in Q1: 'But as I have a soul, I swear by heaven | I never knew of this most horrible murder.' And then, when Hamlet has bid her 'assist me in revenge, | And in his death your infamy shall die',

oedipal crisis of epic proportions who calls out for his mother to abandon her incestuous and erotic attachment to the father in favour of reclaiming her needful child.[25] Joseph Papp's production of the play at New York's Public Theatre in 1968 astutely captured the spirit of this interpretation by starting the play with a manacled Hamlet in a coffin-like cradle at the foot of Claudius's and Gertrude's bed. The exhilarating ambiguity of this dual interpretation of Hamlet and his mother is of a piece with the play's similarly bifurcated and anxious approach to the dual image of the father as saint and as lecher. Part of Shakespeare's magic is to capture such ambiguity in dramatic form, where the very genre of theatre thrives on the clash of rival ideologies.

In the psychological terms of Hamlet's emotional crisis, the play's ending offers something far more substantial than confirmation of a purported oedipal anxiety about killing a father for the crime of desire that the son unconsciously harbours in his own psyche. Hamlet does kill Claudius, and is evidently reconciled to his mother; he and Gertrude appear to forgive each other (though the point is disputed in scholarly analyses of the play) and die reunited in an implicit repudiation of Claudius and all that he stands for.[26] The son has incorporated aspects of

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the Queen replies: 'Hamlet, I vow by that majesty | That knows our thoughts and looks into our hearts, | I will conceal, consent, and do my best, | What stratagem soe'er thou shalt devise' (sig. G3–3v). Whatever the status of this problematic text, it seems to provide evidence that in some performances of a play called *Hamlet*, prior to 1603, the Queen declared her allegiance to her son. When the King enters a few moments later, her statement in Q1 that she has found Hamlet 'as raging as the sea' would appear to be a fabrication intended to protect her son from Claudius's prying investigation.

[25] Eissler diagnoses Hamlet as one whose misogyny is paradoxically heightened by his own powerful attachment to his mother: 'the hasty marriage of his mother had aroused a conflict with regard to his general relationship to women' (*Discourse on Hamlet and 'Hamlet'*, p. 420). 'His mother's behavior . . . is the primary root of Hamlet's distrust of emotionality, which is then extended from there to his own emotions' (p. 110). Wertham posits an 'Orestes complex' to illuminate the way in which 'Hamlet was more preoccupied with his mother's adultery than with his father's murder and that her infidelity turned his excessive attachment to the mother into bitter hostility' (Lidz, *Hamlet's Enemy*, p. 10, paraphrasing Wertham, 'The Matricidal Impulse').

[26] Cf. Thomas M. Kettle, 'A new way of misunderstanding *Hamlet*' (1905), in *The Day's Burden* (New York, 1918): 'The problem is set wholly from the outside. It is not a product of Hamlet's superculture, but of the sin of his uncle and the lesser sin of his mother . . . the play ends, thanks to Hamlet's course of action, in absolutely the best way in which it could end' (quoted in Claire Sacks and Edgar Whan (eds.), *'Hamlet': Enter Critic* (New York, 1960), pp. 140–1). Adelman (*Suffocating Mothers*, p. 34) is more sceptical: 'In the end we do not know whether or not Gertrude herself has been morally reclaimed', though Adelman does allow that 'Hamlet at least believes that she has returned to him as the mother he can call "good lady" (3.4.182)'. See above, n. 24 on the testimonial of Q1, where the Queen unambiguously aligns herself with her son. Adelman also takes the view that Hamlet 'shows very few signs of interest in his mother as a real

the idealised father, having completed the act of revenge not on murderous terms but at the promptings of a higher providential destiny. He has scapegoated his own worst sexual self onto the hated figure of Claudius, who dies unbewept and forgotten. Hamlet has partly come to terms with his own sexuality by acknowledging his guilt and by etherialising sexual desire into a moral insistence on chaste behaviour and penitent acknowledgement of weakness both in himself and in his mother. To be sure, the price for this mood of calm and self-possession is high, as Adelman points out: 'the parents lost to him at the beginning of the play can be restored only insofar as they are entirely separated from their sexual bodies'. This is 'a pyrrhic solution' that 'does not bode well for Shakespeare's representation of sexual union' in his subsequent tragedies (Adelman, p. 35). Hamlet's own desire for sexual coupling with Ophelia is a necessary casualty of his family crisis, and he dies, so that his story is truly tragic and even heroic; but it is also one in which Hamlet has found a dearly bought resolution. Perhaps he is able now at last to affirm what he said earlier to the ghost of his dead father: 'Rest, rest, perturbèd spirit!' (1.5.192).

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person who might be won to repentance' (p. 257, n. 43); and Bamber, *Comic Women*, p. 71, insists that 'there is no reconciliation with women at the end of the play, as there is in the other tragedies'. This seems to me unnecessarily severe. Of course Gertrude is a fantasy-object to Hamlet in this scene, but she is also his mother, and his distress at her behaviour arises in good part at least out of a deep caring for her. He wishes to protect her from herself as Hamlet's father had done during his lifetime. At the same time, one should not oversimplify Hamlet's longing to reform his mother as high-minded and selfless, as Bradley argues in *Shakespearean Tragedy* (p. 115) and Roland Mushat Frye in *The Renaissance Hamlet* (Princeton, 1984), pp. 152 and 162. Hamlet's motives are at once deeply self-centred and well intended.