

SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

*HAMLET*: CONVERSATIONS WITH THE DEAD

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'WHO's there?' says Barnardo, bravely, in the cold darkness on the castle platform. These are the first words of the play, and it is hard to see how they could be bettered.\* They carry, as often in Shakespeare, both an immediate meaning and a larger meaning, which is not simultaneously present but can grow in the mind as the play unfolds. Barnardo means only, 'Who goes there?', the sentry's challenge. The larger meaning is, 'Who is there, in the darkness, among the dead?' As I struggle to paraphrase, I find myself in danger of opting too easily for the more usual phrases: 'Is there life beyond the grave?' 'Are there human existences on the far side of what we call death?' But these fail to take account of a certain grammatical peculiarity in Shakespeare's words; the sentry's challenge, though formally in the third person singular, is partly infiltrated by a sense of second person singular, arising from the fact that the question posed is addressed to its presumed subject. In which case we must modify our paraphrase, perhaps to 'Who, of you who are dead, is there?' The very awkwardness of the sentence is instructive. The English language naturally resists such a combination of second and third persons. Yet some such phrasing is needed, because *Hamlet* is not a cool treatise on death but is instead about an *encounter* with a dead person.

If Barnardo's words are to work at all, beyond their immediate sense, they must, so to speak, be set ticking, like a time bomb. All that is needed for this purpose is that the words be set slightly askew, so that the immediate meaning is felt to be in some degree unsatisfactory or incomplete. This is done, wonderfully, by Francisco's reply: 'Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself!' Francisco means, 'I am the sentry on duty, so I should be the one

\* All quotations from Shakespeare are, unless otherwise specified, from William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

to issue the challenge. Now *you* tell me who *you* are'. This exchange, with its wrong-footing of Barnardo, is remotely linked to farce, as many things will prove to be as the play goes on (two comic sentries frighten each other). But here the sense of fear is of course much stronger than any intuition of the ridiculous. We may think that Barnardo should formally have taken over from Francisco before challenging strangers, but the whole point of the challenge is that friend and foe cannot be distinguished at first. Shakespeare for once holds back on the theatrical metaphor—he does not make Francisco say, as the Volscian says in *Coriolanus* (IV. iii. 48) 'You take my part from me, sir'—but some sort of self-reference seems nevertheless to be going on: the actor arriving pat upon his cue matches neatly with 'most carefully upon your hour' (I. i. 4) and 'Unfold yourself' is placed exactly to echo the other use of *unfold*: 'explain oneself to the audience; perform the exposition'. Thus we have fear, faintly absurd confusion and a question of identity, thrown out upon the dark. And all the while someone, or some thing—something other than Francisco—is there. At line 19 Horatio (if we follow the second Quarto) or else Marcellus, shrewdly responding to the extra warmth of Barnardo's welcome, asks, 'What, has this thing appeared again tonight?'

Forty-six years ago in his Annual Shakespeare Lecture to the British Academy, C. S. Lewis said that the thing to remember about *Hamlet* is that it is about a man 'who has been given a task by a ghost'.<sup>1</sup> There is no ghost in Saxo Grammaticus's version of the Hamlet story, though there is in Belleforest's. We do not possess the Elizabethan *Hamlet* which preceded Shakespeare's, but we know from Lodge's reference to it that it contained a ghost. Curiously, we *do* possess Kyd's inverse *Hamlet*—for *The Spanish Tragedy* is about a father avenging his son—and there the whole action is watched by a dead man. In the *Ambales Saga* there are angels, and in remote Greek analogues there are, as we shall see, dreams, oracles and visions of a dead father. Hamlet, in Shakespeare's play, is beckoned into the shadows by something which may be his father, may be the Devil, may even be, since our disorientation is so great, negation itself. He is then made party to the dark world, is changed utterly, cut off from marriage and friendship, made an agent of death. The Ghost tells him to wreak vengeance, but Hamlet notoriously finds himself strangely

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 28 (1942), 139–54, p. 147. Also in C. S. Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays*. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1969) 88–105, p. 97.

impeded. It is as if, having joined the shades, he finds himself drained of substance. He savages Ophelia, because she is life, ready for procreation, but for the rest he is lost, suddenly adrift in the paralysing liberty of a kind of solipsism; bounded by a nutshell he could count himself king of infinite space, but for his bad dreams (II. ii. 244). Such reality as persists figures, we notice, as mere nightmare to Hamlet.

'There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so', he tells Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern (II. ii. 250-1). Professor Harold Jenkins in the New Arden edition robustly rejects the notion that ethical absolutes are here discarded, pointing out that the phrase is commonplace and has reference not to morals but to happiness or taste.<sup>2</sup> Certainly the same thought can be found (though not perhaps with precisely the same force) in Spenser and also in Montaigne who knows it as a Stoic aphorism. But for all that, I sense that Professor Jenkins is here *too* robust. There was always a seed of epistemological relativism within Stoicism itself; the rational man is exhorted to rise above seeming misfortunes, bereavement, say, or exile by exerting the power of reason, by reflecting that all must die, or that the good man is a citizen of the whole world and therefore cannot be exiled. One senses that reason is here being accorded, covertly, a fictive power to reconstruct reality according to the needs of the subject. Real reason, one feels, is an altogether more constrained affair. The Stoic philosopher in Johnson's *Rasselas*, when his daughter died, found the reality of loss simply insuperable: 'What comfort, said the mourner, can truth and reason afford me? of what effect are they now, but to tell me, that my daughter will not be restored?'<sup>3</sup> Of course it is true that in Stoicism the major constraint of a rationally ordered cosmos is always present. With this, reason must always accord, and so by implication keep relativism at bay. But what of *Hamlet*, a Post-Stoic text? Surely it is not only bad readers who sense that now this thought is in suspension, hanging between ancient and modern conceptions. The passage taken as a whole is so instinct with a vertiginous uncertainty as to what is real, what unreal, what is waking, what dream, that the relativism germinally present even in Senecan Stoicism grows suddenly stronger. Philip Edwards in the New Cambridge edition<sup>4</sup> accepts Professor Jenkins's note, but only after a concessive

<sup>2</sup> The New Arden edition of *Hamlet* (Methuen, London, 1982) pp. 467-8.

<sup>3</sup> *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*, Chap. 18, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson and Brian Jenkins (Oxford University Press, London, 1971). p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, the New Cambridge Shakespeare, ed. Philip Edwards (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985), p. 129.

clause: 'While this phrase voices an uncertainty about absolutes which reverberates through the play, Jenkins, makes it clear . . .' and so on. The wilder meaning, which is as much epistemological as it is ethical, cannot be entirely excluded.

I have argued so far in terms of mere metaphysical affinity: Hamlet meeting the father who no longer is, becomes one with death and un-being. Meanwhile, however, other lines of interpretation are open to us. William Empson in the 1950s offered a brilliant explanation<sup>5</sup> in terms of Shakespeare's orchestration of styles, now naturalistic, now theatrical. It is likely, he suggests, that Shakespeare was approached to do a re-write of the immensely popular *Ur-Hamlet*. The audience which demanded this was not however quite like the audience which had been terrified in the 1580s by, as it might be, Kyd. The new audience was keen but it was also cool. Such audiences are, by a familiar paradox, notoriously 'tickle o' the sere', that is, a shade too ready to laugh. Meanwhile, the text of the old play, which Shakespeare had before him, was marred by a crippling improbability: the hero, simply in order that the dramatist might spin out the suspense, and for no other reason, continually delayed. Faced with this state of affairs Shakespeare had a choice. He could either render the delay ordinarily intelligible by interposing a series of practical obstacles, or else he could foreground the very oddity of the delay, make his hero comment musingly on his own inaction, and so transform an original error of construction into a psychological mystery. He chose the second course and in so doing solved his problem with the too-cheerful audience. They could now be given, to their great delight, serious pastiche of the old play, in those scenes in which Hamlet assumes his antic disposition, but at any moment the dramatist could wipe the smiles from their faces by showing that beneath the histrionics lay something which they just did not understand:

I have that within which passeth show—  
There but the trappings and the suits of woe.  
(I. ii. 85–6)

The play thus runs on a stylistic oscillation, between a histrionic seeming and a reality which is at first light and naturalistic but is

<sup>5</sup> 'Hamlet when new', *Sewanee Review*, 61 (1953). 15–42; reprinted as 'Hamlet' in William Empson, *Essays on Shakespeare* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986), pp. 79–136.

ultimately beyond our understanding. The melodramatic style, entirely appropriate to revenge tragedy, is disparaged by Hamlet in his advice to the players, but used by him to perplex the Court.

Empson's account is vigorous and elegant, yet finally somehow dispiriting. He dispatches centuries of laboured speculation on the sources of Hamlet's inaction through a single, meta-critical move: 'You are all puzzled because you were meant to be puzzled; Hamlet is constructed as a mystery, and there's an end on't'. In certain psychological experiments doggedly conscientious academics are made to struggle with problems which they are led to believe have solutions but in fact have none. It is so with the audience and readers of *Hamlet*. There is a sense, Empson, implies, in which all that vivid adventurous thought was a waste of time.

Empson's thesis, in the simple form to which I have reduced it, resolves all difficulties by frankly placing sheer negation or absence in the centre. But this is too clear, too neat, and of course Empson knew that. Shakespeare may give us no ultimate answer but, equally, he refuses to make it unequivocally clear that no answer should be sought. The negative comfort is withheld as is the positive. Trails of suggestion are laid down, so that we can sense at once that certain interpretations, though they may indeed be irremediably speculative and insusceptible of a final determination, are manifestly more reasonable than others. With all his marvellous openness of mind, Empson brings to bear a spirit naturally and vigorously atheist, a robust confidence of absence. What is rather needed for *Hamlet* is, I would suggest, agnosticism.

Notice first how soon Hamlet's scheme of histrionic deception begins to go off the rails. At first indeed he out-Hamlets the Ur-*Hamlet* to bemuse the opposition. But, as he separates himself from all ordinary, truthful conversation with the living, his motivation decays. We sense, behind the feigned madness, a real disorder in his understanding. There is one moment, seldom picked up in the theatre, which shows this very exactly. In the play scene Hamlet says to Ophelia, 'What should a man do but be merry? For look you how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within's two hours'. Ophelia answers, 'Nay 'tis twice two months, my lord'. Hamlet answers, 'So long? Nay then, let the devil wear black, for I'll have a suit of sables. O heavens, die two months ago, and not forgotten yet!' (III. ii. 119-25) If we attend, as Empson taught us, to the shifting styles, we shall see that Hamlet speaks at first, not indeed in the ranting style, but in

the 'wild and whirling' hyperbolic manner which is similarly, though less certainly, associated with the feigned madness. Ophelia is distressed by his flippant exaggeration and answers with what must be the truth, that 'twice two', that is *four* months have elapsed. Hamlet reacts at first with the same harsh jocularity: 'I'll have a suit of sables' but then seems to drop into an ordinary speaking voice: 'Oh heavens, die two months ago and not forgotten yet?' But when at last he drops the false mannerisms, *he still gets the time wrong*; Ophelia said four months; Hamlet, thinking that he is agreeing, says two. Does he not know any more? To be sure, we could be dealing with an authorial slip, or just careless writing. But the moment can be very powerful and is in fact in principle quite easy to convey to an audience. A pause, and a frown from Ophelia will do it.

An interesting possible example of this subtle orchestration going wrong in performance is provided by the bad Quarto stage direction of V. ii. 252, directing Hamlet to leap into the grave after Laertes. The anonymous *Elegy* on the actor Richard Burbage<sup>6</sup> contains the line, 'Oft have I seen him leap into the grave'. This strongly suggests that the First Quarto stage direction is reflecting actor's practice rather than authorial intent (for the *writing* requires that Hamlet's demeanour be courteous at this point). It seems to me just possible that the *Elegy* is referring not to Shakespeare's play but to the old *Hamlet*, in which Burbage could conceivably have acted: the symmetrical structure of the line, 'No more young Hamlet, old Hieronymo' could be designed to mirror two inversely related plays by Kyd. If that were the case (since actors certainly leapt into the grave in later productions of Shakespeare's play<sup>7</sup>) it would mean that actors (themselves irremediably theatrical beings) could not resist carrying on in the manner of the old *Hamlet*, and ignored the subtler controls interposed by Shakespeare, all of which accords very well with Empson's perception of the psychology of the performance. But it remains more likely that Burbage behaved in this way in Shakespeare's plays, in which case, while we can make no inferences back to the *Ur-Hamlet*, we may still note the histrionic mis-firing—the surviving sign of a now *ungovernable* theatricality in the principal actor.

<sup>6</sup> Printed in *The Shakespeare Allusion Book: A Collection of Allusions to Shakespeare*, compiled by C. M. Ingleby, L. Toulmin-Smith and F. J. Furnivall, re-edited by John Munro (1909), re-issued with a preface by E. K. Chambers, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, London, 1932), Vol. 1, p. 272.

<sup>7</sup> See Arthur Colby Sprague, *Shakespeare and the Actors* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1948), p. 178.

Even our inner selves are nourished by relations with others. The contrast between a supposedly primary, inviolable self and outward relational behaviour can be sustained only for brief periods. Hamlet sees a real tear in the eye of the actor *playing* Aeneas but can find no emotion in himself, despite the fact that his father has actually been murdered. This prompts in him the thought that role playing can be *used*, not to deceive others but (with infinite pathos) to reconstruct some sort of motivational core, from the outside in. That is why we find at III. ii. 379 the 'Now could I drink hot blood' speech, in language which imperiously requires the 'Kyd style' of acting, but is delivered *in soliloquy*. Hamlet is now working, not upon others, but on his own, ill-nourished self.

We have passed from a logical to a psychological negative: instead of 'There is no answer' we have 'The terminal self proves to be a kind of nothingness', so that role-playing can shift from being a means of deception to being a means of constituting that which was at first seen as its antithesis. For those who relish anachronistic terms I would add, it smells of existentialism.

The critical formula, 'This is constructed as a mystery, therefore do not search for a solution', is really very odd. The feeling one gets is like the sense of sudden triviality in a philosophical argument, when someone replaces a synthetic with an analytic account; for example, A says that all voluntary action can be shown to be fundamentally egoistic if one investigates the unconscious forces involved, and B says, as if in warm agreement, that this is certainly true, since a man who acts voluntarily does what pleases him—because that is what 'voluntary' *means*.

In fact, as I have suggested, drama resists this sort of collapse into logically pure circles of non-explanation. If the audience and the good reader are to think, they must be given some food for thought. The critic who austerely abstains from the entire process on the ground that ultimate certainty is not to be had, will find himself or herself excluded from the vivid enjoyment of the rest, who are all thinking, imagining, guessing like mad.

It is curious how this sequence of critical moves recurs in history. If there is a modern Hamlet it is surely Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov. In a brilliant study Mikhail Bakhtin expressed disdain for those readers who are eager 'to philosophize with' the heroes of Dostoevsky.<sup>8</sup> L. C. Knights's rejection of motivational inference in 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?' is in the

<sup>8</sup> *Problèmes de la Poétique de Dostoevski*, traduit par Guy Verret (Éditions l'âge d'homme, Lausanne, 1970), pp. 314–16.

same mode. The Empsonian example is, however, one stage further advanced: Empson does not argue that we should stop guessing because we are given images rather than people; instead he initially accepts the fact that audiences will make inferences, but declares those inferences contentless, on the (insufficient) ground that they fail to cohere in an unambiguous conclusion.

Let us, then, obey the play not the critics. If it helps us to wonder, let us do just that. It may seem that we have slid uncritically from the mystery of the Ghost to the mystery of Hamlet, but, if we have, the offence is venial. The embodied darkness without becomes a darkness within; in Act I the Ghost is visible to all who are present; in the closet scene he is visible to Hamlet alone. Together with the negatives of death, darkness, the unknown, we are offered possible positives. There seem to be shapes in this darkness and the good critic knows that such seeming must be respected. Hamlet's 'I know not "seems"' (I: ii. 76) is in a manner savagely ironic; there is a sense in which he knows nothing else. To put the matter with an almost idiotic simplicity, it would be false to say, 'Hamlet went out on the platform one night, but there was nothing there.' Hamlet met with something, which may have been a devil, may have been nothingness somehow concentrated into an inverse, palpable intensity . . . may have been his father. And it is this last thought that burns in his mind.

There is another poem in which the dispossessed leader of his people rejects the woman who loves him, visits his father in the world of the dead and returns, strangely dehumanised, with a mission. I mean the *Aeneid* of Virgil. Virgil took the ancient episode, familiar in Homeric epic as the *nekuia* or Questioning of the Dead, and morally transformed it by causing Aeneas to meet old Anchises in the Underworld. The ghosts in Homer cry, as old Hamlet cries, for blood. Behind the dominant Shakespearean meaning, 'vengeance', an older thirst for life and substance may still, obscurely, persist (think of the special poignancy of the Ghost's references to the Queen). In particular, we find in Virgil a peculiar interpenetration of horror with good, arising from the introduction of the father-motif. The grim House of Hades becomes gradually a green world with a larger sky than ours (*Aeneid* vi, 640) before the loved father meets his son again. In *Hamlet* the ghost comes from 'sulph'rous and tormenting flames' (I. v. 3). We learn later that the flames are purgatorial, but never quite lose the sense of a loved person, in the midst of damnation, obliging the hero to damnation. *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's *nekuia*.



But what if the loved father is also hated? This is the kind of remark to which Empson applies the epithet 'profound' as a term of abuse. It comes to us from the most famous post-Shakespearean theorist of father-figures, Freud. I ought to say now that I am unpersuaded, in general, by Freud's writings. I have never been convinced that adequate evidence exists for the theory that all male infants wish to murder their fathers and ravish their mothers. Nevertheless Shakespeare who thought of everything seems almost to have thought of this too. Hamlet, when he thinks of his father, seems unable to kill Claudius. But when he thinks of Gertrude's present relationship with Claudius, he can stab and kill. The first thing to reach us in III. iv is the setting. Traditionally, this is known as the bedroom scene, but it may be more correct to place it in the Queen's 'closet'. Either way the implication, more or less direct, is that the setting is intimate, not public; after all, closets normally open into bedrooms, are the place where one gets ready for bed. Moreover, before this scene is ended there will be talk of things that are done in bed. Indeed, to think of this as a kind of bedroom scene is not a peculiarly modern aberration. In the 1714 edition of Rowe's *Shakespeare Du Guernier's* drawing, illustrating III. iv. 97, 'Do you not come your tardy son to chide?' shows a sumptuous double bed in the background.<sup>9</sup> Of course such pictures do not always reflect theatrical practice. But they certainly do reflect what arose in the mind. Near the beginning of the scene Hamlet enters the curtained room, where Polonius is now hiding. He begins almost at once to bait his mother, and the baiting follows a swiftly rising sequence from 'You have my father much offended' (III. iv. 10) to 'You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife,/And, would it were not so, you are my mother' (III. iv. 15-16) (here I follow the Second Quarto reading). It is then that he adds, so menacingly that Gertrude thinks he is about to murder her, that he will set up a glass to show her own inmost part. Gertrude's fear infects Polonius, who betrays his presence behind the arras. Hamlet—again, doubtless, because of the intimate setting—assumes that it is the King and strikes home without difficulty. The man who removed his father he cannot kill. The man who makes love to his mother he can kill.

In the dialogue which follows, the first rising sequence is re-enacted, more slowly. First we have the comparison of the two pictures in which Hamlet applies to his father the terms of

<sup>9</sup> The drawing is reproduced in the New Cambridge edition of *Hamlet*, p. 65.

classical mythology, Hyperion, Jove, Mars, Mercury, Super-ego language to the Freudians. This is followed by the reappearance, to Hamlet only, of the Ghost and that in turn is followed by the violence of '... the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,/Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love/Over the nasty sty', (III. iv. 82-4) which, equally clearly, is 'Id language'. The licentious movement in the listener's imagination from 'enseamed' meaning 'greasy' to 'semen' is assisted both by the context and by the echoic character of the word chosen. Of course such a presumption is not rigorously demonstrable. But it is part of my point that in practice theatre-goers, if not dead from the neck up, habitually indulge in such culpably loose inferences. Moreover Shakespeare knows and in some degree relies on this fact. Even Empson says, 'Some kind of sex nausea about his mother is what is really poisoning him'.<sup>10</sup> We still have not reached the full Freudian thesis: the son who is sexually jealous of the father and sexually drawn to the mother. But it is a tolerably economical explanation of what confronts us. Ockham—he of the famous razor—would be quite pleased with us.

We seem to be involved in an accelerating series of problems. If the Oedipal theory is itself baseless (as I suggested) how can such 'Oedipal' elements be present in *Hamlet* at all? Since Shakespeare cannot have derived these ideas from Freud must he not have derived them from life? But, if that is the case, can we continue to maintain that the Freudian theory is baseless? To this I offer two (less than adequate) answers. First, a theory which is implausibly asserted of all male infants is certainly much more credible if asserted of certain evidently disturbed adults. Secondly, Empson's abusive word, 'profound', may provide us with a useful clue. Freud was a verbal artist as well as a psychologist, and he specialised in *depth*—in going deeper, stripping away more coverings than any predecessor; and Shakespeare did the same. It is not so very surprising that a similarity of method should produce at times similar structures of psychological paradox. But, once more, to follow this through we must be prepared to obey the poem's imperative to guess, to assume—even, if necessary, to make temporary fools of ourselves.

The truth is, however, that Greek tragedy has a much closer analogue to Hamlet than Oedipus. I mean Orestes. For this we must go back to a yet earlier British Academy Shakespeare

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit., *Sewanee Review*, p. 202; *Essays on Shakespeare*, p. 112.

lecture, Gilbert Murray's 'Hamlet and Oedipus',<sup>11</sup> given in 1914, some thirty-five years before Ernest Jones's psychoanalytic study, *Hamlet and Oedipus*.<sup>12</sup> Murray puts his case—at least until he mounts his hobby-horse, 'the Year Spirit' near the end—with disarming modesty. He uses, primarily, *Hamlet*, Saxo Grammaticus, the Ambales Saga, Aeschylus's *Choephoroe*, Sophocles' *Electra* and Euripides' *Electra*, *Orestes*, *Iphigeneia in Tauris* and *Andromache*. The case, at first unimpressive, becomes by gradual accumulation of detail overwhelming.

Murray begins with broad resemblances. The hero is the son of a King who has been murdered and succeeded by a younger kinsman; the dead King's wife marries this inferior successor; the hero, driven by supernatural commands, avenges his father. This gives us the vertebra, as it were, of our analogy. Murray conceded that Hamlet, unlike Orestes, dies on achieving his revenge, but observes that in the earlier Scandinavian version he succeeds to the kingdom. In all the versions there is some shyness about the mother-murder: in Saxo the mother is not killed, in Shakespeare she is killed by accident, in the Greek version she is indeed deliberately killed but the horror of the killing drives the hero mad. It is important that in all the versions the hero is under the shadow of madness (Orestes, Murray says, has that in him which makes us feel that 'it is easy for him to go mad').<sup>13</sup> Like Hamlet in his mother's room, Orestes sees visions which others cannot see. Orestes is remarkable in Greek drama for soliloquy and for hesitation. This last point is put briefly by Murray but seems to me to be of immense importance for the history of drama. John Jones in his *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* brings out the difference between Euripides' Orestes in the play of that name and Aeschylus'. In the older play the hero is as it were crucified by conflicting external imperatives, but in Euripides the conflict is internalized and the tragic hero becomes the locus of hesitation, of an interior indeterminacy.<sup>14</sup> It is remarkable that the figure of Orestes should evoke from Euripides this feat of

<sup>11</sup> 'Hamlet and Orestes: a study in traditional types', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 6 (1913-14), 389-412. A slightly modified version appears in Murray's Charles Eliot Norton Lectures under the title *The Classical Tradition in Poetry* (Oxford University Press, London, 1927), pp. 205-40.

<sup>12</sup> Jones had embarked on the Hamlet-Oedipus theme earlier, in his *Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis* (International Psychoanalytical Library, London and Vienna, 1923).

<sup>13</sup> *The Classical Tradition in Poetry*, p. 210.

<sup>14</sup> Chatto and Windus, London, 1962, pp. 272-3.

dramaturgy and that Hamlet should have so similar an effect upon Shakespeare. In Euripides' *Electra* (979) Orestes suspects that the god commanding him to take vengeance may be an evil spirit in disguise and in the *Orestes* (288–93) says that his father would not have wished him to kill his mother (think here of old Hamlet's 'Nor let thy soul contrive/Against thy mother aught' (I. v. 85–6)). Orestes, like Hamlet, dissembles his true feelings, is thought to be dead, but returns. Like Hamlet (and Ambales) Orestes is given to cynically violent language against women. Indeed at *Orestes* 1590 he is given what Murray describes as 'the horrible, mad line'<sup>15</sup> in which he says that he could never weary of killing evil women. Both, Murray observes, bully any woman they are left alone with.

Finally Murray turns to odd details, some of which are very striking indeed. In both traditions the hero has been away when the action begins (Phocis, Wittenberg); in both he goes on a ship, is captured by enemies who try to murder him and escapes (*Iphigeneia in Tauris*). In Saxo,<sup>16</sup> though not in *Hamlet*, the hero ties his dead soldiers to stakes to deceive the enemy, while in Euripides' *Electra* Orestes prays to his father to 'come, bringing every dead man as a fellow-fighter' (this, Murray concedes, may be just a weird coincidence). The father in both traditions dies without due religious observances. Hamlet has his friend Horatio as Orestes has Pylades. Hamlet in the Scandinavian versions is filthy, covered with ashes and rolls on the ground. At the beginning of *Orestes* the hero is found with his sister, ghastly pale, his hair matted with dirt and in *Iphigeneia in Tauris* he foams at the mouth and rolls on the ground (307). This is not prominent in Shakespeare's play, but Hamlet does appear before Ophelia with his doublet unbraced, his stockings fouled, 'pale as his shirt' (II. i. 79–82). Although there is no Ophelia in the Greek and no Electra in the northern story, there are signs that these two figures may themselves be analogically related. The pairing of this young woman with an old man who treats her as his daughter is present in Euripides' *Electra* (493, 563). Most telling of all, in all the *Electra* plays a peculiar effect is obtained by having Orestes first sight his sister in funeral garb or in a funeral procession (*Choephoroe*, 16; Sophocles, *Electra*, 80; Euripides, *Electra*, 107).

<sup>15</sup> *The Classical Tradition in Poetry*, p. 216.

<sup>16</sup> See Saxo Grammaticus *The History of the Danes*, 2 vols. (D. S. Brewer, Cambridge; Rowman and Littlefield, Totowa, New Jersey, 1979–80), Vol. 1, p. 100.

Compare with this Hamlet's 'What the fair Ophelia?' on seeing her carried to the burial.

But what can such an analogy, intricate as it is, mean? In these days of synchronic anthropology it is somehow bad form to worry about historical connexion, about who read what or the mechanics of transmission. Yet I must confess to an unregenerate discomfort in the face of a resemblance so detailed and yet, at the same time, so signally short on visible causal links.<sup>17</sup> It is hard, indeed, to avoid the sense that we have an oddly coherent body of stories, probably having at some early date an extensive oral provenance. I do not know whether at some crucial point a Norse story-teller told the tale to a Greek or vice versa, and I imagine no one does. But some such transmission is inherently probable—much more probable than the freakish array of coincidences which otherwise confronts us.

Nor do I know whether it is fair to find in such materials corroboration of one's own interpretation of Shakespeare's unique play. I have suggested, a little nervously, that there is something odd about Hamlet's relation to his mother. When we learn that in Saxo<sup>18</sup> Hamlet remained always in his mother's house and that in the Ambales Saga<sup>19</sup> he actually slept in his mother's room, we may begin to feel that we were not after all merely imagining things. Later, when he came to write *Coriolanus* Shakespeare read in Plutarch that his hero did not leave his mother's house even when he married,<sup>20</sup> and built wonderfully on the suggestion. Shakespeare certainly read Plutarch and probably did not read Saxo. But the author of the *Ur-Hamlet*, especially if it was indeed Kyd, is quite likely to have done so. Saxo is an important source, at one or two removes. It belongs quite clearly in the direct tradition of Shakespeare's story, as ancient Greek plays do not.

Yet the analogy expounded by Gilbert Murray nags at the mind. It can even, perhaps, be made to confirm our sense that behind the revenge story of *Hamlet*, blood for blood, lies a

<sup>17</sup> William F. Hansen describes the link between Hamlet and Orestes as 'possible' but adds that certainty in this matter seems to be unattainable. See his *Saxo Grammaticus and the Life of Hamlet* (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska and London, 1983), p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> *History of the Danes*, Vol. 1, p. 84.

<sup>19</sup> Ambales Saga, *Capituli* XV, XVI and XVIII, printed with a translation in Israel Gollancz's *Hamlet in Iceland* (David Nutt, London, 1898), pp. 98–9, 101–3, 109.

<sup>20</sup> See the New Arden edition of *Coriolanus* by J. Philip Brockbank (Methuen, London, 1976), p. 317.

metaphysical drama of substance and unbeing. I saw the Ghost's persisting love for Gertrude as a kind of hunger for life in the midst of death, making him for a moment like the thirsting, bloodless shades in Homer's *Odyssey*. I suggested that Hamlet is paralysed partly because he has become one of them, a dead man walking among the living, opposite to life (which is Ophelia). Like the dead he cannot weep (tickle him and he might not laugh). All of this is grounded—but insecurely—in the text. Hamlet is dressed in black, in the garb of death; he talks to a ghost and later to skulls; his exchange with the gravedigger is a conversation of two persons expert in death. Thought to have been murdered, he returns, a lethal revenant, and kills others. Yet all these things could be turned, by an unsympathizing critic, in another, more commonsensical direction.

In the Greek tradition, however, the notion that Orestes is himself a kind of ghost is explicit (here, again, I am guided by Murray): in *Orestes* (385–6), Menelaus, meeting with Orestes, says

ὦ θεοί, τί λεύσσω; τίνα δέδορκα νερτέρων;

Gods! What do I see? Whom, of those that live in this Underworld, am I looking at?

And Orestes answers

εἶ γ' εἶπας· οὐ γὰρ ζῶ κακοῖς, φάος δ' ὄρω.

You say well. By reason of the evils I have suffered, I live not, but I see the light of day.

Later in the same play the messenger tells of the citizen who alerted him to this sudden appearance of Orestes: 'He said to me, "Can't you see Orestes walking near, to run the race of death?" and I saw the unlooked for phantom' (877–8). As Murray observed, Hamlet's sudden advancing to meet Laertes, in the funeral scene, 'This is I,/Hamlet the Dane' (V. i. 254–5) is like *Andromache*, 884, 'It is I, Agamemnon's and Clytemnestra's son, Orestes'. *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, 1361, has a similar ring: the self-announcing apparition. Moreover this is the play in which Orestes interrupts his own funeral rites (at line 67). When Hamlet says, 'Horatio, I am dead,/Thou liv'st' (V. ii. 289–90) the immediate meaning is, as at the opening, followed by a larger meaning which fills the play, this time retrospectively. Again a

minor linguistic abnormality, the proleptic 'I am dead' for 'I am dying' (a little like the modern idiom, 'I am as good as dead') carries a potent charge. We are dealing, I surmise, with what must now be seen as an ancient European story, and that is public matter. Again—may we say?—the fear of a merely subjective reaction is less than it was. Presentiment looks more like intuition.

I have moved from a meta-critical insistence on the impossibility of explanation (Empson) to psychoanalysis and thence to ancient story patterns which, while they tend to confirm our sense of a certain strangeness in Hamlet's relation to his mother and Ophelia, push the range of reference further into the darkness, so to speak, forcing us to confront once more the embodied death and negation from which we began.

There has been much talk about this play because, I suggest, Shakespeare has given us much to talk about. There is meat for the psychologically minded and for the philosophically minded. The brilliant interplay of the substantial with the artificially (theatrically) constituted self is answered at another level by a disturbing displacement of sexual feeling. But the beginning and end of the play is death. That is why the powerful, complex analogy with Orestes is *critically* more fruitful than the looser analogy with Oedipus. Wittgenstein said that death is not an event in life (*Tractatus* 6. 4311). It is a philosophically imaginative remark, and full of the philosopher's contempt for the more usual uses of the imagination. It respects the logical uniqueness of death, which is, in the words of another philosopher, 'itself, and not another thing'. It reminds us of our confinement to life; when we think we talk about death, we really talk about dying or else, because of some natural intolerance of pure negation, we use our intelligence, as Richard II did, to people a vacuity—with ghosts, machinery of punishment—images, suitably darkened, drawn from our own order of things. Faced with this philosophic challenge, *Hamlet* fares better than most works of literature. Lewis was right to insist that it forces us to think not just about dying, but about 'being dead'.<sup>21</sup> For every more or less palpable image Shakespeare offers a correlative, undermining doubt. The ghost may not be a ghost. Startlingly, the Christian scheme of afterlife may be a delusion (the *play* raises this possibility, though only at moments). Death is not the metallically hard, systematic

<sup>21</sup> *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 28 (1942), p. 149; *Selected Literary Essays*, p. 99.

landscape of Dante nor is it plainly the simplified scheme of the Reformers. It is an undiscovered country, or a dream-invaded sleep. The days have passed when scholars could pretend that agnostic thought was simply impossible in Elizabethan times. Indeed, faced with the text of *Hamlet*, one wonders how they could ever have done so.

The drama, however, hinges upon the initial encounter, and an encounter must be with something. This element of the play, one supposes, Wittgenstein would condemn as self-indulgence. I have argued that inferences and associations which may appear under the searchlight of a sceptical investigation to be less than rigorous are not only permissible but in a way essential to a full critical response. It does not follow that any comparison is as apposite as any other. The story of Hamlet is nothing like the story of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5). But it is a little like that most haunting of Biblical narratives, which tells how Jacob met a man and wrestled with him until the light came (Genesis 32). Traditionally the story is known as: 'Jacob and the Angel' but the Bible itself seems to say what tradition dare not repeat: that Jacob wrestled with God. Gunkel in his commentary on Genesis<sup>22</sup> assembles copious analogues, showing the pattern of the ambiguous spirit who must depart when dawn breaks: 'It faded on the crowing of the cock' (*Hamlet*, I. i. 138). I might have struggled to frame from these materials some sort of bridge to the Hamlet story. But my own licentious imagination, which is not perhaps so very unusual, made the step long before I knew anything of Gunkel's work. Hamlet never engages in physical combat with the majestic being he meets in the night, but there is a sense in which the rest of the play is taken up with his wrestling with the Ghost. We may think also of 'Loving Mad Tom' in which the world of darkness and death throws up an emissary and a challenge:

With an host of furious fancies  
 Wherof I am commander,  
 With a burning spear and a horse of air  
 To the wilderness I wander.

<sup>22</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis: Übersetzt und Erklärt* (Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1964), pp. 359–65. Cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. John Marks (SCM Press, London, 1972), p. 321.



By a Knight of ghosts and shadows  
 I summoned am to tourney  
 Ten leagues beyond the wide world's end.  
 Methinks it is no journey.<sup>23</sup>

Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is more than a *jeu d'esprit*. His question, 'Where do they go when they leave the drama?' is in profound accord with Shakespeare's play, though he is readier than Shakespeare could ever be to defuse primitive anxieties with logical jokes. In *Timon of Athens* Shakespeare was to dramatize negation in a manner more acceptable, I suspect, to such as Wittgenstein. There, no images are in the end allowed. Timon's epitaph is worn away by the sea and he himself is no more. The emptiness, in all its intellectual purity, is almost fatal to the drama.

The implied argument I have attached to the name of Wittgenstein works in this way: the very force of *Hamlet*, which must be at bottom a force of imagery, presupposes an intellectual softness, an impulse self-indulgently to tame the unimaginable with conventional pictures. This argument would, I suppose, have seemed strong to many philosophers in the 1950s and '60s. But now philosophers seem less willing to dismiss as merely incoherent Hamlet's words 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (I. v. 168–9). Perhaps it is the play rather than twentieth-century philosophy which perceives the full extent of our ignorance. If we do not know that death is any particular thing, equally we do not know that it excludes or is not any particular thing. If death is a sleep, there may be dreams in that sleep, and what kind of thing would that be . . . ? Even today, in 1988, in clear daylight, do we know with confidence the answer to Barnardo's question: 'Who's there?'

<sup>23</sup> *The New Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250–1950*, ed. Helen Gardner (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972), p. 371.