

SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

HAMLET AND OPHELIA

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IN the interpretation of *Hamlet* criticism has found many problems; but none has proved more puzzling than the hero's treatment of Ophelia in the so-called 'nunnery scene'. Dr. Johnson saw in this Hamlet's 'useless and wanton cruelty' to one who was young and beautiful, harmless and pious. But Professor Dover Wilson defends Hamlet at some length by explaining how he must regard Ophelia as a jilt and a dissembler. It is usual to stress her playing the decoy, and to speak of her 'betraying' Hamlet. Sir Edmund Chambers may stand for many who deplore her weakness. Others have seen her as a light o' love; Dame Rebecca West tells us roundly that 'she was not a chaste young woman'; and there used to be a theory, favoured by some nineteenth-century German critics and still occasionally revived, that she was actually Hamlet's mistress. Yet Professor G. R. Elliott praises her 'religious strength' and perceives in her the symbol of 'the Christian charity . . . which Hamlet needs'. Professor Leo Kirschbaum, on the other hand, regards her as pitifully out of her depth in Hamlet's 'spiritual milieu'.¹ Amid such diverse opinions I feel nearly as bewildered as Ophelia herself. They do not encourage me to hope that anything I say about the problem will be universally acceptable; but at least they may excuse my wish to re-examine it.

The nunnery scene has its origin in the early versions of the Hamlet story. In Saxo and Belleforest, when Hamlet pretends to be mad, in order to test the genuineness of his madness the King employs a beautiful woman to try her charms upon him. This is the beautiful woman's role, and in Saxo and Belleforest it is the whole of it. In Shakespeare, however—with or without

¹ Johnson (ed.), *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, 1775, viii. 311; Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet*, 1935, pp. 125 ff.; Chambers, *Shakespeare: A Survey*, 1925, pp. 187-8; R. West, *The Court and the Castle*, 1958, p. 15; Elliott, *Scourge and Minister*, 1951, pp. xxx-xxxi; Kirschbaum, 'Hamlet and Ophelia', *Philological Quarterly*, xxxv (1956), 388.

the precedent of the lost English play of *Hamlet*—this single episode has become the middle of a story which has also a beginning and an end. And it is the beginning and the end which give the middle its significance.

The beginning of the story is that Hamlet loves Ophelia; and the character of his love is plainly told us by Ophelia herself in three short speeches to her father, who demands to know 'the truth'. Hamlet has made many 'tenders of his affection', 'in honourable fashion', and with 'holy vows of heaven'. Whatever doubts may be cast upon them, now or later, the memory of those 'holy vows of heaven' will stay with us throughout the play. Yet the end of Ophelia's story, when she drowns hanging garlands on a willow, is a death emblematic of forsaken love; and the flowers that should have decked her bride-bed are strewn upon her grave. It is now that we get from the Queen the most explicit statement of what Hamlet's love had looked to: 'I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife.' But that this was also Hamlet's hope we may gather from those 'holy vows' at the beginning and the love so far beyond a brother's that he now at the end declares: 'I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers Could not . . . Make up my sum.' Ophelia is the woman Hamlet had wished to marry. Yet the disastrous end of initial hope has come about through an encounter in which he has stormed at her to get her to a nunnery. This encounter is clearly the moment of crisis in Hamlet's relations with Ophelia; and that is why, if we would appreciate Ophelia's function in the play, we must try to understand its meaning.

The dramatic impact of the nunnery scene is very great; and the more so since it is most artfully prepared for. Remarkably enough, until it occurs, almost at the middle of the play, we are never allowed to see Hamlet and Ophelia meet, though we have known from the first that they inevitably must. This long deferment holds us in suspense, while everything is being done to enhance our curiosity and ensure that, when they do meet, their encounter will have the maximum effect.

Preparation begins from the moment that Hamlet's love is introduced. The first reference to it is when Ophelia's brother warns her to 'fear' Hamlet's 'trifling' with her chastity. This is before we hear anything of 'holy vows', which her father at once suspects of commending 'unholy suits'. The suspicions of Ophelia's father and brother arouse our apprehension that the course of love will not run smooth, and, with Shakespeare's flair

for opening up a dramatic situation, this very scene, which tells of Hamlet's love, has Ophelia promising to give her lover up.

For her obedience to her father Ophelia has been much blamed. This was not, it is observed, the way of Juliet and Desdemona, who defied their fathers in the cause of love. But the simple answer to this is that Ophelia is in a different play—and a play to which the conventions of romantic love-story, where fathers exist in order to be circumvented, have singularly little relevance. The first premiss of *Hamlet* is that sons must avenge their fathers; and a play which required sons to avenge and daughters to flout their fathers would be in danger of moral chaos. Nor ought respect for a father to prove so hard to tolerate. The sixteenth century enjoined it, Shakespeare certainly approved of it, and instances of it are occasionally met with even at the present day. The natural bonds of the family are as strong for Ophelia as for Hamlet, as the play will show. It is not unimportant that the first words it gives Ophelia to speak assure her brother she will write to him; and when this admirable sister shows herself an obedient daughter by ceasing communication with Hamlet, we should not be surprised and should certainly not reproach her but should look forward to developments.

Developments are swift. For the next we see of Ophelia is when she enters terrified by Hamlet's strange apparition in her closet. The 'doublet all unbraced', ungartered stockings, and the rest Polonius immediately recognizes as the symptoms of love-madness, and they are in the play in order that he shall. But what Polonius sees as madness we are invited to regard as feigning. For Hamlet has already warned us that he will 'put on' some 'strange or odd' behaviour; and though the scholars tell us that two months have intervened, for an audience, who go by playing time, it is no longer ago than it takes to speak a mere eighty lines of verse since Hamlet made the promise which now seems to receive its Q.E.D. Yet this first account of 'strange or odd' behaviour disturbs us with its hints of something more mysterious and profound. That sigh of Hamlet's, which Polonius ascribes to a distracted lover and we to a feigned madman, 'did seem to shatter all his bulk And end his being'. More has happened to Hamlet, as we know, than Ophelia's denying him. Yet it cannot be an accident that this first evidence of his so ambiguous madness is connected with Ophelia. Her description of how he went from her, finding his way 'without his eyes' and bending their light upon her to the

last, haunts us. It is a parting reluctant yet of a spell-like compulsion; and it gives, of course, an image and foreshadowing of that later parting, which the nunnery scene will enact.

The closet episode, with its complex of suggestions, leaves us tantalized. And its effect is not diminished when we now find all the court in alarm about Hamlet's 'transformation' and Polonius arriving to expound his theory of it. To tell the court what Ophelia told him would be natural, but in drama tiresomely repetitive. So instead he reads a letter. We need not ask, as the commentators do, when Hamlet could have written this letter or Ophelia received it. What matters is its introduction at this point. Though this has been disputed, it is certainly a love-letter, but as certainly a strange one. The author of Shakespeare's sonnets could obviously have done better by Hamlet had he wished. The art of the letter, I take it, is neither to confirm nor yet dispel the notion of love-madness. It sustains mystification; and the touch of comedy in Polonius's fussy self-importance can be used to relax tension without surrendering suspense. Indeed comedy acquires an edge of irony as expectation grows that Polonius is due to be confounded. The more he insists that all is clear, the more we feel that all is yet to be explained. When he comes to his plot to confront Hamlet with Ophelia, we eagerly await the promised meeting.

There is ample excuse for the bad quarto to move on to it at once. But the authentic text of the second quarto shows Shakespeare still postponing it. Yet if we are still to be denied the expected encounter with Ophelia, what better could we have instead than an encounter with her father, who boasts of reading Hamlet's riddle? This will more than satisfy us for the moment by beginning his confounding, while raising interest even higher in what is still to come. When Hamlet enters for Polonius to 'board' him, this is the first time that we see him since the 'transformation' of which we have heard so much. Immediate demonstration is essential, and is delightfully provided when Polonius's too pointed query, 'Do you know me, my lord?', wins the instant retort, 'You are a fishmonger.' Applied to Polonius in its literal sense, the word has a shattering incongruity, which its cant use for a wencher, if we know it, may redouble. Polonius disclaims it, Hamlet talks of the rarity of an honest man, goes on to a dead dog, and ejects 'Have you a daughter?', thereby introducing with an agreeable shock the very topic the play requires them to discuss. All this confirms Polonius in his view that Hamlet is 'far gone', and

on Ophelia's account, but permits us to suppose that Hamlet, like Touchstone and other licensed fools, is using his folly like a stalking-horse under cover of which to shoot his wit. Yet the role of the fool is one that Shakespeare often uses to hint at more than sanity can state, and with the line already blurred between the feint of madness and a genuine disturbance, we get glimpses through the mad talk of what is stirring deep in Hamlet's mind. Polonius's daughter comes into the dialogue in a context highly charged. Fishmongers were popularly associated with loose women, whether as their fathers or procurers, and 'honest' has a second meaning, with which women are concerned. A sudden leap brings us to polluted procreation. 'If the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion—'. 'Carrion', too, has a second meaning, and from kissing and breeding to the woman who may do these a train of thought is clear. It is a pity Warburton perplexed it by emending to 'a *god* kissing carrion', which Johnson thought a 'noble' reading and which some scholars still defend. 'A good kissing carrion', like a good eating apple—to cite a parallel which I think was Percy Simpson's—is one well suited for the purpose. The dead dog which the sun embraces is prolific. The analogy with Polonius's daughter is not perhaps a pretty one; but at least it will be plain why Hamlet says, 'Let her not walk i' th' sun.' Knowing that Polonius is planning to 'loose' his daughter to the Prince, we may find the warning apt. That 'conception is a blessing' Hamlet punningly acknowledges; but with the maggots of the dead dog in mind we may have our reservations, and we must be ready for Hamlet's recoil. 'As your daughter may conceive—friend, look to't.' The warning given to Polonius is to guard his daughter from the destiny of her womanhood. This must be still in Hamlet's mind when on Polonius's next appearance he addresses him as Jephthah. For Jephthah too had a 'fair daughter', as Hamlet indeed tells us by quoting a popular ballad. What he does not tell us, but what the completed ballad would, and what in any case we ought to know, is that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter while she was still a virgin. And though Polonius, along with most Shakespearian commentators, fails to see this point, it does something to explain why Hamlet, when he meets Ophelia, directs her to a nunnery. The Jephthah allusion by itself would be enough to refute that queer theory that Ophelia was Hamlet's mistress. What the play suggests is not that Hamlet seduces her but that he condemns her to virginity. This is what the nunnery scene does.

When now at last the lovers meet, for the first time in the play, we are keyed up with expectancy. We know that Ophelia has first accepted and then rejected Hamlet's love addresses. We know that Polonius believes this has driven Hamlet mad. We share Polonius's view that Hamlet's strangeness is connected with Ophelia. But I think we do not share his view of what the connexion is. When Ophelia now repeats her rejection of Hamlet's love, on the stage before our eyes, by giving him back his lover's gifts, the moment is supremely tense. Yet whatever we expect from this, it will hardly be what happens. For the first astonishing thing about their conversation, though insufficiently remarked on, is that the expected roles of the lovers are reversed. Ophelia, to be sure, has denied Hamlet access to her; but it is she, not he, who speaks of the 'many a day' since they have met. And though she returns Hamlet's gifts, it is not she but he who now repudiates their love. He does not complain of getting his gifts back; he says he never gave them. It is not the receiver but the giver of the gifts who proves 'unkind', so that instead of his reproaching her with inconstancy, she reproaches him. This runs so much counter to what Polonius, at least, would have led us to expect that many regard it as duplicity on Ophelia's part. Professor Dover Wilson, for example, says, 'She, the jilt, is accusing him of coldness towards her.'¹ But this is to ignore that Hamlet has just disowned the tokens of his love. It is not Ophelia only, it is the play itself which now presents the estrangement as of Hamlet's making. When Hamlet says, 'I never gave you aught', I cannot think it just for Professor Dover Wilson to put the stress on *you*—'I never gave *you* aught'—as though Hamlet charges a fickle Ophelia with having become another person. Her reply shows that she has not. It is true that some have heard in it the tones of calculation. Interpretation can be very subjective; and I am aware of that risk in my own. Yet I am fairly certain that a character in an Elizabethan play is not to be judged insincere for speaking in a rhyming couplet. The woman who returns the gifts is the same as first spoke of Hamlet's love. For her the gifts are 'remembrances', and when he chooses to deny them, she recalls the 'words of so sweet breath composed As made the things more rich', whose 'perfume' now is 'lost'. What *we* may recall is that her brother told her at the beginning to esteem Hamlet's love like a 'violet', with a 'perfume' 'sweet not lasting'. The ironic echo is poignant; and there will shortly be another. Her father warned her at the

¹ *What Happens in Hamlet*, p. 130.

beginning, 'Do not believe his vows'; but now it is Hamlet himself who says, 'You should not have believed me.' The theory, whether Polonius's or ours, that what is troubling Hamlet is Ophelia's unkindness can hardly explain *this*. If the gifts which she holds out to him seem at first to image *her* denial of love, they stay on the stage between them as the sign of *his*.

What then of the usual theory that Hamlet treats Ophelia as he does because she has betrayed him? Making Hamlet in our own image, we require him to resent her stopping the addresses she at first was ready to receive; but if he does, he never lets us know. The ways of madness, real or feigned, are legitimately extraordinary. Yet Hamlet's madness is at the dramatist's service, and if it serves him by being extraordinary, it must also be extraordinary in a significant way. And what I find both extraordinary and significant is that Hamlet reproaches Ophelia not for refusing his love but for having once accepted it under the illusion that he gave it. We are perhaps at liberty to suppose that Ophelia's repelling him has contributed to this extraordinary behaviour; but that is something the play now chooses not to stress. What I think it comes to is that Ophelia's repelling Hamlet is a necessary part of the dramatic plot, which Shakespeare manipulates with his customary dramatic skill. With Polonius's help it provides the occasion for the nunnery scene. But the use that is made of that occasion when it arrives suggests that Hamlet's imagination, and that of the dramatist who creates him, is involved with something deeper. And the conversations with Polonius have given dark hints of what it is.

Now certainly Hamlet distrusts Ophelia. In one of his sudden, bewildering questions he asks her, 'Are you honest?' If we think Ophelia has played him fast and loose, the question may seem pertinent. It comes just when she has returned his gifts. But it also comes just when she has shown how much she cherished them. This is what makes it particularly cruel. To Ophelia, whose beauty he has praised, Hamlet now maintains that beauty and honesty do not go together.

The power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness.

Ophelia's danger is apparent. Hamlet told her father to keep her from the sun; he tells her to 'admit no discourse' to her beauty. I take this to be less an accusation than a warning. But Ophelia has no fears of herself. She appears to believe that a

woman's love may be pure. What Hamlet thinks about this, already glanced at in his talk about the carrion in the sun, about kissing, conception, and breeding, will now be more explicit. 'Why, wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?' This question editors always punctuate in a way that seems to me mistaken. The 'why' is not, I think, an interrogative ('Why wouldst thou . . .?'), as though Hamlet seeks a reason for a curious predilection on Ophelia's part. I take 'why' as an interjection. It is a favourite with Hamlet and conveys expostulation. 'Why, wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?' There is one means other than Jephthah's to save Ophelia from this fate. And I note that it is just at this point that Hamlet first bids Ophelia to get her 'to a nunnery'.

Hamlet's objection to Ophelia, then, is that she is a woman, and a woman he has loved. He has come to know what women are, and Ophelia has to be shown. He does not accuse her of having betrayed him; he implies that she inevitably will. He lays out for her her character; but the sins for which he reviles her—unfaithfulness, dissimulation, wantonness—are less her own than the sins of all her sex. To the woman he had hoped to marry he delivers a diatribe against marriage, insisting that there shall be no more of it.

Yet there are two parties to marriage, and we must surely think, as Hamlet does, of both. His protest, 'Wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?', when regarded merely as denunciation of Ophelia, as it often is, is interpreted in too limited a sense. Though Hamlet sees in Ophelia the nature of a woman and all the sins that belong to it, his first speech to her in this scene—and that means in the play itself—refers not to her sins but to his.

Nymph, in thy orisons

Be all my sins remembered.

This is sometimes taken as sarcasm; but Johnson, with good reason, thought it a 'grave and solemn' address; and if sarcasm it is, like other of Hamlet's sarcasms it hides something underneath. That Hamlet has in mind his condition of sinful man will presently appear when he refers to the human stock from which he springs. The Queen had hoped that Ophelia's virtues would restore her ailing son; but Hamlet knows that virtue itself cannot eliminate his taint. Is that not why he could not love, and why Ophelia should not have received the love he offered? In one significant speech these thoughts all come together:

You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not.

Is it not because he is what he is that she should not have believed him? It is now, when she twice confesses that she has, that he breaks out, 'Get thee to a nunnery. Why, wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?' Though he has asked her if she is honest and will presently proceed to her sins, it is again of his own sins that he first speaks.

I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me.

She should not have believed him, and she must not.

What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? . . . Believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery.

Far from valuing his love too little, she has valued it too well. So he not only denies his own love; he would also extinguish hers. It is not only herself that the nunnery is to save her from. If Hamlet cannot marry Ophelia, it is equally important that she must not marry him.

The nunnery scene, then, dramatizes with the utmost force and vividness Hamlet's parting from Ophelia and some complex reasons for it. The end of their interview confirms what the beginning of it suggested, that it is not Ophelia who has abandoned him but he who abandons her. Five times he bids her to a nunnery, and three times says 'Farewell', finally going off in rage while she is left solitary on the stage, 'deject and wretched', to recall once more those 'musicked vows' of which she has 'sucked the honey' and which we have just heard him disown. The scene has shown us that she has treasured Hamlet's love; it suggests that she has returned it; and may I not now add that she loves him still? The grief which she expresses is less for her plight than for his. When he poured abuse upon her, she prayed Heaven to restore him; and she says less of herself forsaken than of his noble mind now wrecked. The critic who pronounces her soliloquy 'all surface and starch'¹ may judge less well than Coleridge, who saw in it the exquisite unselfishness of love.² I do not think the play which gives her this soliloquy means to present Ophelia as a loose woman or a traitor.

But what are we to say about her famous lie? When Hamlet suddenly asks her, 'Where's your father?', and she replies, 'At home', we gasp. For those who see her as the betrayer, this is

¹ Kirschbaum, loc. cit.

² *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor, Everyman edn., i. 27.

the climax of her treachery. Kittredge, however, in a very interesting note, defends it as her only possible answer. She could hardly say, 'My father is behind the arras.' The lie is forced upon her, and we could add that she tells it plainly and without equivocation. But I do not find such arguments entirely satisfactory; for the play, had it wished to, could have saved her from her lie by sparing her Hamlet's question. Her answer is as staggering as the question, and that is one reason why Ophelia must give it. It forces upon our attention, and in the most sensational way, what we may by this time be in danger of forgetting, that Polonius is not 'at home', but close at hand. The crux, of course, is whether Hamlet is supposed to know this too. There is a well-known stage tradition for Polonius to betray his presence at this point, usually by peering through a curtain; and a common interpretation is that Hamlet seizes his opportunity to catch Ophelia out, and that his manner to her consequently changes from now on. His manner must be what the actor makes it, and if the actor exhibits mounting fury, the text will give him some support. But the text shows Hamlet making no more reference to Ophelia's lie than he has done to her repelling of his suit. I remember again that the ways of a suspected madman may be strange; but I may still observe that Hamlet does not say that women are liars, who betray their lovers to their fathers, and plot with their enemies against them. It is the critics who say this. What Hamlet says is that women are wantons, who give themselves faces God did not, and make cuckolds of their husbands—all of which has little to do with the lie Ophelia has just told but much to do with what he has been saying to her before. He has already put her honesty in question, maintained that beautiful women cannot be expected to stay chaste, and warned her against breeding sinners. He goes on to warn her against marriage. He has already recommended a nunnery twice; he now does so three times more. I have come across the proposal that when he first says, 'Get thee to a nunnery', he should speak the words with tenderness, as though anxious for her safety, and then, on discovering Polonius and the trick, he should change his tone to anger; and the scene could obviously be played in that way. But that the nunnery is first a literal one and then becomes a brothel,¹ and that the actor's voice and gesture can convey this, is something I take leave to doubt. When the nunnery, at whatever stage, becomes a brothel, it becomes, I suspect, a red herring.

¹ Cf. *Hamlet*, ed. J. Q. Adams, 1929, pp. 258-60.

The question, 'Where's your father?', interrupts the dialogue in Hamlet's characteristically disconcerting way; but it does not deflect its course. That others before me have perceived this is evident from the practice of some producers of making Hamlet detect Polonius much earlier in the scene—when he asks Ophelia if she is honest, or even when she first offers to return the gifts. But this does not much improve matters, since, as we have seen, the route which brings us to the nunnery has come via Jephthah's daughter from the carrion in the sun. If Hamlet is aware of Polonius's trick at all, must he not be aware of it from the outset? Professor Dover Wilson has some logic on his side in deciding that Hamlet must overhear Polonius propose it, and he invents a new stage-direction to enable him to do so. Elizabethan play-texts being what they are, their stage-directions are often insufficient. But they are only insufficient when they fail to indicate some action which the dialogue necessitates or implies. And an editor who supplements them must be careful not to lead the dialogue when the dialogue should lead him.

Now in the matter of overhearing on the stage the Elizabethans had conventions, and an instructive article by Miss Helen Gardner¹ has shown us what they were. Shakespearian eavesdroppers declare themselves to us as such, as indeed dramatic effect requires and as Polonius and Claudius very elaborately do. They explain that they will be 'behind an arras' to 'mark the encounter' of Hamlet and Ophelia; and when the encounter is over Polonius says, 'We heard it all.' But Hamlet is less helpful. He does not say, 'I heard it all.' He leaves Professor Dover Wilson to infer this. In the converse situation, when a character who is spied on has knowledge of the spies, he must likewise make it clear to us. And that is another dramatic duty which Hamlet fails to perform. Whatever we may think of the trick now being played on him, I find no evidence that Hamlet ever thinks, or knows, of it at all.

To the conventions which Miss Gardner has expounded, I should like to add another, best seen in an example. In *Henry IV* there is an episode in which Prince Hal and Poins arrange to spy on Falstaff with his whore. And no sooner have they taken up their places than Doll Tearsheet obligingly inquires, 'What humour's the Prince of?', with the result that the listeners hear something about themselves. Am I to suppose, as some indeed have done, that they are recognized by Doll Tearsheet, who

¹ 'Lawful Espials', *Modern Language Review*, xxxiii (1938), 345 ff.

deliberately leads Falstaff on? I am glad to find that the learned Variorum editor says that I need not. In fact Doll asks about the Prince not because she knows, but because the audience know, that the Prince is within earshot. She requires no further motive for her question; the design it serves is not the speaker's but the play's. And dramatic convention readily permits this. Hamlet's question is no doubt less simple: while fixing on the unseen listener, it also exhibits the workings of Hamlet's mind. But the dramatic convention is fundamentally the same. Indeed it is precisely this convention that allows Hamlet to remind *us* of Polonius's presence and still be his surprising, incalculable self. Those critics and producers who make Hamlet discover where Polonius is provide him with so crude a reason for his question as to destroy half of its effect. That Polonius shall hear what Hamlet says is less Hamlet's purpose than the purpose of the play in which he figures.

It is to assist this purpose of the play that Ophelia must tell her lie. When she says her father is 'at home', Hamlet is able to retort, 'Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool nowhere but in's own house.' Whatever Hamlet has in mind by this, it is certain that the dramatist has more. For the play will show how Polonius, by not keeping to his own house, by playing the fool once more behind an arras, comes to grief. The fate of the second unseen listener is also now anticipated. We know that Hamlet must ultimately kill the King; and he gives us here the promise that he will. 'Those that are married already, all but one, shall live.' But again, what the play requires is not that Hamlet shall know, but that we shall know, that the King is there to hear it.

The opportunity for such dramatic piquancies was far too good for an accomplished dramatist to miss. But as Shakespeare's art exploits it, there is more than a brief thrill. The situation of Ophelia at the moment of her crisis is combined and involved with the other situations out of which Hamlet's tragedy develops. While Hamlet is announcing to Ophelia her fate, he foreshadows the fates of Polonius and the King; while he is bidding her to the nunnery, he reminds us of his duty of revenge. And the marriage that will not now take place is linked with one that has taken place already. The conjoining of these situations here is but one sign of the play's intense imaginative coherence. It is in the context of Hamlet's revenge and his mother's marriage that Ophelia's story is shaped, and it is of course within the larger drama of Hamlet's revenge and

his mother's marriage—though I can speak of these but briefly—that Hamlet's relations with Ophelia have their deepest significance.

Before we know anything of Hamlet's vows to Ophelia, or indeed of Ophelia's existence, his revulsion from his mother's marriage is deeply impressed upon us. It is the marriage of one who, having hung upon a loving husband, accepts the embraces of his brother, posting with 'wicked speed' to 'incestuous sheets'. The Ghost that comes to tell Hamlet of his father's murder enlarges also on his mother's filthy lust; and these awful revelations will still be in our minds when we hear of Hamlet in Ophelia's closet looking like one 'loosed out of hell To speak of horrors'. His distracted state, which Polonius ascribes to disappointed love, is connected by the Queen with her 'o'er-hasty marriage'. 'Frailty, thy name is woman!' was Hamlet's bitter comment on what his mother's marriage showed him, and when at length we find him with Ophelia, it is of woman's frailty that he speaks and the sins that it engenders. The play represents him in the nunnery scene turning from Ophelia in anger and despair, and at once goes on, in its big central scene, where all its various actions intertwine, to show him for the first and only time with his mother and Ophelia together. The primary purpose of the play-within-the-play is no doubt to 'catch the conscience of the King'; but it also makes assault upon the conscience of the Queen. The imaging of her worthless love Hamlet watches, as the dialogue is at some pains to emphasize, from a place at Ophelia's feet. He draws Ophelia's attention to how cheerfully his mother sits by her new husband with her first one but just dead; and it is when the dumb-show has presented the fickleness of a royal wife that he taunts Ophelia with the brevity of woman's love. The re-enacting of his mother's story is framed by his bitter jests to Ophelia, which make her who has received his holy vows the object now of every lewd insinuation. For her share in this dialogue Ophelia's character has suffered much at the commentators' hands; but an examination of the dialogue will show, I think, that the obscene equivocations are all in Hamlet's part. The worst that we can say of her is that she appears to understand them. The explication of them, which editors forbear to give, I need not supply. It will be enough to say that they run all the time upon the sexual organs and their use in copulation. A final thrust about how women take their husbands is Hamlet's last word to Ophelia in the play.

To his mother he will speak further. For the play-scene is presently to be followed by a scene between Hamlet and his mother, just as it was preceded by a scene between Hamlet and Ophelia. These two scenes, in which he denounces each of them in turn, balance one another in the structure of the play, and set the marriage which is not to be against the marriage which is in being. In the interview with his mother Hamlet makes no mention of Ophelia; but the patterning of a play may often suggest to us what the dialogue cannot make explicit. It is impossible that we should not think of her. If 'hell' can mutiny 'in a matron's bones', Hamlet bursts out, the virtue of a youthful love may 'melt' in its own 'fire'. How should Ophelia be honest? Hamlet's mother has transformed marriage. She has done an act that

takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love
And sets a blister there, makes marriage vows
As false as dicers' oaths, O, such a deed
As from the body of contraction plucks
The very soul.

For the rose of love Hamlet sees the blister of the harlot; with the soul gone out of marriage, grossness alone remains. There must be no more marriage.

It is ironic that Gertrude, who feared that Hamlet's 'dis-temper' had to do with her marriage, should have hoped that Ophelia's virtues might help to cure him of it. It is still more ironic that the Queen at Ophelia's graveside should confess her hope that Ophelia should have been Hamlet's wife. And the description of the lovelorn maiden drowning beneath the willow acquires an extra poignancy from the fact that Gertrude speaks it. It is not usual for dramatists to make a royal personage the nuntius, and it cannot be an accident that Shakespeare does so here. Instead of asking whether the speech is out of character, or labelling it, with Kittredge, more lyrical than dramatic, should we not rather appreciate this sharp dramatic point?

In the dramatic ordering of the play the connexion between Gertrude and Ophelia is everywhere implicit. Why is it to the King and Queen that Ophelia must sing her mad songs? But I must leave Ophelia for a moment to say something more of Hamlet.

By what his mother is he feels himself contaminated. Her union with her husband's brother, revolting as it is as a violation

of natural law, is made still worse by the antithesis between the brothers. They are compared by Hamlet, when he first cries out upon the marriage, to Hyperion and a satyr. Before we know about the murder, the dead and living brothers may already appear in the imagination as something more than themselves. The god in man has died unmourned, and the beast usurps his place. The task imposed upon Hamlet, that of avenging his father, we may see, as I have suggested elsewhere,¹ as the reassertion of the god by the destruction of the beast. The strongest bonds of nature compel Hamlet to respond to the call of his father's spirit, but with his uncle ruling his father's kingdom and married to his mother, he finds himself in a world of grossness; and though his soul condemns it and he would isolate himself from it, he knows himself a part of it. He swears that the Ghost's commandment 'all alone shall live' within his brain 'unmixed with baser matter'. But from his lot of man the 'baser matter' can never be eliminated, as he does not long forget. He dedicates himself to his task, saying, 'I will go pray'; but even as he does so, he adds, 'for my own poor part', and thinking of 'so poor a man as Hamlet is', he knows that his noble mission is also his curse. When he shows his mother the pictures of her two husbands, he describes to her a wondrous man on whom 'every god did seem to set his seal', and whose 'empire' a 'vice of kings' has stolen. But hardly has he said this than his father's spirit, whom he has sworn to remember, reappears to warn him of forgetfulness. The 'tardy son' is chided for the deed he has neglected; while the corpse of Polonius lies there to show what he has done instead. The revenge plot, like the marriage plot, is a double one. The destined avenger of a father's murder becomes in a secondary action the killer of another's father and dies as the object of another son's revenge at the moment when he achieves his own. This paradox in the action of the play gives great dramatic tension to its catastrophe; but it also enlarges the whole revenge situation to symbolize that mysterious duality in man's nature upon which Hamlet continually reflects. It reveals to us how the same man may fulfil both parts, how he who is called to right wrong is also capable of perpetrating it. Hamlet requites Claudius for his crime; but he shares something of his guilt. When Hamlet at length resolves to kill the King he knows that it is 'perfect conscience' to remove 'this canker of our nature'. But is it not

¹ 'The Tragedy of Revenge in Shakespeare and Webster', *Shakespeare Survey*, xiv (1961), 47-48.

because the canker belongs to 'our nature' that the play cannot permit Hamlet to kill the King until the moment of his own death?

Hamlet's sense of the contamination in his nature, and in that larger nature of which his is a part, inspires in him a loathing for all the processes of life, of growth, of generation, and sexual union itself. In everything that engenders or nourishes life he sees the evil principle at work. The 'old stock', though virtue be grafted on to it, will still impart its taint. The world is a garden, but 'unweeded', possessed by 'things rank and gross in nature'; and he implores his mother not to 'spread the compost on the weeds To make them ranker'. She, forgetting her union with the godlike man, sits cheerfully by her bestial husband's side, and lives

In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty.

Though Hamlet sees the god in man, he also sees how the beast everywhere transforms him. If he concedes that 'conception is a blessing', he thinks of the sun uniting with the carrion to bring forth living pollution. It is this sense of the pollution of life that destroys his joy in its loveliness. In the beauty of Ophelia he looks for the impurity of woman; in her innocent conversation he discovers sexual nastiness; and from the love that begins in 'holy vows' he foresees unholy issue. His renunciation of Ophelia expresses in the action of the play Hamlet's rejection of the beauty and nobility of life because of what must be inseparable from it.

We may see Ophelia as a decoy whom Polonius places in Hamlet's way; but what Hamlet sees, I think, is a temptress placed there by Nature. He puts the temptress behind him, but the violence with which he does so may suggest how vulnerable he feels himself to be. Remembering those eyes that bent their light upon Ophelia to the last, we know that what drives him from her has to struggle with what draws him to her. But though love would draw them together, he says 'We will have no more marriage.'

So Ophelia is left in the state of Jephthah's daughter. And if we recall, as Dowden did, that Jephthah's daughter, before she went to her death, spent two months bewailing her virginity, this may help to explain to us what Ophelia too will do. In forms given to her by madness, she sings of what she has not

known. Her drowning under the willow, as I said, is emblematic. Where she sought to hang her garlands, 'an envious sliver broke'. And she is buried with those 'maimed rites' which Hamlet has to watch. But though a 'churlish priest' may begrudge them, she has, as the play insists, her 'virgin crants', her 'maiden strewments'; and as she is laid in the earth there is the wish that from her 'unpolluted flesh' 'violets' may 'spring'.¹

Is it perhaps ironic that these words are spoken by Laertes, the brother who began her story by warning her to guard her chastity from Hamlet? That early scene in which she tells of Hamlet's love establishes her relationship with the father her lover will kill and the brother who will avenge him. In beginning the preparation for the nunnery scene, it also begins the design which links her fate with theirs. Polonius, who suspects Hamlet's love, afterwards brings his daughter to him; and Hamlet exhorts her to the nunnery and treats her father as a fool. When Hamlet has killed her father, the lamentations of forsaken love and sorrow for her father's death inextricably mingle in her disordered mind. 'She speaks much of her father', they say. And she says, 'My brother shall know of it.' Her brother indeed comes to avenge his father, but has first to follow his sister to her grave—which he does with a curse for the doer of the 'wicked deed' which has brought her to it. At Ophelia's grave Hamlet at last declares his love, and he and Laertes, as her lover and her brother, fight—in anticipation of their final contest, in which, as avengers of their fathers, both noble and both guilty, they will kill yet forgive one another.² Ophelia has died in her virginity. She has escaped life's contamination; she has also been denied its fulfilment. The pathos of her austere funeral preludes the catastrophe, upon which, however, she also sheds the brief fragrance of her innocence.

¹ Centring upon the nunnery scene, most interpretations of Ophelia ignore, and some wildly contradict, this very significant conclusion. A judgement on Hamlet's attitude to Ophelia is suggested by *Measure for Measure*, II. ii. 166–8, which observes that the sun in which the carrion corrupts brings the violet to flower.

² Laertes is usually thought of as some sort of villain. But Hamlet has more than his rank in mind when he calls him 'a very noble youth'. As the avenger of his father, he is comparable to Hamlet, as Hamlet indeed declares: 'By the image of my cause I see The portraiture of his.' Yet as the treacherous instrument of Claudius, Laertes no less than Hamlet dies through his own guilt at the moment of achieving his revenge.