

“‘Now might I do it pat’”: Hamlet’s Failure of Reason, the ‘Instant’, and the ‘Leap’ ”

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One source of **Hamlet’s** attraction is the mystery which occupies its centre. The enigmatic hero who for some reason is slow to take the apparently obvious action, who trusts no living person but puts his faith in what a Ghost tells him and dies saying “the rest is silence”, without offering any convincing explanation for his eccentricities is of all dramatic creations the most fascinating, a never-to-be-exhausted source of questions. Twenty years ago Harry Levin particularly noted the number of questions which the play raises, in contrast to **King Lear**, which tends to make statements.¹ In **Hamlet** the hero acts as a starting-point for curiosity about himself and the material world about him, denoting a desire for information which infects other personae in the play and eventually the audience.

In the mid-1930’s Dover Wilson, indulging a penchant for detective stories, described **Hamlet** as “a dramatic essay in mystery... so constructed that the more it is examined the more there is to discover”² However, Hamlet’s enigma is not to be dissolved by following clues, nor by persistent obsession with minor difficulties which do not have to be overcome. Take, for instance, these awkward spots among many noted by critics:

Why is Horatio, a visitor, on guard before he sees Hamlet?

Why does Hamlet, a Dane, have to explain things Danish to Horatio, another Dane?

Why does Horatio turn up several weeks late for the funeral which he says he came to attend?

Did Ophelia commit suicide or was it an accident?

Is the Ghost seen by Hamlet in Act III (and which his mother the Queen does not see) the same Ghost as he and his followers saw in Act I? If so, why does the Queen not see it?

Why is Hamlet so reticent about the Ghost’s message in Act I?

Is he really mad, or only “mad in craft”?

Does he love Ophelia?

Above all, the major question, which Olivier used to define his filmed (and thus rigidly fixed) interpretation of Hamlet as a man who could not make up his mind — why does he delay in taking revenge?

Henry Mackenzie, writing in 1780,³ thought Hamlet a sweet prince with over-delicate feelings; Goethe, stating the sentimental view, described him as "a beautiful, pure, noble and most moral nature without the strength of nerve which forms a hero"⁴ and who sinks under the burden which Fate has given him to bear. The Spaniard Salvador de Madariaga overbore most difficulties in a study published in 1948⁵ by saying that Hamlet was a Renaissance hero, an egomaniac, indifferent to the concerns and desires of all others. Such a monolithic treatment, the antithesis of romantic "delicate-flower" explanations, attracted a great deal of attention at the time of publication because of the energy of its presentation. Madariaga's account rejected the romantic belief that a contemplative man cannot also be a man of action.

The text reveals that Hamlet has the Renaissance virtù, a dynamic combination of physical and mental abilities of which the English embodiment was Henry VIII, or, in Shakespeare's own lifetime, Sir Philip Sidney and Sir Walter Raleigh, the *uomo universale* described in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*. Such a polished individual stood in marked contrast to the old-style feudal knight. Hamlet never had a chance to be King, but we are told that he would probably have come up to public expectations. Spaced throughout the play are references to his skill and daring⁶ and Ophelia's portrait of him as "a noble mind" in III,1,153f.

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion, and the mould of form....

repeats the Ghost's word "noble" and extols Hamlet's natural gifts, while at the same time marking a change in him. He is now "quite, quite down" and "out of tune and harsh".

Certainly the change is noticeable. Both the King and the Queen have already detected Hamlet's transformation and the former assumes that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have heard about it, so that it must be known throughout the Court. Hamlet himself mentions it to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, saying (dishonestly) that he does not know why. The psycho-analytic school of Hamlet criticism⁷ tries to make out that Hamlet was a neurotic, but Shakespeare's text indicates that he had been a sane and well-balanced man, who had changed. Moreover, we are shown by the context that the reason for this alteration lay in his mother's betrayal of his father, whom Hamlet loved, by an incestuous marriage a few weeks after his father's death.⁸

The idea that the theme of procrastination is central goes back to the early 18th century, when commentators on *Hamlet* thought that the hero's delay in taking revenge on the King was absurd.⁹ This started a major trend in criticism of the play in terms of the Prince's character and motives, often divorced from close study of the text. Hamlet's first reference to delaying is itself delayed, until II, ii, 553f in fact, when he is left alone to condemn himself for lack of

passion in an ironically violent soliloquy, before reason asserts itself and he realises that he can say nothing. Enforced silence is the cause of his frustration and inability to act. His reason, claiming precedence over his passion, must grasp the truth, whatever it is. Is the Ghost a spirit sent to damn him? Is the King **really** guilty of murder or only of adultery and incest? The hero must have "grounds/More relative than this" (i.e. the Ghost) recalling his "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue", which comes at the conclusion of his very first soliloquy, before he had even heard of his father's Ghost, let alone seen it. Hamlet takes time to find out about the King and while he is doing this, the nobility with which he is endowed in Act I is through his own actions gradually eroded.

Hamlet's mistakes mount up. He alienates his friends, both male and female, and his mother the Queen. He behaves outrageously in public and to cover up his real meanings he talks nonsense. Critics seeking an explanation for such conduct say that Hamlet is mad and it is true that the text contains many references to madness by both major and minor characters, including Hamlet himself.¹⁰ However, these statements do not furnish an answer to the question of whether he was mad or merely pretended to be mad.

The first to suggest that Hamlet is actually mad is Polonius. The King sees fit to agree with him at the time but later (III,i,167) does not, although he eventually prefers to accept the "mad" theory since it fits in with his own plan to get Hamlet out of the country to England and summary execution, stated in soliloquy in IV, iii. The general public, represented in the play by the Gravedigger, believes that Hamlet went mad and on that account was sent to England. When questioned more closely on the reason for this strange madness the Gravedigger covers up his lack of information with a pun on "ground".

Hamlet himself always makes it clear that his madness is assumed. To his mother he says that he is "essentially" feigning his condition —

"not in madness,
But mad in craft" (III,iv,187-8).

He apologises to Laertes and blames his own madness (V,ii,230,235,237). But he makes his mother promise not to tell her husband that Hamlet is only pretending, though it is clear that she does not believe her son is sane, since in a short while she is telling Claudius how Polonius had been killed by Hamlet.

"Mad as the sea and wind when both contend
Which is the mightier" (IV,i,7-8).

Hamlet's tactic of madness, his "antic disposition", is germinated when Horatio mentions the possibility of his being driven mad by the Ghost (I,iv,73-4). This occurs before he has heard the Ghost's message. Thereafter Hamlet the truth-teller has to be distinguished from Hamlet the lie-teller, for he tells the truth to Horatio and the Queen, but lies to Laertes, Polonius, Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Some critics have followed Dover Wilson and com-

promised with the madness explanation, borrowing Hamlet's own account of himself as "but mad north-north-west" (II,ii,383), that is to say, from time to time, sometimes in his right senses, at other times not. Yet one may look in vain for textual and even common-sense evidence in support of such an explanation for there is nothing in Shakespeare's text to suggest that Hamlet is not rational from start to finish.

Next we come to that most important figure, or figment, the Ghost. Without the Ghost, there is no play. Dover Wilson, a Protestant, holds that the Ghost is Catholic, coming from Purgatory, which is mistaken. No Catholic could possibly accept a figure out of Purgatory (a purgation of sins) which is trying to promote the commission of another sin (revenge). A soul in Purgatory would know that God held the absolute monopoly of vengeance — "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord", wrote St. Paul to the Romans, telling them that they should not recompense evil for evil. However, revenge, as an Elizabethan stage-convention, is acceptable dramatically, so that a member of Shakespeare's first audience, watching Hamlet performed on the Globe stage in 1601/2,¹¹ would have taken the Ghost in one of three ways:

- (i) As a figment of Hamlet's imagination.
- (ii) As a soul permitted by God to return to earth for a specific purpose, in this instance, to seek revenge.
- (iii) As the Devil intent upon deception.

Dealing with these in the above order, (i) is obviously not intended by Shakespeare. The Ghost is **not** an illusion. Others see it, including the sceptical Horatio, who discusses it with Marcellus and Bernardo in the very first scene of the play.¹²

(ii) and (iii) present greater difficulties. Horatio's challenge offends the Ghost and Marcellus says that "it stalks away" (I,i, 49-50). Its warning to Hamlet against the consequences of sin (I,v,10f) and his reference to it as "perturbed spirit" (I,v,183) suggests that the Ghost is not the Devil impersonating the dead King.

(iii) is supported by the effects of the cock-crowing, as reported by Marcellus and Horatio (I,i,148f) and later repeated by the latter to Hamlet (I,ii,216-9) which recalls the scriptural associations of Peter's betrayal of Christ.

Hamlet himself fluctuates between (ii) and (iii). Immediately after he has heard the Ghost's message he is sure the vision is "honest", though this may be because its revelations about the murder confirmed the suspicions already in his mind, shown by his ejaculation "O, my prophetic soul!" But later he is not so sure, because he lacks evidence, as we have pointed out, and seizes on the play

device in the hope that Claudius may betray himself. Here Hamlet has to be thought of in Catholic terms and thus as subscribing to the doctrine that to kill an innocent Claudius is mortal sin. Hamlet is concerned about his own mortal soul and does not wish to risk eternal damnation. This is what his reason tells him. Reason and his nobility of character combine to stop him sweeping to immediate revenge, so he hatches a plot with the help of the Players and tells Horatio what he is up to (III,ii,73-85). The result of this scheme is that both Hamlet and the audience are convinced that the Ghost told the truth about the King. The Ghost is "honest" after all and so here and now, at the half-way mark of the drama, Hamlet may carry out his act of revenge, as he had promised the Ghost.

Yet he does not take the first opportunity which falls to him and kill Claudius as soon as he sees him alone. "Now might I do it pat, now a' is a-praying" he argues with himself. Today, a theologian might say that to make certain of the greatest possible revenge, Hamlet ought to have done it "pat" (i.e. at once), while the King was at prayer, troubled by his own sins for the second time.¹³ Hamlet enters, undetected. This is the high point, the psychological climax of the drama (III,iii,73f).¹⁴ The hero is so consumed by hatred that he wishes to send Claudius to Hell, so he postpones killing him. Later, in the same scene, he hears a noise behind the arras, thinks it is Claudius spying on him and runs his rapier through the source of the noise. He has killed the wrong man, for the eavesdropper is Polonius, whom he dismisses as "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool", an interloper whose fate it is to be slaughtered in this fashion for interfering in matters which do not concern him. Fate has here treated Hamlet with irony — failing to kill the real King, the King that **is**, he has killed the King that **seems** — another example of the world's treachery, the subject of Hamlet's very first speech (I,ii,77-86), a paradox of description pervading the internal conflict of the play. Romantic critics found the unpleasantness of these scenes hard to explain in "delicate-flower" terms; Madariaga finds it shows up an essential quality in Hamlet, namely, his ruthlessness.

As stated by the Ghost, Hamlet has two aims, to kill the King and not to do harm to the Queen. By fulfilling the first aim, Hamlet ensures that the Queen's mortal sin of incest ends. The Ghost says that he wants the Queen, his former wife, left "to heaven" and before that to her own conscience. (I,v, 86-7). Revenge is to be directed solely against the King, whose death at young Hamlet's hands will benefit the Queen's spirit.

The Ghost's second visitation occurs in II, iv, in the Queen's presence, when it makes a short speech reminding Hamlet that he should pursue his revenge — "but to what thy almost blunted purpose" (110). The Queen neither sees nor hears the Ghost and asks why he is looking at empty air. Hamlet's reply includes the lines —.

Do not look upon me,
Lest with this piteous action you convert
My stern effects, then what I have to do
Will want true colour, tears perchance for blood (126-30).

When Hamlet makes his first speech after his original meeting with the Ghost on the battlements he rejects all that is normal (which he calls "baser matter") and resolves that only revenge will occupy his mind from this time forth. His first and only object in life is to kill. He immediately judges the Queen ("O most pernicious woman")—a more violent statement of the "frailty, thy name is women" idea expressed in his first soliloquy (I,ii,146), but this is a direction in which the Ghost has only just forbidden him to go. So he transfers his hatred of woman-kind to the person of Ophelia, whom he thinks has rejected him.

Now he is again in the same emotional state at the ultimate expense of the Queen. The Ghost's second appearance, "this piteous action" has the immediate effect of reducing Hamlet's violent feelings of hatred which are apparently about to be concentrated once more on his mother. As he is abusing her, the Ghost enters the closet and Hamlet appeals to "you heavenly guards" to save him. Save him from what? The Ghost? Is he again not sure that he is not dealing with the Devil?

Not so. The context establishes Hamlet's sudden return to reason. He is asking to be saved from committing violence against his mother by "you heavenly guards." The phrase following — "What would your gracious figure?" indicates a change of tone. He fears the possible effects of his own uncontrolled rage, not the Ghost. Hamlet never really loses a grip on himself; his reason always wins the contest with his passions.

The play's dramatic crisis, which signals the start of Hamlet's rush to destruction, occurs at the moment he says "No" and deliberately postpones the killing of Claudius when he believes the King to be praying. (III,iii,87). This is Hamlet's sin and this is where his evil really lies. Now he is no better than Claudius for Claudius did not wish to bring down eternal damnation on the head of his brother or, if he did bring it down, it was not part of his intention. Young Hamlet has ignored the Ghost's warning and dispensed with human feelings. Killing the King is one thing, condemning him to Hell is an additional refinement. If Claudius is a usurper, Hamlet is King by right, and is therefore legally entitled to extract the death-penalty for his various crimes of regicide and high treason. The law's revenge is not a sin, and Hamlet has already referred to "the law's delay" (III,i,72), so that we cannot be surprised at the time taken by Hamlet to prove the guilt of the accused before finally condemning him to death.

What happens is that Hamlet (to continue the legal analogy) goes on to exceed the Ghost's brief of revenge. His reason is now adapted to justifying the ethic that ends are more important than means. He becomes more and more cruel, ruthlessly unconcerned with others from the crisis-point forward to

the very end of his life. Before he kills Claudius, he kills, without any real remorse, Polonius, ensures the deaths of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Laertes, and owns indirect responsibility for the death of Ophelia. His talk grows more and more passionate and he begins to see himself as the instrument of Heavenly vengeance; in the last scene, the stage is littered with corpses — “Such a sight as this. Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss,” comments Horatio in the penultimate lines, distinguishing the disorder witnessed in the hall at Elsinore from the propriety of death in battle.

Finally, in this connection it should be noted that, theologically, to wish grave bodily evil, injury or death to a man constitutes a mortal sin, but to wish eternal damnation on him is the second gravest sin.¹⁵ An Elizabethan audience would have been appalled at the prospect of a sudden death, “not shriving-time allowed.” Sudden death was one of the most feared legacies of the plague-ridden later Middle Ages because it meant no confession and therefore the likelihood of eternal damnation.¹⁶

No reck'ning made, but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head.
O, horrible! most horrible!

is how the Ghost describes his own quick translation from the world (I,v,78-80). Hamlet's meting-out of the same punishment to Claudius may be understood in the light of what had happened to his father, but no such excuse could be made for his attitude to his own contriving, at long range, of the abrupt demise of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two harmless pawns.

Ophelia is a negative figure, whose function is to believe uncritically everything which Polonius tells her. “I do not know, my lord, what I should think” (I,iii,104) sums her up as lacking in judgement. The same conversation marks her as lacking in passion, as does her talk with Hamlet, overheard by the King and Polonius with her own collaboration. Dover Wilson, whose interpretation of this scene (III,i) is excellent,¹⁷ concludes that Ophelia fails Hamlet in understanding love when Hamlet most needs it. When he turns up dressed as a distracted lover she gives him no comfort but instead runs to tell Polonius everything she has seen (II,i,74f). Because Polonius told her to do it, she repelled Hamlet's letters and denied him access. His gestures and demeanour is a way of asking for explanation because he is desperate, but he gets nothing from her.

In III,i she actually accuses him of neglecting **her**. Hamlet has been hurt, and his replies, ribald only on the surface, show it. He consigns **her** to the category in which he has already set his mother, a symbol of frailty, like all women since Eve. His question (i.130) "Where's your father?" is answered with a lie for he (i.e. Polonius) is not "at home" but eavesdropping outside with the King — what the latter has called "lawful espials" (1.22).

This is her last chance and she cannot take it. Her appeal to heaven to restore Hamlet is a tragic irony since she alone had the power to draw him back. At once he begins to treat her like a prostitute.¹⁸ In the play scene Hamlet indulges in one final cynical comment in response to her observation on the brevity of the Prologue :

Ophelia. 'Tis brief, my Lord.

Hamlet. As woman's love.

(III,ii, 151-2)

but just after his graveyard struggle with Laertes and in the grip of strong emotion Hamlet reveals his feelings for her, now that she is dead:

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

(V,i, 263-5).

Hamlet did not cast out love. Love seemed to have rejected him. When Ophelia dies, he admits no responsibility for by this time his conscience has been deadened also. It is Ophelia, as much if not more than Hamlet, who has contributed to the change in their relationship.

Hamlet dies unrepentant, telling Horatio that "the rest is silence". Critics are loath to let him go so easily, for it is tempting to claim that he was regenerated because he carried out the Ghost's commands in the end and died happily, leaving Horatio to tell his story to the world which he leaves, free of threats of hell and damnation, with flights of angels singing him to his rest. This last flicker of "sweet prince" romanticism is hard to square with evidence. The Ghost's account of Purgatory — practically indescribable in fact — indicates that Hell must be an utterly appalling place. Hamlet talks of the possible consequences of suicide in his most famous soliloquy (II,i, 78f) and his confidence that Claudius's soul can be sent to hell by a sudden thrust of his sword (II,iii,95) is evidence that for the dramatic purpose of the play Shakespeare wished his audience to believe in a punitive next world for the unshriven, and that Hamlet's theology was that of a 15th-century Catholic notwithstanding his Wittenberg education.

The critic inevitably comes to ask what was Hamlet's "tragic flaw" — is it his liability to fly to extremes, like many "normal" human beings? It is true that his passion and reason are not well enough harmonized but is this enough to make him a tragic hero? The "tragic flaw" (*hamartia*) was a stage convention inherited from the Greek form of tragedy but Shakespeare did not make Hamlet suit the convention. Rather, he made the convention suit Hamlet. The latter's description of the flawed man (I,iv, 23-36) is not a description of himself but instead of human responsibility for action. His own deficiency is an excess of passion, particularly of anger, but this is no accident, no "vicious mole of nature" or "fortune's star" peculiar to himself. In his own case such excess has its source in his own choice. Shakespeare does not ask his audience to share the general censure of the flawed man when his defect is part of his nature or his destiny. We are not intended to take Hamlet's statements literally, only logically, and to work out what possible meanings they could have.

For example, as we have previously noted, he sometimes tells lies. He tells Rosencrantz, one well-intentioned tool of Claudius, that he still loves him (III,ii, 337); he pretends that he expects to lose the fencing match to Laertes but admits to Horatio that he has been "in continual practice" and "shall win at the odds." (V,ii, 209). When he is not giving the lie direct, he is misleading his hearers, by puns, plays on words, euphuisms, inviting them to accept apparent confidences based on deceits, and by actions designed to perplex or embarrass. Yet no-one, not even Horatio, his one consistent friend, enjoys Hamlet's confidence.

His fluctuations become more and more extreme as the play proceeds¹⁹ but Hamlet is aware of his own failings and is capable of standing outside himself and, so to speak, putting on the brake, a sign that he is sane:

But I am very sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes, I forgot myself;
For by the image of my cause I see
The portraiture of his; I'll court his favours:
But sure the bravery of his grief did put me
Into a towering passion

(V,ii, 74-80).

His emotions fight with his passions. He flares up into ecstasy and subsides into depression. This is the change of mood most typical of romantic art, readily perceptible in 19th-century poetry and music and one of the main sources of Hamlet's attraction for his early critics. But even under the greatest strain he shows himself as pre-eminently a thinker; once he has survived the first explosion, he settles down to cogitate on the situation in hand, a working-out which sustains him until the next onslaught of passion. Shakespeare represents his hero as a man with a singular nature, a melancholy type, a contemplative, who says that he wants only to go back to Wittenberg to study philosophy and stays at Court only because his mother wants him to do so. He is fed up with life, sees other people enjoying themselves while he does not, and eventually thinks of suicide (but only in theory since not even that drastic act strikes him as

worthwhile). He covers up all this gloom by displaying a ready wit and behaving with bright cynicism.

Suddenly, a call comes to him, delivered by the Ghost, and Hamlet has at once found a worthy mission. He is confirmed in his despondency because he now has a really sound reason for sadness. Something is indeed rotten in the state of Denmark and Hamlet, having sworn his friends to secrecy about the Ghost's visitation, makes his way alone. Nobody else seems to realise what a consummate rascal the King is, or if they do, they are glossing over it. Hamlet's task, which he does not relish, is to expose the corruption in high places but he has to keep his one-man vendetta quiet, otherwise the King and his agents will have him murdered. He thus conceives the scheme of having a dumb-show performed before the Court, representing his father's murder and the usurpation. "The play's the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" he tells himself at the end of Act II. Like Sherlock Holmes and the Baker Street Irregulars he gets the strolling players to do the job of detection for him. His device works and the King is unmasked.

Now comes the problem. Hamlet is still uncertain. Why is he uncertain? Certainly not because he lacks factual information. The Ghost and the play-within-the-play have together furnished him with plenty of that commodity. Nor is his mind hazy; on the contrary it is very clear and logical **ad absurdum**. Is his will weak? Far from it — Hamlet is strong-willed and ruthless when opposed. So why is he cast into an uncertainty? The answer is that he cannot **prove** the reality of the call which he has received, nor the reality of its object. His uncertainty lies in the means to, not the nature of, the end desired. Man must discover for himself the role he has to play in the drama of human existence, like the Players in the Dumb Show, who have no plot, lines or cues. We are all on the stage, play-acting from here to Eternity.

Hamlet is set in Denmark,²⁰ though Shakespeare, so far as we know, never visited that country. However, in spite of Dover Wilson's assertions to the contrary, the audience need not draw parallels with Elizabethan England, even though the "Denmark" in the play is an invented and unique world created to suit the purposes of the dramatist. Wilson gives the politics of Denmark undue prominence, referring to the Danish constitution which is described in **Hamlet** both directly and indirectly. The question is one of succession. Was Hamlet a hereditary claimant to Denmark's throne, or might Claudius have been elected according to the prevailing system? If Hamlet was the rightful heir, Claudius becomes subject to Hamlet's will, so that Hamlet's "revenge" is not revenge at all but legal justice instead.

In the Norwegian constitution as presented in **Hamlet** a similar situation is encountered. Fortinbras is passed over in favour of his uncle, "old Norway", yet he directs his hostilities against Poland and Denmark, not against his uncle, so plainly did not consider himself cheated. I,i,60 refers to Old Hamlet, "Norway" to the King of that country, who is the uncle of Young Fortinbras (cf I,ii, 28). This parallel, noted by A. C. Bradley, is clear.²¹ The open

rivalry of Old Hamlet and Old Fortinbras contrasts with Claudius's secret rivalry to Old Hamlet. Young Fortinbras, who lost his father when Old Hamlet slew him in individual combat, (I,i, 80f), wants to take the law into his own hands and recover his father's former territories by force, but is compelled to delay as a result of negotiations between Claudius and "old Norway" (I,ii, 22f). In both Norway and Denmark, the political issue of the succession is the same. The Hamlet of Saxo Grammaticus and Belleforêt was the rightful monarch and Belleforêt calls Hamlet's father and uncle "kings", but Dover Wilson is incorrect in stating that an elective monarchy did not exist.²² The Danish constitution is the one which Shakespeare defines in the play, an elective, not an hereditary constitution, though in this particular instance Claudius appears to have gained consent by sharp practice, judging by his remark in I, ii, 108-9).

... for let the world take note
You are the most immediate to our throne

and there are many references to the succession in the course of the play's development.²³ They underline the constant frustration of Hamlet's logic, which tells him that he is the fitter candidate, though, unlike Macbeth, he is not lured into action by ambition to succeed.

However, it is not until the last scene that the audience is told directly that Claudius's methods of securing popular agreement are, to say the least, devious, but Shakespeare deliberately leaves the details of the election — means of voting and techniques of "rigging" — as vague as possible. Claudius is depicted as a "smooth operator" who starts to win his audience over in Act I,ii and it is not until the very end of the play that the whole scheme becomes clearer, though never completely clear. The suggestion is that Claudius's succession is of dubious legality and that the people have got to know of this. Throughout the plot the twin ideas of election and moral choice are held up to the audience and though the issues of constitutional election become clearer from one Act to the next they are not to be analysed as a succession of static situations or points of law. They are never laid bare and their purpose is to produce a certain atmosphere or dramatic mood of doubt and interference with due process for which the villain is cleverly responsible and which invokes sympathy for Hamlet's bewilderment.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard²⁴, whose personal predicament in outline resembled that of Hamlet, published a brief Appendix to his autobiography, in which he had told the story of his own broken engagement to Regina Olsen. Its English title is "A Side-Glance at Shakespeare's Hamlet" and in it Kierkegaard regrets that the play was not a religious drama, on the ground that if Hamlet's scruples are not religious then he is no tragic hero but instead a near-comic procrastinator. If Hamlet had been religious, the hero's actions would have gained in interest, though they would have lost their purely dramatic quality. Internal conflicts involve religious scruples and the hero finds greatness only through suffering, not triumph.

Kierkegaard published a periodical called *The Instant*.²⁵ The idea of the Instant is one of the two concepts which fascinated him — the other being the

Leap. He said that the Instant was the time of faith, the contact of time and eternity, "the plenitude of time when the eternal decision is realised in the shifting occasion". What he referred to as the Instant was the characteristic movement of faith — irrational, instantaneous and concrete, a movement that has to be sure-footed or fail utterly. Exact timing is of paramount importance.

Transferring these metaphors to the play **Hamlet**, Kierkegaard's reference to it as a failed religious drama becomes clear, for it had all the necessary qualifications except the ambiguity of vocation. Shakespeare represented Hamlet as a man having a singular nature, a melancholy man, a contemplative. Suddenly, he gets a call — the Instant — and his aim is to know the truth. Kierkegaard himself was a religious man and therefore knew the truth immediately — this is the difference between religion and not-religion. Yet both Hamlet and Kierkegaard are cast into an uncertainty; Hamlet's has already been described and illustrated from the text.

Objective uncertainty implies a non-demonstrability of the object of one's conviction. It may be challenged, denied and shown to be pure imagination. Subjective uncertainty has to do with motives. Why am I doing this?, asks Hamlet. Is it my singular nature that is impelling me? Or is it some spirit outside myself? He fails to comprehend the nature of his drive and no ready-made system of logic can help:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy,

(I,v, 165-6)

he comments on his friend's scepticism, and later, at the beginning of the final scene, to the same, he remarks,

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will—

(V,ii, 10-11).

and in these two statements two important ideas are contained. Hamlet bases his action and takes his chances on something inside and outside of himself which is not to be explained in any way — it is the mystery of the play, to which initial reference has been made.

Hamlet, in the end, moves in a Leap — he leaps into the kill. Before that he leaps into Ophelia's grave with Laertes, a symbolic gesture. His leaping is impelled by passion, not logic — he leaps only because he is passionate. The man whom he, ironically, claims to admire, "the man who is not passion's slave", could not make the Leap. Logic must be eliminated — the very reason which Hamlet worships — and then, only then, can Hamlet act. Hamlet delays because of logic. His final leap fulfils his mission.

The natural man swings between contemplation and passion, but it is feeling that properly measures man's power. Kierkegaard extolled the Leap

as opposed to meditation. Hamlet "leaps" from each stage to another. Whenever reason baffles his intellect, his reason takes over and he is propelled into a Leap, his only release from perplexity. Hamlet, about to die, addresses Horatio for the last time, urging him to :

... report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.

(V, ii, 336-7)

Why should Hamlet want the whole world to know what happened to him? Why should Horatio absent himself from felicity awhile to report the hero and his cause? — (even if he could, since he does not know even as much as the audience). It is this flat ending on Hamlet's part which makes Kierkegaard think that the play ought to have been religious since, as it stands, it merely defies necessary explanation. The hero had no religious doubts; he should have settled the whole thing immediately and not delayed.

Kierkegaard glorified the "Leap", thus setting feeling above meditation as the touchstone of human power. The hero, a super-man, leaps from one stage to the next, so that the frustration of his reason does not bar his progress. His passion propels him into a leap and releases him from intellectual confusion. Kierkegaard's well-known three stages of existence²⁵ which he calls "aesthetic", "ethical" and "religious", concern respectively things, immanence, (concerning mental acts) and eternity. The aesthetic does not transform man's existence; the ethical produces action, the creative power of the individual, and the religious has to do with the paradox of reward and punishment unconnected with this world. Hamlet is victorious in the first stage and controls his earthly destiny; likewise in the second he questions his own guilt or innocence, leaping from the first to the second in a fury of passion when he cannot solve his problem by exercise of reason. The third stage brings the natural man to submission to eternal judgement, but, according to Kierkegaard, Hamlet fails to make this final leap — thus leaving his audience "up in the air". However, Hamlet's survival as a play depends upon the perplexity it leaves behind and while Kierkegaard's explanation in terms of what amounts to a dramatic falling-short is satisfactory to the existentialist because it draws on no rational justification, it tends to emphasise the mystery confronting non-Christian man who is unable to free himself in one bound, because he lacks that faith which generates the "spring".²⁶ Macbeth, a "physical" man, makes neither the first nor the second leap and scorns the third — he would like a chance "to jump the life to come" but the only energy he can at first discover in himself is rooted in the deadly sins of pride, avarice and envy:

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'er-leaps itself and falls on the other.

(Macbeth, I, vii, 25-8).

At the end, when all is revealed to him by his own slow comprehension, he

has no leap to make, but simply stands up and fights. "I will not yield", he cries and dies with an oath on his lips, a redoubtable warrior who finds his own code of values strictly earth-bound — and his own strength the only remaining object of faith. He is an "aesthetic" hero. For him the rest is not silence — he is not concerned with a "rest", only with the here and now:

Lay on, Macduff,
And damn'd be him that first cries, 'Hold, enough!'
(*Macbeth*, V, vii, 62-3).

Both Hamlet and Macbeth share the same internal conflict. arising from the paradox of description. How can life be comprehended through the veil of distortion? Why does innocence seem like guilt, and vice-versa? Is it better to live or to die when nobody and nothing is to be trusted? Hamlet states the problem in his first speech — "Seems, madam! Nay, it is, I know not 'seems'" (I, ii, 76) and the only way out of his sceptical dilemma is to make the leap into action, which is the solution of the ethical, as distinct from the aesthetic, hero. The hero must act, not ponder, for meditation is shameful:

Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action...
(III, i, 83-8)

Previously Hamlet had spoken of the stage player's lack of concern:

What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her?
What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have?
(II, ii, 562-5)

Only on the stage may one have a **motive** for passion — only a play actor on the boards or in life could:

... drown the stage with tears,
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears; yet I
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing; no, not for a king,

Upon whose property and most dear life
A damned defeat was made: am I a coward?
(II, ii, 565-74)

His question emphasises his dilemma. Only passion can induce the leap, the reality as opposed to the appearance — the moral world as distinct from the material. Hamlet makes his leap, and vanishes into death and silence. Where does he go? What happens to him? Is he rewarded or punished? What are the answers to all the questions which he asks in the various soliloquies? Shakespeare does not provide them. Hamlet never leaves this world. To the very last, his worries are earth-bound:

... report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.
(V, ii, 337-8)

and a political prediction, together with a vote:

But I do prophesy th'election lights
On Fortinbras, he has my dying voice.
idem, 354-5)

Fortinbras, a newcomer, has the final word, to the accompaniment of a "dead march" — Hamlet is borne off the stage amidst images of military ritual and "a peal of ordnance is shot off". The mystery is preserved because not soluble on the evidence given in the play. Kierkegaard's hypothetical "Instant" and "Leap" enable Hamlet to be studied as a metaphor of human inability to act meaningfully while relying upon reason alone — without the touch of revelation man can only twist and turn again, in and out of the mundane conflict. Hamlet cannot escape. The connection is never made and he has nowhere to go from here.

NOTES

1. H. Levin, **The Question of Hamlet** (1959).
2. J. Dover Wilson, **What Happens In Hamlet** (1935). All quotations from the play are taken from Wilson's text (2nd. edition: Cambridge 1936: reprinted 1977).
3. Essay in his journal **The Mirror**, 18th April, 1780. This "delicate-flower" description suggested some of the far-fetched theories which influenced 19th-century performances, e.g. that Hamlet was actually a woman in disguise, so that he could not have married Ophelia. Expressed in present-day language, this indicates that Hamlet was a transvestite, homosexual or hermaphrodite in process of sex-change. In 1899 the actress Sarah Bernhardt played the part of Hamlet in a French prose version, but made Hamlet dignified and masculine.
4. Quoted by A. C. Bradley, **Shakespearean Tragedy** (1904), Lect III.
5. Madariaga, **On Hamlet** (1948). Both Goethe and Schlegel held this view and thought that Hamlet's fault was embodied in his delay. But the "delicate prince" is not Shakespeare's creation.
6. According to the text, Hamlet is an expert swordsman in good practice (V, ii, 209); he boarded the private ship alone (IV, vi, 19-20); he is not afraid to follow the Ghost (I, iv, 79f); the people of Denmark, a warlike, roistering nation, love him (IV, iii, 4 & IV, vii, 18); when he makes up his mind to kill, he does so in a flash (III, iv, 23f) & V, ii, 320).
7. The founder of this is Ernest Jones, who published **Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis** (1923) and a Freudian interpretation, **Hamlet and Oedipus** (1949).
8. T. S. Eliot claimed in **The Sacred Wood** (1919) that Hamlet is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is "in excess of the facts as they appear". He omits all mention of Hamlet's love and respect for his father and contrasting dislike of his uncle, something made clear in Hamlet's opening words (I, ii, 65), and several times more before he hears what the Ghost has to tell him (e.g. I, ii, 139-40; 151-3).
9. Sir Thomas Hanmer is credited with having made the statement in 1736 that "there appears no reason at all in nature why this young prince did not put the usurper to death as soon as possible".
10. E.g. I, v, 172; II, ii, 382 & c. by Hamlet: II, i, 82 & 107; II, ii, 49 & c. by Polonius: II, ii, 5; III, i, 192; III, iii, 2; V, i, 266 & c. by Claudius: III, iv, 105; V, i, 278 & c. by Gertrude: III, i, 153 by Ophelia: III, i, 8 by Guildenstern: V, i, 144f by the Gravedigger.

11. It is possible that the play was composed much earlier and performed in the University towns as early as 1593.
12. cf. I, iv, 40-4 & 64-8.
13. The first being in the play scene.
14. Hanmer (cf. n. 9 *supra*) perceived the unpleasantness of this scene which the romantics (starting with William Richardson in 1784) minimised.
15. *i.e.* next to **odium inimicitiae Dei**, which is hatred of God's person as distinct from hatred of one of his attributes.
16. Other plays of Shakespeare make the same point, e.g. Othello makes sure that Desdemona is prepared for death — "I would not kill thy unprepared spirit", he tells her (V, ii, 32) and in **Pericles**, Leontes, about to kill Marina: "If you require/A little space for prayer,/I grant it" (IV, i, 67-8). But Hamlet is different — he acquiesces in the King's denial of "shriving-time" to them though he has no evidence of their complicity. Ten lines further on in the same scene he is telling Horatio that he equates conscience with his revenge and damnation with mercy (V, ii, 67-70). He is even ready to kill the man for something he has not yet, done to which he refers as he refers as "further evil". His friend Horatio is clearly taken a back and makes no comment. His remark "So Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go to't" (*idem*, 56) stands as "normal" reaction to Hamlet's abnormal ferocity here.
17. **In What Happens in Hamlet.**
18. cf. II, ii, 174 where he calls Polonius "a fishmonger" (procurer). "Get thee to a nunnery" (III, i, 121) means "go to a brothel". Later (150f) he extends his anger to include all women.
19. e.g. I, iv, 85; II, ii, 55; III, i; III, ii (esp. III, ii, 72f); III iv, the closet scene when he is close to killing his mother; V, i, 251, when he fights Laertes in the grave; V, ii, 320 etc. Gielgud's performance (1930 and subsequently) showed by these successive climaxes that Hamlet is not mad.
20. For information on Shakespeare's Danish connections see Cay Dollerup, **Denmark, Hamlet, and Shakespeare** (Salzburg 1975), 1-2.
21. Quoted by A. C. Bradley, **Shakespearean Tragedy** (1904), Lcct. III.
22. Kingship by consent is clear in Belleforêt (the oration of the young prince (Amleth) so moved the hearts of the Danes that all with one consent proclaimed him king of Jutie and Chersonnese, at this present the proper country of Denmark).
23. *e.g.* esp. in Acts II & III. The closing speech of the play, by Fortinbras, touches on Hamlet's suitability (V, ii, 396-7).

24. W. H. Auden's introduction to **Selections From Kierkegaard's Works** (1955) and Denis de Rougemont's essay "Kierkegaard and Hamlet; Two Danish Princes" (**Anchor Review**, 1955) are both useful pointers to the nature of Hamlet's psychology, the "Protestant" conscience at its most sensitive.
25. **Øieblikket** (1856) ran for 10 issues, to which he was the sole contributor, and concluded with his death in the same year. It constituted part of his last attack on the Danish established church. "Øieblikket" (the Instant or moment) and "Springet" (the Leap) were fundamental to Kierkegaard, whose strongest influences came from Luther.
26. For Luther, faith was the remedy for the anguished conscience, the only means of communication with God. Luther stressed the capital importance of what Kierkegaard called "inwardness" (**egentlig beskaffenhed**) the uniqueness of the individual conscience and Self.