Constructing Hamlet's Mind

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"There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face"—so Duncan, before giving further instance of his own inability. If the audience at a play is in a more privileged position, having in *Macbeth* both some obvious "body-language"—not least that fearful "start" by which the hero responds to the Witches' prophecy—and also Macbeth's subsequent self-revelations in soliloquy, it is true, nevertheless, that for much of a Shakespeare tragedy its watchers must assess character by means little different to those they would employ in life. Shakespeare is a master of small verbal signs: of a varying movement of phrases, a tell-tale emphasis or pause, a crucial interruption, a syntactical ploy, a sudden disjunction, the significant choice or avoidance of a word ("He that's coming / Must be *provided for*"). Unfortunately, we do not have the dramatist's directions as to actors' "body-language", beyond what we can infer from his text; but we do have a host of verbal triggers that delineate character and movement of mind, signals that are perceived by an audience largely at a pre-conscious level, where they are registered but not reflected upon. Such triggers are more than a superficial illusion of character or Stoll's signals within a dramatic convention;[1] their placing and interaction—so convincing that audiences and critics have regularly to be counselled against "doing a Bradley" and interpreting the signals as though they emanated from living personages—was probably unconscious in part, and stems from an imaginative creation of character at levels of personality deeper than the simply rational. A proper response must therefore be as much to these signals as to the rational content of speeches. And as in life there are Duncans, always bewailing their inability to "get it right", so there are critics[2] who fail to read the signs on the "face" of the play, who interpret ambiguous signs with premature certainty, or are unable to perform that feat of self-reference whereby we infer the inner dispositions of others.

This was never more so than in discussion of Hamlet, of the construction of his mind and the reasons for his notorious delay.

1 'Hamlet the Man', in *Shakespeare and Other Masters* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1940); also *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare: A Study in Dramatic Contrast and Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933).

2 In this context, of course, actors are also critics.

Interpretations have proliferated over the centuries, none of them commanding general assent; with the result that some scholars would now call off inquiry altogether, the question being one "that academic courtesy should perhaps never again allow."[3] To refuse discussion is, of course, to abandon literary studies to those theorists who insist that no true account can be given: scepticism, relativism, and their proliferating spawn of critical "-isms", breed in the field of our failure. So I make no apology for returning to the old stamping-ground of Hamlet's delay.

One point is worth making at the outset: the difficulty in explaining Hamlet's delay has never seemed to trouble audiences, if we judge by the play's pre-eminent success. The problem emerged late,[4] and has largely been an issue for critics. However, it is not sufficient to say with Waldock[5] that the delay is less prominent on stage than in the study: Hamlet's soliloquies draw insistent attention to it, the "Hecuba" speech and Fortinbras' expedition are set up to give Hamlet occasion for self-reproach, the Ghost itself seeks to whet the revenger's "almost blunted purpose", and the play from its second scene is in part constructed to make contrast between a tardy and an all-too-swift avenger. Yet even Wopsle in *Great Expectations* did not have to fear his audience crying "Why doncha git on wiv it?" Since this doesn't happen—and I question if any member of the audience feels irritated by Hamlet's inaction whilst in the theatre—it would suggest that an attentive audience *knows* why Hamlet delays—"knows", that is, at the level of sub-conscious response to verbal triggers, and through the imaginative empathy with an inferred personality that these occasion. There can be no explicit statement of reasons in the play (as there may be sometimes in Shakespeare through soliloquy or through commentator-figures), otherwise we would have had a satisfactory formulation years ago. And as those who picked up hints from Macbeth, as Banquo does, might have whispered a word of warning in Duncan's ear only to have it dismissed for "lack of

3 Philip Brockbank, "Hamlet the Bonesetter", *Shakespeare Survey* 30 (1977), 109.

4 The first published suggestion of a difficulty comes in the anonymous *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet* (1736), p. 34: "Had *Hamlet* gone naturally to work, as we could suppose such a Prince to do in parallel Circumstances, there would have been an End to our Play. The Poet therefore was obliged to delay his Hero's Revenge; but then he should have contrived some good Reason for it."

5 A. J. A. Waldock, *Hamlet: A Study in Critical Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931; repr. Sydney University Press, 1975).

evidence'', so we shall have to be content with an account of Hamlet's motivation which will not seem to our sceptics to offer anything approaching ''proof''. This present attempt to offer reasons for Hamlet's delay, and to make those reasons central to the tragic effect, must, necessarily, be only ''a word to the wise''.

The requirement that an audience infer a character's whole structure of disposition and motivation from cumulative hints and signs is not restricted to *Hamlet*. If the more explicit indications as to Macbeth's motivation are all that are taken into account, critics divide as to whether his ''ambition'' is, or is not, adequate motive for what he does; and they do so despite a lack of evidence that theatre-goers perceive a problem. It may be that audiences are supine in the face of stage-action, assuming that because events occur they have sufficient cause; but it is more creditable to those who have found Shakespeare's tragedies supremely satisfying to presume that in the theatre a spectator constructs from explicit statement and implicit signs a *gestalt* of personality which makes the actions of Hamlet or Macbeth intelligible. The argument that Macbeth feels impelled to take on the challenge of his own metaphysical dread[6] cannot be sustained by explicit quotation; but as an extrapolation from a range of hints and signs, it represents an advance on previous accounts of the play.

Such extrapolation risks being condemned as evincing a ''desire to explain what the play does not by supplying the characters with motives and reactions on the model of our own''. Harold Jenkins, objecting particularly to reconstructions of Hamlet's motivation, dismissed them as ''part of that demand for psychological realism which has dominated dramatic criticism since the eighteenth century, encouraged by the rise of the novel, which can trace the inner workings of its characters' minds to a degree that a play, presenting its persons through speech and action, cannot''.[7] There has been so much irresponsible inference over the years that a desire to preserve one's agnosticism is understandable; yet caution should not blind us to the extent to which a Shakespeare play lures and even goads its audience along an inferential path.

A case in point is the first introduction of Claudius. From line two his speech creates in its hearers an uncertainty as to the application

6 Christine Mangala Frost, '' 'Who dares do more?' *Macbeth* and Metaphysical Dread'', *Studies in Shakespeare* (Sydney Studies in English, 1985), pp. 57-68.

7 Harold Jenkins (ed.), *Hamlet*, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 124. All quotations are from this edition.

of the pronouns "we", "us" and "our":

> Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death
> The memory be green, and that it *us* befitted
> To bear *our* hearts in grief, and *our* whole kingdom
> To be contracted in one brow of woe,
> Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
> That *we* with wisest sorrow think on him
> Together with remembrance of ourselves.
> (I. ii. 1-7, italics added)

Few in an audience are likely consciously to reflect that the shifting and ambiguous use of the first person plural (stretching to include all, yet restrictable if challenged to the royal person or persons) is a coercive ploy, implicating the court in the incestuous marriage and its indecorously hasty celebration, even before Claudius' open reminder that "your better wisdoms . . . have freely gone / With this affair along". What an audience is likely to pick up is that Claudius is a manipulator by means as yet unperceived; and this unease will contribute to their developing image of the character.

Such triggers, lures and goads will, in the case of Claudius, lead an audience on to fuller understanding through more explicit action and eventual self-revelatory aside and soliloquy. But if even the lesser characters in Shakespeare incite spectators to motivational enquiry and inference, how can an audience when viewing the hero be expected (recollecting perhaps that a play is not a novel) to cut short their character-constructs at a point adequate to the so-called "play-as-play"? It may be that, in the case of Hamlet, the inferential capacities of an audience are disappointed. But before accepting that there is a mystery—or a botch—at the heart of the tragedy, it is worth asking if the problem does not remain one of adequately describing a motivational structure, a structure with which a theatre-audience finds little difficulty in empathizing.

The weakest of all arguments for motivation are those that rest on no textual signs. Understandably, dramatists make only limited use of the observation that what we suppress in our self-analyses is often more significant than what we admit to. With the possible exception of Hamlet's observation that "conscience does make cowards of us all" (III. i. 83)—where context inclines the hearer to interpret "conscience" chiefly in the archaic sense of "consciousness"—there is no indication that Hamlet has any difficulties with the notion of revenge itself. The "craven scruple / Of thinking too precisely on th' event" (IV. iv. 40-41) that Hamlet considers—and then by implication dismisses—as one possible cause

of his delay seems to refer more to over-nice considerations about the outcome of revenge than to moral qualms. It would be pushing ambiguous language too far to deny any hint of moral considerations; but where critics insist (in Jenkins' phrase) on "standing the play on its head" by arguing that Hamlet has difficulties with a demand for revenge that he ought to have resisted,[8] they have to adduce a body of external evidence as to Elizabethan repugnance toward revenge so strong that Shakespeare could rely on arousing it without any definite reminder or stimulus.

Revenge in *Hamlet* is not just a filial, but a political and social duty. In Claudius' Denmark, ghosts walk while the Court drunkenly carouses, old affections are forgotten with indecent haste, wives and thrones prove to be usurped, and the whole kingdom is infected, as suggested by an extended strain of imagery that is not limited to Hamlet alone. Polonius is an expression of Claudius in political and social action—"The head is not more native to the heart, / The hand more instrumental to the mouth, / Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father" (I. ii. 47-49); and Polonius is soon shown undermining his daughter's trust in her lover and setting spies on his own son. It is doubtful how far Hamlet's duty of putting the time back into joint could properly be described as "revenge" (despite his and the Ghost's use of the term), for Claudius is in control of any law that might punish his crime. What legitimate authority remains has devolved upon young Hamlet; and Shakespeare has taken some pains—and risked some implausibility—to emphasize it.

One explicit complaint of Hamlet's—that Claudius "Popp'd in between th' election and my hopes" (V. ii. 65)—and two later references (V. ii. 360, 397) show Shakespeare aware of the elective nature of Danish monarchy; but elsewhere in the play (at I. iii. 20-24, III. i. 154 and V. i. 251) the dramatist chooses to activate the more Elizabethan expectation that succession would be hereditary. Finally, in Act V, scene ii, the descent of authority from old to young Hamlet is emblematically represented through the episode of the "signet".

Horatio questions how the substitute-letter which sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths could be validated:

> How was this seal'd?
> *Hamlet:* Why, even in that was heaven ordinant.
> I had my father's signet in my purse,
> Which was the model of that Danish seal,

8 Jenkins, p. 154, provoked particularly by L. C. Knights, *An Approach to 'Hamlet'* (London, 1960) and Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967).

> Folded the writ up in the form of th' other,
> Subscrib'd it, gave't th'impression, plac'd it safely,
> The changeling never known.
>
> (V. ii. 47-53)

T. J. B. Spencer, suggesting that "that Danish seal" must refer to an impression on the original commission now in Horatio's hand, comments on the oddity of state seals not being changed at the accession of a new king (as was standard Elizabethan and Jacobean practice).[9] But beyond that, one might ask what Hamlet is doing with his father's signet in the first place.

Seals being a major means of authenticating documents in renaissance England, their origins, diversity and titles, the means for their safe-keeping, the rituals that accompanied their use, and, finally, the arrangements for preventing unauthorized use of the matrices (or "dies"), were matters of interest to many in the theatre audience, especially a court audience. The "Great Seal" or "Seal of Majesty", showing the seated monarch with royal insignia, was in existence from the time of Edward the Confessor, but had proved cumbersome for general use; the smaller, single armorial seal, the "Privy Seal", acquired such importance for day-to-day business that its keeper was by the early fourteenth century third minister of state. For convenience in authenticating letters and warrants, the king came to prefer another small seal, the "Signet", which by 1400 was in charge of the king's secretary. From 1540 there were two secretaries, each with two signets.[10] The matrices of all seals, Great, Privy and Signet, were defaced on the death of a monarch—an obvious precaution to prevent "posthumous" royal edicts, gifts of land, or (in the case of the signet) the issue of fraudulent warrants for imprisonment or execution. In consequence, many more seal-impressions are extant than seal-dies. What is evident is that the signet is much more than a merely personal seal that an affectionate son might be expected to have about him as a keepsake. Even with "heaven ordinant", Hamlet ought not to have had access to an instrument of government.

Hamlet's use of the signet does not derive from the play's sources as we have them. Though the "letter episode" in the *Historiae Danicae* of Saxo Grammaticus[11] is substantially as in Shakespeare's

9 T. J. B. Spencer (ed.), *Hamlet*, New Penguin Shakespeare (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 344.

10 A useful general account is Sir Hilary Jenkinson, *Guide to Seals in the Public Record Office* (London, 1954).

11 Sir Israel Gollancz (ed.), *The Sources of 'Hamlet'* (1926; new impression, London: Frank Cass, 1967), pp. 119, 151.

tragedy, no mention is made of sealing the erased and re-written commission. Admittedly, when a similar trick is later played on Amleth himself by a Scottish Queen, the substituted letter is said to be "sealed with the king's seal" (*ejusdemque sigillo obsignatum*); but it is doubtful if this circumstantial detail alone constitutes evidence that Shakespeare had read Saxo Grammaticus. Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*,[12] derived from the *Historiae Danicae*, and the presumed source of that lost *Ur-Hamlet* on which Shakespeare is thought to have based his tragedy, again does not mention seals: in the anonymous 1608 translation, *The Historie of Hamblet*, Hamlet "raced out the letters that concerned his death, and in stead thereof, graved others [Belleforest: *y grava et cisa*], with commission to the king of England to hang his two companions . . ." Seals come into the story only with the lost *Ur-Hamlet* or with Shakespeare himself.

Whether Shakespeare elaborated or originated Hamlet's use of the signet, he risked a double improbability: Claudius ought to have had a different seal to old Hamlet; young Hamlet ought not to have inherited his father's signet. And the episode as presented is more than a careless addition of circumstantial detail: the possession of the seal is seen by the hero as divinely ordained, and attention is drawn to the signet being "the model of that Danish seal" by which Claudius has authenticated his act against the prince. Shakespeare risks considerable implausibility so as to create the impression of a descent of legitimate judicial authority from father to son. Hamlet's treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is therefore not simply private vengeance or malice but a fitting punishment (in circumstances where trial is impossible) for those who have been implicated in plots against a rightful prince. Their fate remains savage, sent to death "Not shriving-time allow'd" (V. ii. 47), their precise guilt undetermined; but that savagery is somewhat offset by the aura of legitimacy lent by the royal seal.

The hint that young Hamlet is the remaining source of legitimate authority is only one of a range of means by which an audience is brought to feel that Hamlet must take action against Claudius. They experience an induced need, which only the hero can relieve. How then do they accommodate themselves to a delay which Hamlet can lament but not give reason for? I'd suggest that, in the theatre, the spectator has necessarily to construct models of personality that are dynamic, manifesting needs and drives, seeking goals that are achieved or thwarted in the course of the action, reacting to success or failure

12 Gollancz (ed.), p. 233.

by redefining, transmuting or abandoning those goals. Critical accounts of Hamlet's motivation, on the other hand, have been for the most part static, conceiving his problem in terms of a temperament, a constitution, a habit of mind, a condition, a sickness or a state.

Perhaps this is why dropping in on the critics immediately after one has sat through a production of *Hamlet* is all too like overhearing the neighbours when one's close relative has lost the battle to stay sane and finally been carted off to hospital. Their analyses of what went wrong—not always falsifiable as far as they go—seem somewhat beside the point, harping on character-traits without proper regard to intolerable circumstance. Often enough, they treat what one suspects to be symptoms as though they were causes; and almost invariably, there is a barely veiled censoriousness beneath the apparent sympathy.

Olivier's one-line solution for his film—"This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind"—has attracted more than its fair share of opprobrium; for in its emphasis on a slant of mind, either a hereditary defect (a "vicious mole of nature") or a developing temperament or an engrained habit, it epitomizes a whole line of more sophisticated commentary. Goethe attributed Hamlet's difficulty to an over-delicate sensibility: "a beautiful, pure, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes the hero, sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off."[13] By the time of von Schlegel, we already sense a demand that the patient should learn to "pull himself together":

> in the resolutions which he so often embraces and always leaves unexecuted, his weakness is too apparent . . . He is not solely impelled by necessity to artifice and dissimulation, he has a natural inclination for crooked ways; he is a hypocrite towards himself; his far-fetched scruples are often mere pretexts to cover his want of determination . . .[14]

With Coleridge, Hamlet has become a warning—one which the preacher concedes is not wholly inappropriate to himself:

> In Hamlet [Shakespeare] seems to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to the objects of our senses and our meditation on the working of our minds—an *equilibrium* between the real and the imaginary worlds. In Hamlet this balance is disturbed; his thoughts and the images of his fancy are far more vivid than his actual perceptions, and his very perceptions, instantly passing through the *medium* of his contemplations, acquire, as they pass, a form and colour not naturally

13 C. C. H. Williamson (ed.), *Readings on the Character of Hamlet* (1950; repr. New York: Gordian Press, 1972), p. 24.
14 Williamson (ed.), p. 40.

> their own. Hence we see a great, an almost enormous, intellectual activity, and a proportionate aversion to real action consequent upon it . . .[15] I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so.[16]

Those twentieth-century commentators who have ignored advice that Hamlet's problem could not or should not be talked about have similarly tended (with undertones of criticism) to conceive it in terms of a fixed condition. Hamlet's trouble, according to H. B. Charlton, is that he is an idealist, creating an image of reality which he mistakes for "a true intellectual projection"; understandably, therefore, when he is required to act in the real world, especially in situations where "the stress of his feelings and the heat of his imagination" have markedly distorted his perceptions, he cannot come up with an appropriate response.[17] For D. G. James, it is Hamlet's moral and metaphysical scepticism that betrays him: "he does not rise to the bounds of philosophy; he cannot sink into passion; he inhabits a middle region where philosophy and passion, judgement and honour, reason and blood, annul each other and leave him, for all essential purposes, helpless and angry, passive and violent."[18]

A disturbing development among the "neighbours" of late has been the suggestion that Hamlet ought not to have reacted as he did to the corruption he found in Denmark. Once again, the emphasis is on habits of mind, personality traits. An early essay of Lionel Knights, developing Wilson Knight's portrait of the prince as sick, cynical and inhuman,[19] brands Hamlet as a "neurotic", "fundamentally immature", and asserts that "the desire to escape from the complexities of adult living is central to Hamlet's character".[20] As for my own early diagnosis, if it avoids criticizing Hamlet for failing to accommodate to evil, I now sense behind it an imminent injunction to "Have faith, old chap!": "Broken down by events to despair, unable to believe in the possibility of goodness, oppressed by disgust and contempt for creation, Hamlet is incapable of action."[21]

15 Williamson (ed.), p. 32, from *Notes and Lectures upon Shakespeare* (1808).
16 Williamson (ed.), p. 36, from *Table Talk*, 24 June 1827.
17 H. B. Charlton, *Shakespearian Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), pp. 83-112.
18 D. G. James, *The Dream of Learning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), p. 62.
19 G. Wilson Knight, "The Embassy of Death: An Essay on *Hamlet*", chapter two of *The Wheel of Fire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930).
20 L. C. Knights, "Prince Hamlet" in *Explorations* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1946).
21 D. L. Frost, *The School of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 170.

Such summaries take one symptom as it manifests itself on stage, elevate that symptom to an all-explaining cause, and conveniently ignore those occasions where the symptom is not apparent—for instance, where in the last diagnosis is there room for Hamlet's admiration of Horatio or his praise of his dead father? Though recent attempts to account for Hamlet's delay have made a welcome attempt to describe character and event interacting, there is still an underlying suggestion that the explanation lies in Hamlet's "personality", and that another personality might have behaved differently. Harold Jenkins and Catherine Belsey both see Hamlet as placed in a world where mixed motives are inevitable, and clear-cut right and wrong unattainable: Jenkins asks if we may "perhaps find here the reason for Hamlet's delay? A hero whose tragic role it is to punish and be punished, to do evil along with good, might well be reluctant to perform it."[22]

It is indicative of A. C. Bradley's superiority to most of those who before or since have commented on the play that he rejects notions of some determining temperament for a more dynamic view of Hamlet's personality. It is, unfortunately, also characteristic of Bradley that he places the crucial event *outside* the frame of the stage-action as an audience experiences it. For Bradley, the direct cause of Hamlet's irresolution "was a state of mind quite abnormal and induced by special circumstances,—a state of profound melancholy". Hamlet's natural reflectiveness, combined with his melancholy, does produce "excessive reflection on the required deed"; but that excess, like most of the temperamental characteristics that have been adduced to account for his delay—disgust with the world, cynicism, despair, lack of will, apathy—are to be seen as symptoms of sickness. Hamlet's melancholia is "no mere common depression of spirits"; and Bradley had "no doubt that many readers of the play would understand it better if they read an account of melancholia in a work on mental diseases". Its sole cause is "the moral shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother's true nature, falling on him when his heart was aching with love, and his body was doubtless weakened by sorrow."[23]

It is partly a consequence of a tendency to speculate overmuch on matters extraneous to the play, and partly (one suspects) a result of

22 Jenkins (ed.), p. 146; Catherine Belsey, "The Case of Hamlet's Conscience", *Studies in Philology* 76 (1979), 127-48.

23 A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904; repr. London: Methuen, 1958), pp. 86, 94.

Edwardian theories of mental illness, that Bradley thus returns Hamlet to a fixed "condition" by a circuitous route. By the time of the play Hamlet is for Bradley already locked into a state of mind from which he cannot escape:

> And this is the time which his fate chooses. In this hour of uttermost weakness, this sinking of his whole being towards annihilation, there comes on him, bursting the bounds of the natural world with a shock of astonishment and terror, the revelation of his mother's adultery and his father's murder, and, with this, the demand on him, in the name of everything dearest and most sacred, to arise and act. And for a moment, though his brain reels and totters, his soul leaps up in passion to answer this demand. But it comes too late. It does but strike home the last rivet in the melancholy which holds him bound.[24]

Hamlet's inability to act against Claudius is thus seen as a consequence of his sickness: "if, the state of melancholy being thus deepened and fixed, a sudden demand for difficult and decisive action in a matter connected with the melancholy arose, this state might well have for one of its symptoms an endless and futile mental dissection of the required deed."[25]

That Bradley speculates on motivation is not the problem—I have argued that an audience is led, even prodded, to do just that. The difficulty is that even that most sensitive of critics does not give pre-eminent attention to the dominant speculation and inferences that are triggered by stage performance: where Bradley posits a dynamic of Hamlet's personality prior to the action, an audience has to construct that dynamic *during* the action. Bradley may talk about "a sudden ghastly disclosure" in the past, but that for an audience must remain in the secondary realm of tentative speculation; what it confronts is a Hamlet violently resentful towards his mother. And when an audience's attention is absorbed primarily in inferences triggered by the action, it should observe (probably without conscious reflection) that there is a marked difference between the animus Hamlet displays towards his mother and that exhibited towards Claudius. That difference leads me to dissent from Bradley's analysis on one crucial point: his assertion that the demand for revenge on Claudius is "in a matter connection with the melancholy". I shall argue, on the contrary, and in apparent defiance of the obvious, that the demand for revenge does not bear on Hamlet's sickness. The death of his uncle would afford Hamlet no significant release—and that is why

24 Bradley, p. 96.
25 Bradley, p. 93.

he cannot (and why an audience understands that he cannot) take action against him.

We might put two passages side by side, both part of the evidence from which an audience will infer Hamlet's structure of motivation. The contrast between them is significant. The first follows the confirmation of Claudius' guilt by means of the play-within-the-play—though on stage there has intervened an exchange between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and (more importantly) a summons conveyed by Polonius for Hamlet to visit his mother:

> 'Tis now the very witching time of night,
> When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
> Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood,
> And do such bitter business as the day
> Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother.
> O heart, lose not thy nature. Let not ever
> The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom;
> Let me be cruel, not unnatural.
> I will speak daggers to her, but use none.
> My tongue and soul shall be hypocrites:
> How in my words somever she be shent,
> To give them seals never my soul consent.
> (III. ii. 379-90)

Hamlet may echo the accents of a conventional revenger, but his intentions and their object are unspecified; very soon his thoughts tend towards Gertrude, and to his fear that rage may lead him to murder her, as Nero put to death his mother Agrippina. This is only one instance of many, from the second scene of the play onwards, that serves to convince an audience of what few critics would deny: that Hamlet has an overwhelming and persistent resentment against his mother. Contrast with this his attempt towards the close of an earlier soliloquy to move feeling against Claudius:

> . . . for it cannot be
> But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall
> To make oppression bitter, or ere this
> I should ha' fatted all the region kites
> With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!
> Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
> Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
> That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,
> Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell
> Must like a whore unpack my heart with words
> And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
> A scullion! Fie upon't! Foh!
> (II. ii. 572-83)

The first speech by its sentiments and movement communicates a passion barely held in check; the second displays a willed attempt to work up feeling, which collapses into self-critical distaste. In his initial response to the Ghost's revelations, Hamlet had indicated the order of his emotional priorities: "O most pernicious woman!"—and only then—"O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!" (I. v. 105-6). The course of later action will confirm for an audience that, emotionally, Claudius has only secondary importance to Hamlet, as the agent of his mother's whoring more than the murderer of his father: Hamlet's demonstration of his inability to kill Claudius at prayer is followed immediately by his passionate and effective denunciation of Gertrude in the closet-scene.

Talk of speculation and inference may suggest that an audience at a play infers motivational structures like a psychiatrist at the couch of a patient. But if Hamlet is well played, the experience may be more like being drawn in by one of those emotional, not to say hysterical, personalities who compel the listener to empathize with, and even reproduce, some elements of their sickness. By empathizing with as well as observing Hamlet, members of an audience to a degree replicate the personality-dynamics of the character and whatever blocks there may be; hence, they will experience why Hamlet cannot revenge, even if they have insufficient psychological understanding to give a formal account of their experience.

Why then is Hamlet unable to act? Bradley posited a melancholia established before the play began; what an audience experiences is a collision of personality-drives with unremitting circumstance, producing and maintaining through much of the stage-action what we would now call a "reactive depression". To use the appropriate medical term is to run the risk that readers will simply dismiss Hamlet as "sick"—especially because the characteristics of clinical depression are so accurately charted by Shakespeare that a recent textbook for professional workers with the mentally ill devotes the first paragraph of the first chapter to quotations from the play.[26] However, a major achievement of psychiatry since Bradley's day has been to view the severer forms of depression on a continuum from personality reactions that an audience can comprehend from its own experience, and to provide a theoretical model by which both the milder and the most extreme experiences can be understood.

Probably the theoretical model is no more than a formulation of what perceptive minds in the past well understood. The first

26 Jack Dominian, *Depression* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1976), p. 15.

relationships a child develops are normally with its parents; and for good or ill these set the pattern for subsequent relationships. The mother–child bond establishes the terms and nature of emotional interchange; the father–mother relationship offers the child a first experience of affectionate interaction that does not necessarily involve itself. Both parents establish the norms and standards of human behaviour for the child. In consequence, anything that attacks these primal relationships is experienced by the child as a major threat to itself; and those who have witnessed the hostility of offspring to parents who are seen as betraying such bonds or to those regarded as interlopers will know that such reactions frequently continue into adult life. So far, there is nothing in Hamlet's resentment at Gertrude's remarriage that would be incomprehensible to an audience.

Depression is thought to develop in those situations where the person causing distress is both loved and hated, where aggression cannot be fully expressed or accepted, and where the sufferer experiences guilt at his vengeful feelings. To treat Hamlet for a moment as the human personality audiences insist on constructing (in the teeth of "our great forbidders"): Hamlet's natural confusion of feeling over an idealized mother who has betrayed that ideal and has even been revealed as an adulterer[27] is further complicated by the Ghost banning any action against her—"Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven . . ." (I. v. 85-6). To such external inhibitors are to be added Hamlet's own fears of a vengeful matricide that would leave him in a worse psychological bind. Killing Claudius might restrict Gertrude's opportunities for continued indulgence; but it would do nothing to reverse her past betrayal or to restore her moral, spiritual and emotional status in her son's eyes. For this reason, Claudius' death is understood by an audience as offering no solution of Hamlet's emotional agony. They feel why he has no motivation to act, however much he may puzzle at his own inability.

As for his obsession with Gertrude's behaviour, it is not necessary to posit some covert sexual interest on Hamlet's part: the violation of the primal bond and the betrayal of human standards by the first inculcator of those standards are sufficient to account for Hamlet's aggression. The notion of an Oedipal Hamlet owes more (in John Jump's phrase)[28] "to Freud's imagination than to Shakespeare's".

27 This is the implication of the Ghost's words at I. v. 42-57, confirmed by III. iv. 40-51, 66-77 and V. ii. 64.

28 John Jump, "Hamlet", in *Shakespeare: Select Bibliographical Guides*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 149.

It has no substantiation in the text, and can only be imported into the play by directors who turn Gertrude's "closet" (III. ii. 322-3, III. iii. 27) into a bedroom and bring disputing mother and son into a variety of quasi-coital postures.

Hamlet's inability to act against his mother, the frustration of his aggressive urges and his guilt at those urges produce the classic range of depressive symptoms: a loss of will, a failure of self-esteem, apathy, self-neglect, weariness, contempt for the world, inability to enjoy ordinary human pleasures, cynicism, despair, and thoughts of suicide. His mother's betrayal and his own self-disgust lead to a suspicion of all human relationships, especially the sexual; hence, his rejection of Ophelia. And because, as C. S. Lewis put it,[29] Hamlet's speeches "describe a certain spiritual region through which most of us have passed"—though not necessarily from strictly analogous causes—audiences have identified with Hamlet more, perhaps, than with any other stage character.

An audience empathizing with Hamlet's frustrated aggression toward Gertrude will receive a series of confirmatory signs. He seeks relief by verbal hits against minor characters of the play, from Polonius through to Osric. An audience may enjoy such humour, but is also likely to be aware that the aggression is *displaced*, especially when it emerges in savage baiting of Ophelia and obscene jests against her. The fitfulness and unpredictability of the prince's outbursts, felt by Hamlet himself to be inexplicable "madness" (witness his apology to Laertes, V. ii. 224-40) are another indication that his feelings are not directed to their true object.

Even the murder of Polonius is presented not so much as an attack on Claudius himself as a rash assault on an unidentified intruder who has dared to eavesdrop on mother and son—in other words, it is the product of frustrated aggression rather than directed malice. Where Hamlet does appear to act purposively against his uncle, in setting up the "play-within-the-play", it is because "The Murder of Gonzago" is also an indictment of Gertrude, showing the brevity of woman's love (III. ii. 148-9), and offering "wormwood" to any who have embarked on second marriage (III. ii. 176). Throughout the play-scene, Hamlet's preoccupation (where he is not tormenting Ophelia) is in provoking a response from his mother: "Madam, how like you this play?" (III. ii. 224).

29 C. S. Lewis, "Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem?", *Proceedings of the British Academy* 28 (1942), p. 15; collected in *They Asked for a Paper* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962).

Hamlet's plight, caught in a psychological bind not of his own making, tormented by and yet uncomprehending of his inability to act, is likely to move pity in an audience rather than criticism or condemnation. They may wonder what kind of world it is that places human beings in such a situation. What makes release possible is, as we would expect, some sign of a shift on the part of Gertrude. The first indication from her of regret for her conduct elicits from Hamlet a new note of tenderness, of hope, even of constructive suggestion. Only then can he pause to repent the murder of Polonius. He also predicts, and will later report himself as executing, a purposive if ruthless action against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. And when Hamlet reappears in the graveyard scene, an audience will hear for the first time (mingled with his irrational outburst against Laertes) both a positive assertion of feeling for Ophelia—"I lov'd Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quality of love / Make up my sum" (V. i. 264-6)—and also a claim to represent legitimate authority—"This is I, / Hamlet the Dane" (V. i. 250-51).

We also hear from Hamlet at his reappearance a new note of religious faith. In terms of audience-response, it is important not to make too much of this—or too little. Hamlet's assertion, when recounting the impulse which led him to purloin the commission carried by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, that

> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will —
> (V. ii. 9-10)

perhaps comes across as not much more than a pious reflection occasioned by a piece of good fortune. Nevertheless, it is something we have not heard Hamlet say before; and the suggestion of an "ordinant" heaven is repeated when Hamlet reflects on the circumstance of having his father's seal-ring at hand at his most need. Whatever spectators may think of this piety (and Hamlet throughout has been too ironic for them to be entirely easy with it), it is crucial in the most obviously free decision Hamlet makes, the resolve to ignore his forebodings and go to the fencing-match. Horatio is made to offer an explicit alternative, only to be set aside with a resounding theological assertion, backed by allusion to Matthew 10.29:

> *Horatio:* If your mind dislike anything, obey it. I will
> forestall their repair hither and say you are not fit.
>
> *Hamlet:* Not a whit. We defy augury. There is special
> providence in the fall of a sparrow.
> (V. ii. 213-16)

At a performance, we may suspect that we are seeing yet another instance of Hamlet's quirky volatility, for there has been nothing in the action to make such faith rational. However, an audience may come to see that the irrational leap, the decision for meaning, the willingness to trust that events have a purpose, does produce a solution that is uniquely fitted to Hamlet's psychological need, and so makes it possible for him to discharge his burden.

As with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet acts only after an attack on his life, this time by Claudius and Laertes. Once again, he responds to, rather than creates, a situation. He acts on the spur of the moment, as against the "rat" in the arras. But he can act against Claudius because Claudius' attempt to poison him with the cup has gone astray, and Gertrude has been killed. The mother Hamlet both loved and hated has suffered a cruelly appropriate end at the hands of her corrupter; Hamlet's vengeful feelings are discharged, and he is free to proceed against the murderer of his mother, the assassin of his king and father, the man who has debauched Denmark.

Gertrude's cry indicates treachery, but identifies no suspect:

> No, no, the drink, the drink, O my dear Hamlet!
> The drink, the drink! I am poison'd.
> (V. ii. 315-16)

Laertes confesses that he has murdered Hamlet with the poisoned rapier; but (significantly) it is the revelation that "Thy mother's poison'd. / I can no more. The King—the King's to blame" (V. ii. 325-6) which cues Hamlet's response. At last—at very long last—Hamlet turns on Claudius:

> The point envenom'd too! Then, venom, to thy work

and follows that thrust with the cup which holds (and as a "loving-cup" symbolizes) the poisoned "union" between Claudius and Gertrude:

> Here, thou incestuous, murd'rous, damned Dane
> Drink off this potion. Is thy union here?
> Follow my mother.
> (V. ii. 327-32)

An audience which has empathized with Hamlet's psychological block is likely to feel at this point the lifting of an oppressive burden. They may share the general feeling on stage that the Prince has done well, that he has discharged his duty and purged his world, even if the cost has been his own life and the destruction of the finest (and

the less fine) flowers of his society. Looking back, they may also feel that Hamlet's unavoidable torment precluded him from the easy (and erroneous) solutions of a Laertes, and that this delayed but public judgement on treachery, adultery and murder is in some way more fitting than any hole-in-the-corner revenge. Perhaps "special providence" had its points, after all. And experiencing imaginatively why Hamlet has not been able to act, they will not feel obliged to formulate their reasons. That does not mean that reasons cannot be given which are adequate to the case.