“WHAT IS IT YOU WOULD SEE?”: HAMLET AND THE CONSCIENCE OF THE THEATRE

BY BRENT M. COHEN

My title, which quotes Horatio’s question to Fortinbras near the end of Hamlet (5.2.364), might stand for the kind of question the play frequently asks its audience. Critics, like Dover Wilson in What Happens in Hamlet, who attempt to resolve the uncertainties of what we do see, treat the audience as if, like Fortinbras, it somehow has been absent from the play it has just witnessed. That we continue to question what happens in Hamlet suggests, however, that it is less a question we should expect the play to answer than one it asks of us. Why after seeing Hamlet don’t we trust ourselves to know what we have seen? Fortinbras’ final comparison of Hamlet to a soldier (5.2.397) betrays the stake subsequent spectators have had in this question: usually with less apparent strain than Fortinbras who has just conquered Poland, we too would see ourselves in Hamlet. This expression of intuitive sympathy is at the heart of the criticism of the English Romantics who found in Hamlet their most convincing argument for empathy as the primary mode of literary response. To a large extent, the dramatic structure of the play corroborates the Romantic view: we become involved in Hamlet through Hamlet. In the soliloquies Hamlet puts himself in our confidence, seeks our approbation, and in turn we see him and others through his eyes. When he puts on the mask of “antic disposition” (1.5.172), we share his moral superiority, as we do when he denounces masks in favor of that “within which passeth show” (1.2.85) or when he sees through the masks of a world in which “one may smile, and smile and be a villain” (1.5.108). Even critics who emphasize the play rather than its prince usually assume that our response to the action does not differ significantly from Hamlet’s. But there are exceptions, the Nunnery scene notably, where unable to distinguish self from mask, we find our sympathy for Hamlet in conflict with his actual behavior. In this essay, I propose to examine the effect of such double-binds on an audience in the theatre. My argument will be that the conditions of the Elizabethan theatre allowed Shakespeare to place demands on his audience that are foreign to a theatre based on Romantic assumptions; that in Hamlet Shakespeare does not use his theatre
simply to encourage audience identification or to disclose the mys-
teries of subjectivity, but to explore the implications of producing
plays for our entertainment.

I

I wish to begin with the sequence of scenes that follows Hamlet’s
decision not to kill Claudius at prayer, and to treat it as a paradigm of
our changing involvement with Hamlet. In the Prayer scene, Hamlet
worries not simply that Claudius’ soul will go to heaven, but how
such a revenge would be “scann’d” (3.3.75), how others would
interpret his action. His casuistical address justifying his inaction to
us and confiding his misgivings sets up our expectation in the next
scene, after he stabs Polonius, that again he will justify himself to us
or show some misgivings. For the first time in the play, however,
Hamlet does not directly address the audience at some point during
his appearance. In fact, his promise to “answer well” (3.4.177) for
Polonius’ death is followed by perhaps the strangest action in the
play—the hide-and-seek game. Hamlet’s concealment of Polonius’
body and his riddling taunts of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and
then of Claudius, are as baffling to us as to Claudius and the court.
Hamlet does not stop to answer our qualms as he exits lugging
Polonius’ guts from Gertrude’s bedroom, nor does he leave us with
the clear sense we have had after every previous exit of what his next
move will be. As Hamlet re-enacts the pattern of murder and con-
cealment that had given him cause for revenge, he reaches both a
moral and a strategic impasse. Claudius now takes over as master of
stratagems, as Hamlet disappears first into the role of “antic disposi-
tion” and then from the stage for the next forty-five minutes. With
our sudden loss of intimacy with Hamlet, we find ourselves on the
peripheries of the action in which we have been so excitedly in-
volved, and perhaps frustrated by the sense of futility and repetition
that seems to take over the main action of the play.

As in the Nunnery scene, Hamlet’s failure to acknowledge our
discomfort succeeds in concealing his intentions but still invites our
conjecture. Although Romantic critics were reticent about Polonius’
murder, they believed that such “harsh and unpleasant” moments,
in Charles Lamb’s words, “are what we forgive afterwards and ex-
plain by the whole of his character.”3 We might explain Hamlet’s
concealment of Polonius’ body as “madness,” as Hamlet later will,
or as an avoidance of conscience. In either case, we explain Hamlet’s
action by explaining how we might have acted in such a situation. “It
is we [the readers] who are Hamlet,”4 William Hazlitt wrote, articulating both the cardinal principle of psychological interpretation and the kind of response Hamlet would elicit from us. Perhaps since we have shared Hamlet’s concerns throughout, after Polonius’ murder we will attempt to re-involve ourselves in the action from Hamlet’s point of view. But Hamlet’s failure to show any of the misgivings he has shown previously in the play forces us to imagine the conflict we presume his “antic disposition” to conceal; we must substitute our conscience for his.

Romantic critics correctly realized that our interest in Hamlet depends on its hero’s capacity to claim our interest in him, but Hamlet’s prolonged and jarring denials of such natural human responses as grief, remorse, or responsibility for Polonius’ death force us, at least momentarily, to look at him from the outside. Shakespeare, however, does not allow Hamlet’s inaccessibility to exclude our interest and participation in the action, but utilizes our awareness of theatrical convention at once to deepen our sense of alienation and to complicate our sense of theatrical engagement. After Hamlet leaves the court for England, Claudius directly addresses the audience: “Do it England, / For like the hectic in my blood he rages, / And thou must cure me” (4.3.65-67). Although in appropriating Hamlet’s habit of enlisting the audience in his cause Claudius only confirms our loyalty to Hamlet, he does succeed in re-involving us in the action, placing considerable stress on our immediate response. Claudius’ address exacerbates our sense of dislocation in the scenes that follow Polonius’ murder (where is Polonius? where is Hamlet?): are we in Denmark, where we see events as Hamlet sees them, or are we in England, in the distance of ironical awareness, and the loyal subjects of his proposed executioner? Unlike the more customarily off-handed, unproblematic ribbings of the audience that we find later, for example, in the Gravedigger’s quip about English madness, here Shakespeare reminds his audience of its place in a London theatre at precisely the moment that our continued involvement in Hamlet is most precarious. Claudius’ daring address creates a highly charged pause in which the audience must reconsider just how complicated and contradictory its involvement in the play might be.

Frequently in Hamlet, as in other plays, Shakespeare acknowledges the presence of his audience in the theatre. The kinds of involvement in the drama such disruptive tactics could create sharply distinguishes the theatrical conventions of illusion in the
Elizabethan theatre from those of the Romantic theatre. Until William Poel revived the Elizabethan platform stage at the end of the century, 19th-century productions of Shakespeare were performed on a stage that was separated from its audience by a proscenium arch, and their goal, as Hazlitt wrote in his review of Edmund Kean's premier performance of Hamlet, was to mirror "what might have taken place at the court of Denmark 500 years ago" (V, 185). Attempts to enhance the illusion with increasingly elaborate scenery and costuming, however, only increased the audience's awareness of the theatre—at least the awareness of such an avid theatre-going, closet critic as Lamb who rejected the principle introduced by the early Romantic actor John Phillip Kemble of correlating visual effects with subjective states of mind. When Lamb denounces the stage because its machinery "positively destroys the illusion" (I, 110) or because it "makes all things natural" (I, 111), he does not object to the principle of naturalism, only its imperfect implementation. Shakespeare was not concerned, according to Lamb, with the externals of place and gesture, but with the interiors of feeling, "grounded deep in nature, so deep that the depth of them lies out of the reach of most of us" (I, 102), and forever out of the reach of the stage.

Coleridge believed that this "depth" could be realized on Shakespeare's stage. Unencumbered by the spectacles of the Georgian stage, the bare, placeless Elizabethan stage permitted Shakespeare's poetry to exalt the imagination. Freed from the necessity to copy nature, Shakespeare could "appeal to that which we most wish to be when we are most worthy of being"—whether that be Henry V or Richard III. Dramatic illusions create a world of wish-fulfillment, in which, as in a "dream . . . the judgment is neither beguiled nor conscious of the fraud. . . . Whatever disturbs this repose of judgment by its harshness, abruptness, and improbability offends against dramatic propriety" (II, 258). Like Lamb (I, 98), Coleridge compares dramatic illusion to dreaming in order to describe the audience's suspension of judgment and its submission to the illusion. But he goes beyond Lamb when he complains that scene changes on the Georgian stage arouse us "from that delightful dream of our inner nature which in truth was more than a dream" (II, 79). The reveries produced by illusions, like dreams, Coleridge seems to say, originate somehow from our "inner nature" or what he calls, in his well-known definition of imagination, "the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."
to Coleridgean epistemology, Hazlitt can say we are Hamlet because the self must predicate itself as an object, live in the object, in order to have knowledge of itself. In order to "make the object one with us, we must become one with the object—ergo, an object. Ergo, the object must be itself a subject" (BL, 183). By dissolving the boundaries of waking life that separate us from our "inner nature," dramatic illusions fulfill Coleridge's philosophical dream of restoring the unity of subject and object, of inside and outside. In terms of the theatre, each member of the audience becomes like an actor who identifies with and embodies an heroic role.

Romantic writers wanted an heroic theatre that would ennoble its audience, but with the ambivalent exception of Hazlitt, they found the collectivity of the audience and the bodies of actors to inhibit that process of identification. They not only wanted to protect their favorite plays from the dross of performance, but to eliminate the audience altogether as a concept or as an epistemological category. Writing about Shakespeare with greatest conviction in the study, misinformed by a nostalgic sense of the Elizabethan stage, Romantic critics formed notions of dramatic illusion that ironically better fitted the design of the Georgian theatre. In the Georgian theatre, the actors behind the proscenium do not recognize the presence of the audience across the orchestra pit. The stage, the "lofty but striking platform of the imagination" (XVIII, 272) as Hazlitt dubbed it, rises out of the depths of the self; it recreates a world in which we are not present and to which we are not responsible. The empty orchestra pit marks an ontological boundary between the audience and the stage, between consciousness and dreaming, that we must transgress in order to enter the world of the illusion, the quasi-sacred space in which we lose our known selves to find our nobler, truer selves. The world on stage from which we are excluded encourages our absorption into it; the absolute boundary between stage and audience exists to invite us to cross it, leaving our critical faculties behind. The absence of such absolute boundaries in the Elizabethan theatre, however, includes us in the action without permitting our total absorption or abandonment of self-consciousness. The stage—also elevated in order that an actor be seen—extends horizontally into a profane auditorium rather than rising vertically from an unfathomable depth. The projecting platform gives the actor immediate and, in broad daylight, continuous access to his audience, some of whom filled the "pit," and a few of whom sometimes even sat on stage. The maintenance of an intimate, intersubjective distance was
crucial to a Renaissance audience, who, in Ovid's then proverbial phrase, went to the theatre to see and to be seen. Rather than forgetting its place in the theatre, the audience was frequently recognized and acknowledged by actors. Burbage's Hamlet did not "think aloud," as Hazlitt thought proper (V, 187), but declaimed like an orator, with a cultivated sense of how to sound his audience from the lowest note to the top of its compass. Emotions, of course, are involved, but as Stephen Orgel has written, "as in a debate, in the audience's judgment lies half the action." Our involvement, then, does not lead us to the edge of repose and dream, but, as Claudius' address suggests, to a conflicted sense of our role in the action. Instead of losing ourselves in the extasis of sympathetic identification, we remain possessed of our consciousness, or, in the synonymous Renaissance phrase used by Hamlet, caught by our "conscience."

It is remarkable that except for "The Murder of Gonzago" Roman tic critics do not discuss the abundant references in Hamlet to the conditions of its theatre. In a revision of the Romantic view, Leslie Fiedler has argued that Shakespeare makes the audience conscious of the realities of the stage as a defense of illusion. Qualifying Coleridge's point that by the contrast of its artifice "The Murder of Gonzago" enhances the illusion of reality in Hamlet, Fiedler argues that our disruptive realization that Hamlet too is only a play enables the illusion to be reconstituted at a "universal" level. "Is not the very piece we are seeing, the inner play suggests, precisely that play Hamlet has arranged before us—and are we not then a stage audience, beheld as well as beholding, at a play within some greater play, actors all in a universal drama, which inevitably defines all our plays as 'plays within a play'?" (p. 88). Fiedler's argument finds additional sanction in the Renaissance commonplace of theatrum mundi, in which a less refined theological context is explicit. No doubt Jacques' aphorism "All the world's a stage" is always available to Shakespeare in Hamlet, but curiously neither it nor its theological context is ever activated. Except for the abrupt reappearance of the Ghost in the Closet scene, Hamlet does not avail itself of the suggestion that some hovering divinity watches us watch the play, as Thomas Kyd does in The Spanish Tragedy, where the Ghost and Revenge sit on stage from beginning to end. The experience of watching yourself be watched that creates self-consciousness is not expressed in the dramatic structure of Hamlet, but by the moment to moment interaction of audience and actor. Instead of attempting by

Brent M. Cohen
theological or Romantic indirection to defend the theatre, Shake-
spere goes out of his way to demystify the processes of theatrical 
hypnosis. The Players, who are real actors, not the lovable caricu-
tures of A Midsummer Night's Dream, appear out of character; styles 
of acting are discussed, the whims of audiences and demands of 
performance are acknowledged, and other "plays" are presented. 
Fiedler's antitheatricalism, like that of the Romantic critics, seems 
to stem from his embarrassment inside the theatre coupled with a 
desire to defend the drama as a carrier of truth. But Hamlet is 
theatrical precisely insofar as it refuses to make its theatre serve a 
myth of "universal drama" or reduce the world (à la Jacques) to a 
stage. Instead Hamlet honors the integrity of the theatre, its truths 
and mysteries, as something alien, not ours, but which is still the 
object of our voracious appetites. Maddeningly, however, our appe-
tites for theatre are turned against us. The frequent insistence that 
the play we watch is a fiction, like Hamlet's play for Claudius, forces 
us to reckon with our desire for dramatic fictions and our susceptibil-
ity to self-deception. If in the theatre we comfortably assume that we 
know the difference between a hawk and a handsaw, Hamlet makes 
it uncomfortably difficult for us to know or acknowledge what we 
have just seen on stage. The simultaneity of seeing and knowing that 
we take for granted everyday is made problematic in the theatre. Are 
the Player's tears real or acted? Why do they move Hamlet? What 
does Hamlet see in Claudius' face? What do we see Hamlet see? Is 
Hamlet or Claudius hoist on his own petard in the finale?

Before addressing these questions, I want to look more briefly at a 
few other moments of significant audience disjunction. In Fiedler's 
terms, the most defensive throwaway of the illusion occurs in the 
Cellarage scene (1.5) after Hamlet has vowed his revenge in a so-
liloquy of high tragic seriousness. Hamlet's jokes to the Ghost in the 
"cellarage" remind the audience of the physical event it has just 
witnessed: the closing trapdoor through which the actor passed 
when the Ghost vanished. Rather than suggesting that the world's a 
stage, however, the business of Horatio, Marcellus, and Hamlet 
shifting ground as the Ghost, hurrying beneath among the trestles or 
posts, stridently bids them "swear," heightens the burlesque. But 
the burlesque of what? The jokes about the Ghost appeal to the 
audience's familiarity not only with the stage but also with the 
revenge plays to which they allude. The interlacing Latin phrase 
(hic et ubique), characteristic of Elizabethan University drama, has 
suggested to some editors that the earlier Hamlet is being remem-

228 "Hamlet" and the Conscience of the Theatre
bered. Of course the earlier *Hamlet* has not survived, but ridicule of it has, such as Lodge's 1596 jeer about the Ghost "which cried so miserably at the Theator, like an oyster wife, Hamlet, revenge." It is probably safe to say that by 1601 revenge plays were considered hackneyed. Hamlet distracts us from our lack of conviction about such plays, and perhaps about his "poor part" (1.5.131), by stealing our laughter; at the same time he causes us to measure and qualify our involvement in this performance.

And yet, theatrically, Hamlet's gesture of self-awareness is oddly exhilarating. Like Claudius' "Do it England," Hamlet's address to the Ghost in the cellaring grants us the somewhat giddy pleasure of being in two places at once. Often the play makes no pretense of place and uses our awareness of the stage and its traditional forms of deception to define our involvement in the fiction. Consider, for instance, the scene in which Polonius sends Reynaldo to Paris to make sure that Laertes is misbehaving only as a good son should. Polonius shows Reynaldo how to act in such a way that he will discover only what Polonius wants him to discover, no more, no less. "And there put on him / What forgeries you please, marry none so rank / As may dishonor him—take heed of that... You must not put another scandal on him / That he is open to incontinency" (2.1.19-20; 29-30). Shakespeare is not concerned to show Laertes drinking or drabbing in Paris or to show a yokel from Elsinore ineptly putting forgeries on him. Instead we witness a burlesque of an oldtimer from University productions instructing an innocent in an outmoded, tendentious style of acting. Only later do we learn of Polonius' previous history as an actor, or does he demonstrate the literalization of gesture characteristic of this style in his ludicrously emphatic assurance to Claudius, "Take this from this" (2.2.156) if Hamlet is not mad for love of Ophelia. An audience would be likely to see through the acting style in which Polonius schools Reynaldo, just as Hamlet realizes at the end of the preceding scene that any conspicuously emphatic gesture ("with arms encumbered thus, nor with this headshake, or by pronouncing some doubtful phrase" [1.5.175]) would give away the pretense of his "antic disposition." Later we again associate Hamlet with Polonius when Hamlet knowingly instructs actors in a superior style of acting that will enable them to elicit from the audience the response he wants to get. If we feel comfortably contemptuous of Polonius' self-deceiving plan to "take this carp of truth" with a "bait of falsehood," then, as I will suggest, less comfortable suspicions might attend our agreement with Ham-

*Brent M. Cohen*
let that he has "caught the conscience of the King."

The crucial test for the efficacy of acting occurs in Hamlet's account of how he regained the native hue of his resolution (5.2). Shakespeare does not show us Hamlet acting decisively on the ship to England, but instead relies on a theatrical demonstration. The stage is placeless, without suggestion of locale until Hamlet is ready for the duel in the "hall" (5.2.174). No longer in the inky cloak of mourning or in the disarray of antic disposition, Hamlet is perhaps still scarfed in the "sea-gown" (5.2.13), the outward sign of his change. His interruptions of syntactical units, his digressive elaborations, and his demands on Horatio's attention and ours (in a manner similar to that of Prospero's retrospective tale to Miranda in The Tempest) make his account sound like self-justification. Hamlet is now performing; at one point he invokes a theatrical metaphor ("Or I could make a prologue to my brains / They had begun to play") to describe the pace of the action. His re-enactment of the chaotic events aboard ship makes them now feel coherent, even providential. Unlike the "rash" (3.4.28, 32) murder of Polonius, Hamlet can justify the "rashness" (5.2.7) of sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. He removes them from his "conscience" (5.2.58) and rhetorically works himself up to avenge his father upon Claudius (5.2.68). And yet, his performance betrays a disturbing contradiction. Mysteriously something has happened on the way to England; Hamlet has learned to let things take their course, to "let be." No longer will he exercise his control over events; he will stop acting. But in order to show us what has happened, Hamlet must act. His assertions of change, coming so perilously close to the over-explicitness of a Polonius, raise the possibility that Hamlet now acts in the hope that something will happen, something will change. We may be convinced by his performance or we may resist, as the play has taught us, being played upon by an actor. In either case, what has happened to Hamlet has not happened to us; we become aware of our distance from Hamlet and of our difference.

My point is not that Hamlet attempts to trick us at a crucial point in the plot, but that Shakespeare carefully makes us aware of the ambiguities that attend our allegiance to Hamlet. Almost every action in Hamlet is accompanied by an acknowledgement of the artifices of the stage or of the performing presence of the actor from whom action originates. By making us aware of the theatre within the theatre, the play creates a distance between the audience and its
hero that does not abrogate our sympathy, but makes it ours to give, our responsibility once given.

II

Hamlet makes us self-conscious as an audience and often makes us uneasy about the ease with which we acquiesce in Hamlet's view of himself. Our tendency, like Hamlet, to see only what we want to see, is evident in the way the principal action of the play unfolds. As an act of restitution, revenge is a form of mourning; it must be appropriate not to what the world is, but to what it has become. Throughout the first act the heroic comparisons and religiously suggestive language make the audience feel in the death of old Hamlet the loss of a world in which one's words and actions held conviction. In the theatre of the Players, Hamlet finds the conviction he lacks and the possibility of reclaiming a world of action lost to him outside the theatre. The theatre becomes the definitional structure of action in Hamlet, but frequently it threatens to undermine the action of the drama, and even the possibility of action. The Players arouse Hamlet's impulses for the heroic and forbidden, for actions which it turns out, however, can be acted out only in the theatre. An actor conveys his intimacy with the human feelings of the audience, promises in his performance to quell our intimations of unreality, but reserves for himself and the stage sole rights to their expression. The theatre thus turns against Hamlet: on the one hand, it suggests that actions can only be acted (with pretense, for an audience) and on the other, that acting can never be more than gesture, cannot attain the "name of action" (3.1.88).

The long-standing difficulties of relating the Player's recitation of Aeneas' tale to Dido, written in an overly theatrical style of acting and verse, to the action of Hamlet suggests something of this antagonism between acting and action. In the best essay on the connection of the Player's speech with Hamlet, Harry Levin argues that Hamlet is to be identified with Aeneas, old Hamlet with Priam, Fortinbras with Pyrrhus, and Gertrude with Hecuba. The analogy is apt up to a point: the sight of Priam's slaughter arouses Hamlet, like Aeneas, from inaction, but their subsequent actions couldn't be more different. In the Aeneid the sight of the slain Priam calls up the image of Aeneas' father (cari genitoris imago, [2.560]) and recalls him to his familial and historic duties. When a few lines later Aeneas sees Helen, he learns that he must forgo the revenge of Priam and Troy.

Brent M. Cohen
He never absolutely overcomes his impulses to vindicate and reside in the past, but even in the militarism of the later books where we might expect such impulses to be aired, they are not invested with the compelling inwardness we find in his violent fantasy of killing Helen. In Aeneas' tale to Dido, the Homeric language and ethos of revenge and martial heroism are employed with more immediacy than anywhere else in the Aeneid; but like its hero, after paying tribute to its poetic past, the poem is able to get past it. In Hamlet, however, the Player's speech recalls Hamlet to his revenge and compels him to dwell in the past. Recounting the past, obeying the Ghost's injunction to "remember," leaves Hamlet regressively attached to the past, condemned tragically to repeat it.

The difficulties of the Player's speech increase when we consider the problem of its performance—the toll re-enacting the past takes on an actor and the ways an actor makes his presence felt in his performance. As Levin has shown, the speech carefully establishes our literary and temporal distance from its subject: we are witness to a re-enactment of a witness' account of the murder. At the same time, however, as we hear a voice from that lost world, the past seems about to emerge again into our presence. The speech begins (2.2.460) narratively in the past tense ("did the night resemble") and subordinates Pyrrhus' presence ("Hyrcanian," "rugged," "sable," "black") to an explanation of his arrival ("When he lay couched in the ominous horse"). Then suddenly Pyrrhus emerges in the present tense with an emphatic repetition of "now." The locution "Head to foot" describes someone in full dress for combat, as it did in Horatio's description of the Ghost to Hamlet (1.2.200), where it assures him and us that he has not succumbed to "fantasy" (1.1.23). Pyrrhus' presence, like the Ghost's, seems as undeniable as an actor's body ("head to foot") on stage. As he recites the description of Pyrrhus, Hamlet might call attention to his own body in a gesture of immediacy while the inverted syntax emphasizes the urgently unfolding action ("old grandsire Priam seeks"). The opening description is an example of what in Renaissance rhetoric would have been called enargeia, or to use the term which also had currency as an ideal of acting, "liveliness": we feel we are in the presence of Pyrrhus and an urgent action rather than in the presence of Aeneas removed in Carthage.

Throughout, however, the liveliness and conviction of the Player's speech depend more on the physical presence of the actor than on his bombastic rhetoric. In the soliloquy afterwards, Hamlet
comments not on the magnitude of Hecuba’s grief, but on the tears, paled complexion, and distracted aspect of the Player. Hamlet realizes that what has happened happened to an actor, not just to the character “Hecuba.” Hamlet’s complaint “What’s Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba / That he should weep for her?” is a quite apt allusion to the art of the actor who not only brings feeling to his role (“he to Hecuba”) but whose own feelings are strengthened and developed by his role (“Hecuba to him”). To the extent that an actor internalizes his role, his performance may have resonances for him that cannot be expressed explicitly, that, in Hamlet’s words, “pass show.” Since Hamlet does not mention Pyrrhus in his soliloquy, however, critics have generally ignored the disturbing implications that playing Pyrrhus might have for Hamlet and not for the Player. Borrowing Coleridge’s terms, Levin goes so far as to argue that the speech is not concerned with Pyrrhus’ “epic” action, but with Hecuba’s “lyric” lament (p. 144), despite the fact that the former is substantially longer and theatrically and psychologically more complex. Moreover, although the narrative frame virtually disappears, as I have suggested, from the opening description, Levin identifies Hamlet with Aeneas, and Pyrrhus as a vividly depicted, but “unfeeling” (p. 150) fiend. Pyrrhus may be both unfeeling and a fiend, but the rhapsode, who in the opening description is Hamlet, does feel.

What is Hamlet to Pyrrhus or Pyrrhus to Hamlet? The Player’s speech invites this connection and its denial in a number of ways. As avenging sons, they are opposites. Aeneas’ description from “Head to foot” of “hellish Pyrrhus” echoes Ophelia’s portrait from “head” to “ankle” (2.1.79) of Hamlet, so “piteous in purport, / As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors.” Pyrrhus’ relentless pursuit of his revenge appears to rebuke Hamlet’s inactivity and disarray—a rebuke that the Ghost (who according to one tradition doubled as the First Player) would be justified in making, as he subsequently does in the Closet scene. Later in the play it becomes evident that Pyrrhus has become a model revenger for Hamlet. Before “The Murder of Gonzago,” there is an undercurrent of veiled references to Pyrrhus (e.g., 3.2.86, 185-87), and afterwards when Hamlet looks upon himself as a revenger who could “drink hot blood / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on” (3.2.398-400), he sounds as if he would out-Pyrrhus Pyrrhus, who is “tricked / With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons, / Baked and impasted with the parching streets, / That lend a tyrannous and damned light to their lord’s murder” (2.2.469). And in the Prayer

_Brent M. Cohen_ 233
scene, where Hamlet comes close to becoming a caricature of a revenger, his posture—pausing over Claudius with an extended sword—visually reminds the audience of Pyrrhus’ long pause standing over the half-slain Priam. If Pyrrhus suggests a model of the avenging son to Hamlet, Pyrrhus’ murder of old Priam also makes him the object of Hamlet’s revenge. Such logic leads to suicide.

The description of Priam’s murder casts Hamlet in exactly such a dark, contradictory role. At the moment Pyrrhus seeks Priam, Hamlet relinquishes the stage to the Player. The Player continues in the present tense until Pyrrhus is about to murder Priam, when suddenly the speech recoils and stops. Where Virgil, Marlowe, and the First Quarto end their accounts of Priam’s murder, the Second Quarto and Folios delay. Marlowe’s “So, leaning on his sword he stood stone still,” which commentators have associated with the Player’s “So, as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,” comes as a moment of repose after, not before, the murder. Moreover, Shakespeare eliminates Virgil’s description of Hecuba’s intervention and the direct exchanges between Priam and Pyrrhus. With highly simplified dramaturgy, the Player presents only what is directly pertinent to a single, culminating action. In the silence of Pyrrhus and Priam, Shakespeare creates a visual tableau of the murder extended over eighteen lines of verse that places a premium on the interaction of actor and audience. “For lo, his sword, / Which was declining on the milky head / Of reverend Priam, seem’d i’ th’ air to stick. / So, like a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood.” As the natural flow of action is arrested, we become intensely aware both of the actor’s presence, his body, his gestures, and of his conflict with his role. For the first time the Player uses overtly psychological diction: “Pyrrhus stood, / And like a neutral to his will and matter / Did nothing.” The Player’s rhetoric and appearance as a visual emblem of Hamlet’s delay cause us to divide our attention between Hamlet and the Player. We watch an actor inhibited by the spectacle of his action, as Hamlet later is in the Prayer scene, and we watch Hamlet, in effect, watch himself about to perform the murder he must revenge. The momentary superimposition of Hamlet and Pyrrhus creates an uncomfortable distortion of the action which we are then made to feel is literally unspeakable. “But as we often see against some storm, / A silence in the heavens, the rack stand still / The bold winds speechless, and the orb below / As hush as death. . . .” The glimpse we have of Hamlet’s dilemma, in short, remains unexpressed and calls for interpretation.

234  “Hamlet” and the Conscience of the Theatre
Instead of complicating Hamlet’s sense of revenge, however, the Player’s performance revives his pursuit of it. When in the soliloquy Hamlet complains that he can “say nothing” (2.2.580), he refocuses the meaning of the Player’s action (who momentarily “did nothing”) without acknowledging that any darkening distortion had occurred. Hamlet’s failure to register such distortions is a recurring pattern in a play that frequently loses focus and changes direction. When Hamlet next enters (in 3.1), for example, an audience expects him to be in pursuit of his revenge; instead, surprisingly and inexplicably, he delivers the “To be or not to be” soliloquy. We quickly realize that his subsequent attack on Ophelia is not merely “antic disposition”; Hamlet seems truly mad for love of Ophelia, overturning our confidence throughout Act 2 that Polonius was a fool to think so. After losing control with Ophelia, Hamlet returns calmed in the next scene to advise the Players that an actor should deliver his lines calmly, should not “o’erstep the modesty of nature” (3.2.20). Hamlet acknowledges nothing of his recent outburst, and the play proceeds, as it does with great tension after the death of Polonius, as if nothing had happened, as if no action could or does have consequences. Again, in “The Murder of Gonzago,” Hamlet fails to register the fact that the Players’ text involves a significant distortion. When just before the climactic murder Hamlet introduces Lucianus as “nephew to the King” (3.2.250), the discomfort we felt in the Player’s speech is recalled and confirmed. Again our attention is drawn to Hamlet, the King’s nephew, as it was when Pyrrhus paused before murdering Priam, and our willingness to ignore the evidence and agree with Hamlet’s interpretation of the play is put to the test.

It appears to Hamlet that the King’s conscience is caught when he abruptly rises and calls for light. Since “nephew to the King” more immediately identifies Hamlet than Claudius, however, other interpretations of his departure are quite feasible. The court audience, for example, interprets the play as a threat to Claudius’ life, an interpretation it continues to hold after the final duel (5.2.324), and one which Claudius encourages in his conference with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the next scene (3.3). Although the play must seem to Claudius a paranoid nightmare in which murder turns out somehow to have a tongue, his interruption of the play before he is clearly implicated as the “murderer” who “gets the love of Gonzago’s wife” (3.2.270) preserves the ambiguity that Lucianus is to be identified with Hamlet. Hamlet himself confirms the precision of Claudius’ timing when he asks Horatio about Claudius’ appearance
“upon the talk of poisoning” (3.2.296). If we can entertain the possibility that Claudius remained in control, then his outburst is perhaps not the helpless confession of guilt Hamlet assumes it to be, but a shrewdly improvised management of his audience’s response. Although Hamlet wants and later confidently believes this play to convict Claudius of old Hamlet’s murder, his introduction of Lucianus creates a troubling distortion. The change of perspective from a play about the murder of an innocent old King to one about a nephew’s revenge seems to be a gesture of Hamlet’s power to terrify Claudius, and, coming as it does just before old Gonzago’s murder, is perhaps a deeply irrational fantasy of his power to save old Hamlet by killing Claudius. For obscure reasons, which I will come to shortly, Hamlet wants to make Hamlet and “The Murder of Gonzago” into the same play. Their superimposition, however, distorts more than it clarifies, and again casts Hamlet in a contradictory role, leaving us without any single adequate account of what we have seen.

Audiences, however, have so tended to share Hamlet’s conviction that he has caught Claudius’ conscience that until the start of the 20th century the Prayer scene, in which Claudius unambiguously confesses his guilt, was customarily cut from productions. This was doubtless designed primarily to spare the audience the distress of seeing Hamlet in a bad light, but it also assumes that Claudius’ guilt is proved by “The Murder of Gonzago.” My point here is not that Claudius may be innocent, but that we should recognize that our agreement with Hamlet is not a response to a proven fact. After “The Murder of Gonzago,” however, Hamlet virtually paralyses our ability or inclination to acknowledge what we have seen and heard. In celebration of his success, Hamlet bursts into the doggerel of a clown. Horatio seems about to be the voice of reason to Hamlet’s triumphal glee, but every apparent hesitation he voices (“half a share”; “you might have rhymed”) only fuels Hamlet’s wit. When finally Hamlet remembers his plan to check his interpretation with Horatio, Horatio assents (“I did note him well” [3.2.296]) without saying what he saw—and Hamlet, of course, does not stop to ask. Hamlet is so sure that he has discovered Claudius’ guilt that it would be futile to attempt to show him that he cannot be so certain in presuming to know the meaning of another’s behavior. Still, the self-deception of such presumption is exactly his point when in an elaborately extended conceit he berates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for trying to “pluck the heart out of my mystery.” “Call me...
what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me" (3.2.379-80). Again we might wish to remind Hamlet that he has tented Claudius to the quick, but no gesture of self-awareness is forthcoming on his part. When Hamlet mimics Polonius' willingness to confirm his every whim, Shakespeare again goes out of his way to suggest the inconclusiveness of Hamlet's consultation with Horatio. The "cloud," which assumes the shape its beholder gives it (a camel, weasel, whale, [3.2.385 ff]), recalls the ambiguity we found in "The Murder of Gonzago." Hamlet does not acknowledge the self-fulfilling procedure of confirmation that he mimics in Polonius as his own, but expects his audience to share his masterful contempt for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Polonius. Characteristically, Hamlet behaves as if the distorting introduction of Lucianus had not occurred; but by repeatedly showing us Hamlet's clownish and boastful exaggerations, the play refuses to refocus completely. Like the clowns whose banter he would banish from the theatre, Hamlet appears to play more to his audience than to the "necessary question of the play" (3.2.45).

In general Hamlet denies our potentially different perspectives by having us adopt his; he resists our analysis of him by exhaustively and sometimes satirically analyzing himself. Hamlet does not have to relinquish the fictions of self, as Lear must, but displays them confidently in a great "variety" (to use Dr. Johnson's word) of forms. We always enjoy the intelligence of Hamlet's performance, his ability to stay one step ahead of us, to seem to know us better than we know ourselves. Hamlet invites us to admire him for his anxieties by making them entertaining. "To be or not to be" does not become our question; we appreciate his quickness of mind as he moves through moment to moment puzzles of logic and traps of metaphor, and we are pleased without really having to worry about what he says. *Hamlet* does not cause us the pain that *Lear* does, but tempts us to regard our intellectual pleasure with a seriousness that borders on self-deception. So much inwardness exhibited and acted on stage, however, may lead us to feel that intelligence and style are not enough, that Hamlet tells us certain things to avoid telling us others. Only the First Gravedigger knows the limits of intelligence, and his appearance, although late and short-lived, confirms our feeling that Hamlet's delight in the nuances of his various metaphors and logics can be mimicked in the way that Hamlet mimics almost everyone else in the play. In other Shakespearean tragedies, the hero's perspective is often questioned by what Maynard Mack calls an

*Brent M. Cohen*
opposing voice” tragic sensibility is established from a skeptical, ironical distance. Hamlet, however, has no Enobarbus or Kent or Fool who articulates an independent perspective and who ultimately remains loyal to his master. Horatio is loyal, but essentially the silent stoic. Lear and Cleopatra are heroic partly because of their distance; they do not spend themselves on us. Our intimacy with Hamlet does not pluck out his mystery, but we may begin to feel that he wants too much to be seen if not heroically, then at least as tragically unheroical. In *Hamlet*, the role of “opposing voice” is ours.

III

The strain of Hamlet’s acting is especially evident whenever he thinks of revenge. “Hold, hold, my heart, / And you, my sinews, grow not instant old, / But bear me stiffly up” (1.5.93-95). Ready for his revenge after “The Murder of Gonzago,” Hamlet bears himself stiffly until he remembers his visit to his mother: “Now could I drink hot blood / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother” (3.2.398 ff.). When he next stumbles upon Claudius at prayer with knees as “soft as sinews of a newborn babe” (3.3.71), Hamlet’s taut posture and outstretched sword signal his inability to act, as does his oddly rigid language of revenge when he leaves for England (4.4.65). On each occasion, as we watch the actor tense his body in an assertion of strength and virility, we find Hamlet impotent and immobilized by anger. Hamlet’s assertions of revenge, that is, always appear at odds with themselves. The deep contradictions of revenge are evident to the audience in the dramatic presentations of old Hamlet’s murder. Hamlet’s ambiguous identification with Pyrrhus and then with Lucianus suggests that he must repeat in a different form the act he would revenge. Hamlet too must kill a King, an act that has patricidal associations even when the King is Claudius. More importantly, Hamlet’s identification with these aggressors occurs in the first instance when the Player’s rhetoric sympathetically forestalls the murder, and in the second when Hamlet would prevent it by threatening Claudius. Hamlet’s thoughts of revenge occur at moments at which he might magically “undo” old Hamlet’s murder. In psychoanalytic thought, fantasies of “undoing” are often indicated by compulsive patterns of repetition. “What has not happened in such a way as would have accorded with one’s desire,” Freud writes, “is made through its repetition in some other way, not to have happened at all—to which are superadded all the various

“Hamlet” and the Conscience of the Theatre
However heroically conceived, the act of revenge becomes for Hamlet more a gesture than an action, a gesture which cannot attain the completion of action and which, as the murder of Polonius suggests, condemns the revenger to futile repetition of the past.

No one in the play ever conceives of revenge as repetitive action, but we experience patterns of repetition in the play’s structure, language, and performance. In the first act, the Ghost appears and reappears in silence, and then speaks to tell Hamlet the story of his murder. In the third act, the Ghost’s tale is performed first without and then with words; and in the last act, after Hamlet rests in silence, Horatio promises to retell the story we have just witnessed. Some actions need to be performed twice to attain the name of action. Fortinbras enters Denmark first as its enemy, then as its King; Polonius dies first as Caesar and then as himself; Hamlet re-enacts for us the events aboard the ship to England. The impulse to go back and dwell over actions is felt in the difficulties of leave-taking. Anxious to finish his tale, the Ghost (1.5.60) continues for thirty lines, bids Hamlet “adieu” three times, and then lingers to repeat his command to “swear”; Hamlet ends the scene by twice saying “let us together” to Marcellus and Horatio. Similarly Polonius scolds Laertes for staying too long (1.3.55) and then commands his son with a list of precepts. Hamlet bids Ophelia “farewell” three times in the Nunnery scene and then exits only with the refrain “To a nunnery, go”; he bids Gertrude “goodnight” five times in the Closet scene; and tells Horatio he is dead at least three times before his last exit from the play. Hamlet habitually repeats his own words for emphasis, and in general actors, apparently wanting to make the most out of their lines, tended to repeat words and phrases not “set down” (3.2.41) in the text, as the significant increase of such repetitions in the First Folio, usually thought to be based on a promptbook, indicates. Our impression throughout the play is that characters remain attached to what they must relinquish; that all action necessitates repetition to gain focus and definition.

Repetitive action is an important feature of the public theatre. The hectic pace of the Elizabethan repertory system, in which an actor might have to perform forty different roles in a season, must have made it difficult for actors to trust their performances to have inner-ness and conviction, and would have encouraged them to rely heavily on external gesture to convey intense feeling. After the Player’s re-enactment of the conventional stage roles of revenger and wailing

Brent M. Cohen
woman, Hamlet demonstrates, with the virtuosity of the *professional* role-player that he is, his facility in repertory as a “John-a-dreams,” a coward challenged as a villain, and a revenger. Hamlet’s use of well-worn theatrical pranks to exhibit his suffering and compel us with his self-rebuke makes his performance exhilarating. As he works himself up into the role of a revenger, however, Hamlet despairs of theatrical routine. “Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain! / O vengeance! / Why, what an ass am I!” (2.2.591 ff.). The heavily alliterative list of adjectives and the short climactic “O vengeance” punctuating the outburst require the actor to commit the original sin of the Stanislavski method: theatrical acting. The consciousness of acting blocks Hamlet’s concentration within his role; ranting like a conventional stage revenger, his performance loses focus. Exasperated that by acting his passion, it has not gained conviction, Hamlet arranges a play in which he will not have to act and to which he can be a spectator vicariously reliving and recounting his motives for revenge.

Hamlet’s performance suggests the uncertainty that undermines his successive attempts to demonstrate his original assertion that he has that “within which passeth show.” Here the assertion takes the form of a question: “What would he [the Player] do / Had he the motive and cue for passion / That I have?” (2.2.570 ff.). In the course of the soliloquy, however, Hamlet discovers that his own unfathomable singularity is, or appears to be, only a role, which as an actor he cannot fully settle into. Perhaps Hamlet is as unaware of what’s within him as we are, but Hamlet himself never relinquishes the self-critical voice of the soliloquies with its privileged assumption that it does not come from the same place as the Hamlet it rebukes and accuses. But where, then, does it come from? Perhaps Hamlet discovers in the agonies of self-disavowal that in asserting his interiority to us, he is playing yet another role, which in the infinite regress of his self-reflection he in turn will have to disavow. Whether there is a self behind his various roles or a desperate intimation of emptiness, Hamlet finds that self-reflection is itself an act of theatre. Taking the self as an object of reflection becomes for Hamlet the problematic act of role-taking. Unable to establish his identity alone (his condition throughout), Hamlet must seek confirmation of the self in his audience. The most self-reflective of heroes, and the most protective of his special integrity, Hamlet finally must see himself as we see him.

Hamlet’s self-interruption (“Why, what an ass am I!”) reminds us
how crucially the Elizabethan convention by which the actor remains aware of his audience could affect performance. Direct address to the audience does not destroy the illusion; rather it is in Hamlet’s character to enlist our support and seek our admiration, to make us feel what he feels. He may wish to “make mad the guilty and appal the free” (2.2.574), but he must measure in his performance our conviction and affirmation. When Hamlet at last does complete his revenge, he suits his words to his action. “Here thou incestuous, mur’d’rous, damned Dane” (5.2.326). The rhetorical economy—copious and rhythmic without the excesses of “Bloody, bawdy villain. . . .”—makes his action feel convincing and satisfying. We seem to have reached the promised end. In Michael Goldman’s words, our appetite for “significant action” is satisfied, and we find in these last few minutes a “spacious ending, a great clarifying release.” But what exactly does the ending clarify and how valuable is our release? When Hamlet makes Claudius drink the poison, he appears to be more the avenger of his mother’s death than of his father’s. In fact, Hamlet poisons Claudius twice: once with the sword that killed him, and then again with the potion that killed Gertrude. We are left to wonder how Hamlet would have actively negotiated his father’s revenge, and more importantly we are faced with the last in a series of attempts in the play to claim an event filled with ambiguities as an unambiguous success. The concern for justifying Hamlet’s actions shown in the last two hundred lines of the play indicates how uncertain and unsatisfied we, in fact, may be.

We should begin with Hamlet’s own justification of his actions to Laertes. It is hard not to wish, like Dr. Johnson, that Hamlet had made some other defense. Instead of acknowledging his role in Polonius’ death and Ophelia’s madness, Hamlet denies that “Hamlet” (5.2.277 ff.) wronged him. “Was it Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.” As evasive in court rhetoric as he was earlier in antic disposition (in 4.3), Hamlet attempts to turn even his apology into a personal triumph—here the triumph over his “madness,” which he has schooled us to see as merely acted. Hamlet’s failure to acknowledge either our logical hesitations—does “madness” commit murder?—or the possibility of personal defeat—doesn’t the “madness” belong to “Hamlet”?—reconfirms the pattern we noted in Act 3, in which Hamlet ignores any ambiguities that would detract from his position or pretends they have not occurred. The person “Hamlet” becomes a fiction whose identity Hamlet can establish only by reiterating his name and whose reality he expects us to affirm. “Sir,
in this audience / Let my disclaiming . . . / Free me” (5.2.241). The necessity of gaining our support increases as Hamlet’s death approaches. After killing Claudius, Hamlet does not end with a sense of heroic completion, but with one final wish for an “audience” (5.2.336) to whom in one last histrionic gesture (“O, I could tell you—”) he might justify his performance in the play. The action of revenge neither frees Hamlet from the necessity to act nor does it exhaust his desire to act. Unlike Saxo’s Amleth, however, Hamlet does not have time to make a lengthy public defense, but he makes clear his thirst for self-justification by twice asking Horatio to tell his “story.”

*Hamlet* ends with yet another coup de théâtre with Hamlet dying in his ideal role as a frustrated actor and a misunderstood Prince. Even in his death, Hamlet the actor and Hamlet the Prince fail to merge in an affirmation of his heroic identity. Hamlet ends with a frustrated desire to reclaim his audience, like Richard II who wants his “lamentable tale” (5.1.140) to make its hearers weep. But by granting Hamlet’s wish to have his story told, Shakespeare exposes the bad conscience in the desire to find pardon in telling stories that we find in a less elaborate form at the end of *Romeo and Juliet*, where the survivors leave the stage to tell the “story” of the tragic lovers. An audience’s experience after Hamlet’s death is of repeatedly frustrated attempts to confer value on the tragic spectacle it witnesses. After Horatio bids a gentle farewell to his Prince, Fortinbras, another successfully vindicated son, enters with the English ambassadors. Horatio asks Fortinbras what he “would see,” and then shows him, with a felt but quite conventional tag describing the effect of tragic drama on its audience, a spectacle of “woe and wonder” (5.2.364). All seems finished, and we have no further questions until the English ambassador steps forward to report the news that Hamlet knew he would not “live to hear” (5.2.355)—that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Not only is Hamlet denied the satisfaction of learning of the completion of his revenge—the one successfully plotted action in the last two acts—but it can no longer justify him in the way he would have wanted. Letting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in Horatio’s phrase, “go to’t” (5.2.56) has a satisfying ring and was possibly just, but in the context now of his highminded praise, hardly noble and worthy of “wonder.” The ambassador’s “Where should we have our thanks?” reopens the question of the responsibility for action that undermined Hamlet’s apology to Laertes. Although Horatio denies that Claudius sent the order, he also ignores
what Hamlet had spent the first part of the last scene convincing us
was so—that “Hamlet” had decisively ordered their deaths. Some-
what like Horatio, we are left to reflect on how events invested with
such powerful conviction outlive and diminish their actors.

At the end of Hamlet everything remains to be accounted for, to be
done or told again. “So shall you hear,” Horatio begins, sounding
like a “truly” concise prologue to a dramatic production of the events
we have witnessed. Fortinbras now calls the “noblest to the
audience”—the third hint in the last two hundred lines of our
importance—and, honoring Horatio’s suggestion that the bodies
“high on a stage be placed to view” (5.2.380), he orders the soldier’s
music sounded, for Hamlet was “likely, had he been put on, / To
have proved most royal” (5.2.398-400). Fortinbras’ rearrangement of
the bloody carnage of bodies strewn on stage into an orderly funeral
procession accommodates our desire to admire Hamlet, but the evi-
dent strain of the soldierly comparison (“like a soldier . . . had he
been”) and the repeated reference to the “stage” call us back to the
play we have just seen “put on.” We feel in Fortinbras’ summation
even more overtly the tension embedded in Horatio’s earlier ques-
tion between what we “would see” and what we do see. Horatio and
Fortinbras tempt an audience not certain how to think about its hero
with endings that either say too little or say too much. Despite the
formal suggestions of completion and closure, Hamlet does not pro-
vide its audience with cathartic release (“woe and wonder”) or with
the satisfactions of playing out once and for all the forces that set it
into motion. Hamlet activates our instincts for revenge, but does not
permit us to value their gratification. Just as Hamlet disowns the
actions that are his, we may be tempted to disown the hero that is
ours. Our identification with Hamlet throughout the play sanctions
the frustrated wish we share with him to re-experience the world as
heroically vindicated or as tragically victimized, while the endings
of Hamlet make explicit the fictions on which such an identification
must be based. Instead of purging us of our pretenses, Hamlet
demonstrates how eager we may be to believe our stories about
ourselves.

Perhaps even a Brecht would have found it difficult to maintain in
the theatre the ideal of self-consciousness and judgment that Shake-
spere apparently expected of the “audience” of Hamlet. The long
history of audience identification with Hamlet, moreover, has
obscured the importance of Shakespeare’s attempts to involve the
audience in fictions through self-consciousness rather than at its

Brent M. Cohen 243
expense. Particularly at this point in his career, Shakespeare tested the limits of his dramaturgy to create a distance, both aesthetic and ethical, from which the audience could be made conscious as an audience of its affirmations. The prologues to Henry V and the central addresses to the crowd (often called the “audience”) in Julius Caesar explore the willingness of audiences to give themselves over to self-validating fictions. In Hamlet the explicit discussion of theatrical fashions might well make the audience reconsider its own theatrical appetites. Hamlet, for instance, praises the “play” from which the Player’s speech is excerpted because as heroic drama it did not pander to its audience; and as a result, it closed when it opened. As an instance of 16th century culture’s most popular dramatic form, however, Hamlet was an almost certain success even before it opened—if Shakespeare could infuse his revision of the earlier Hamlet with new conviction. In William Empson’s words, Shakespeare needed to satisfy an audience that “demanded a Revenge play, and then would laugh when it was provided.” One way of dealing with the problem would be to have Hamlet in the soliloquies talk the audience into taking the play seriously, to let much depend, as it had in Henry V and Julius Caesar, on the ability of a single actor to dazzle and manipulate our responses to the action. Because we know the plot and ethos of Hamlet all too well beforehand, the actor’s self-reflexiveness, as well as the play’s, gives the fiction the immediacy of a theatrical event.

The event is the re-enactment of an old play revised for the occasion. Once the play is underway, Horatio reminds the regular clientele of another play it had recently seen when he refers to the time “ere the mighty Julius fell” (1.1.115). In the third act, Polonius tells us that he played Caesar and again dies ominously in the middle of the play. And finally in the graveyard, when in an abrupt shift to ceremonial verse, Hamlet announces that Caesar is dead, Hamlet completes its oblique gesture to the re-enactment of Caesar’s murder prophesied by Cassius and Brutus (3.1.144 ff.). These allusions contribute to the pervasive pattern of repetition in Hamlet that might well produce in the audience something like the unsettling security of déjà vu. The staging of the past in Hamlet and the restaging of the earlier Hamlet suggest that the past of the audience has become its pastime, its entertainment. But Shakespeare does not simply pander to his audience, confirm our habits of response, or sell us a self-validating account of our vindication and victimization in a treacherous world. By frequently acknowledging the conditions that pro-
duce dramatic entertainments, Shakespeare holds us responsible for our theatrical appetites. In *Hamlet* we see what we came to the theatre to see; our wishes, however, are not only fulfilled but they are also criticized. As we enjoy the pleasures of re-experiencing our deepest desires vicariously, Shakespeare unmasks the fictions of our subjectivity and enables us to see ourselves, for the shock of a moment, from the outside; we see ourselves both as the subject of the play’s outcome and as the object of its most searching questions.

*University of California, Berkeley*

**FOOTNOTES**

1 My text is the Signet *Hamlet*, ed. Edward Hubler (New York, 1963). References to other Shakespeare plays are also to the Signet editions. I owe a general debt to the writings of Stanley Cavell; to Paul Alpers, Jonas Barish, and Arnold Stein for timely suggestions; to Janet Adelman, Stephen Booth, and Susan Harris for their copious criticisms; and to Stephen Orgel for whom and with whom this essay was conceived and completed.


10 We can only speculate about whether Polonius’ manner would have been immediately identified as a University style of acting. See Alan Downer, “Prologomenon to a Study of Elizabethan Acting,” *Maske und Kothurn*, 10 (1964), 625-36.


12 Critics have often taken Claudius’ aside at 3.1.50-54 as a confession of his guilt for the murder of old Hamlet, but the metaphor of the “harlot’s cheek” is more suggestive of the sexual crime of incest than of fratricide. Like Gertrude’s aside at 4.5.17-20, which has not convinced most critics of her part in or knowledge of the murder, Claudius’ confession in 3.1 remains perplexingly opaque and open to questions.


A psychoanalytic account of Hamlet’s energy for acting might be pursued, as Susan
Harris has suggested to me, through the analogous relation of mothers and sons and audiences and actors. Hamlet knows his mother primarily as a wife, her “husband’s brother’s wife” (3.4.16), a woman he cannot possess sexually, and his violently aggressive erotic impulses toward her are usually displaced into his energy for acting and exhibition. “Like a whore, [I] unpack my heart with words” (2.2.597) describes his relation to his audience primarily, but also his behavior toward Gertrude in the Closet scene. “Like a whore” expresses both his shame before his audience and an uncannily precise identification with his mother. Rebuke of actors has traditionally taken an anti-feminist form (see Jonas Barish, “Exhibitionism and the Antitheatrical Prejudice,” ELH, 36 (1969), but Hamlet’s identification runs deeper. An actor displaying his body to the gaze of his audience shares the fate of women in our culture whose entire bodies are eroticized in the name of “feminine beauty” (see Otto Fenichel, “On Acting,” Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 15, No. 2 [1946], 145). Hamlet’s making himself into his own erotic object suggests in psychoanalytic terms oral-narcissistic confusions: mothers and audiences present a similar dilemma to sons and actors, who face the problem of establishing separate identities and at the same time of desiring to deny or incorporate the other. We can contrast Hamlet’s theatricality with Macbeth’s: unlike Hamlet, Macbeth knows his wife as a mother (their relationship is closer to that of Coriolanus and Volumnia), which suggests a quite different set of erotic displacements, and accordingly his brooding, genuinely introspective soliloquies lack Hamlet’s exhibitionism. An adequate psychoanalytic treatment of acting is yet to be written.

15 Harold Jenkins in “Playhouse Interpolations in the Folio Hamlet,” Studies in Bibliography, 13 (1960), 31-49 points out numerous instances of verbal repetition in the Folios not found in either Quarto. Jenkins argues that since the “additions in F [made by actors] distort or weaken the effect of Q,” they should be “eliminated from future editions” (43). Although Jenkins’ argument is convincing on narrow textual grounds, I think he underestimates the elusiveness and precariousness of the play’s tragic “effect” and the value of the responses actors actually have to a text in deciding that effect.

16 Shakespeare and the Energies of Drama (Princeton, 1972), p. 88. Although my conclusions are frequently opposed to Professor Goldman’s, I have learned much from his acute discussion of “stop-actions” in the play. Equally important is Robert Hapgood’s “Hamlet Nearly Absurd,” Tulane Drama Review 9 (1965), 132-45, in which he argues that we are released from the structure of repetition in the play (about which I agree in details) by the “significant action” of the finale.

17 Consider the apologies for the stage in Henry V. We must take them seriously, if only because they are insisted upon repeatedly, but Shakespeare’s theatre was no less equipped to put on Henry V than any other play. Except in the prologues, the play is strikingly unconcerned with representing grand military actions. The rhetoric of apology, then, is misleading. By announcing their interest in true representation, the prologues implicitly seek our affirmation that Henry, in historical truth, was the “mirror of Christian Kings.” The fact that the Henry the audience sees does not always measure up to the ideal Henry of the choruses is unsettling, but the play always recalls the audience to its duty to celebrate its national hero. As Henry commands the troops (“On, on, you noblest English!” [3.1.17]), the choruses command the audience’s allegiance (“Follow, follow, grapple your minds” [3rd prologue, l. 17]) by making its presence necessary to unfolding the action of the play. Even if we hesitate, we know, like Katherine, that we must say yes, that we want to say yes. The reservations we harbor about rhetorical speech and an actor’s manipulation of his audience are tellingly evident in Julius Caesar. Space does not permit me to elaborate the dramaturgy of self-consciousness in Julius Caesar, but I refer the reader to Kenneth Burke’s remarks on audience involvement in “Antony in Behalf of the Play,” in The Philosophy of Literary Form, 2nd ed. (Baton Rouge, 1967), pp. 329-44. For a discussion of changes in Shakespeare’s theatrical art around 1600, see Granville-Barker, “From