RECENT EMPHASIS on Hamlet's coming to terms with his world, with human finiteness and infirmity, before final action,\(^1\) leads us to re-examine the complexity of the original task imposed by the ghost. Every reader of the play is aware that in the first three acts Hamlet is tortured almost obsessively by his mother's sin and its implications. But it is not so obvious that this preoccupation is partly explained by the task imposed upon him.

As Dover Wilson has pointed out,\(^2\) the revenge task is complicated by two conditions. Indeed, Hamlet is asked to perform a three-part task: he is asked to revenge his father's murder; asked not to allow incestuous lust to continue in the royal bed of Denmark; and not to contrive against his mother, but to "leave her to Heaven" and to her own conscience.

In other words, Hamlet is not only asked to act in this corrupt, diseased world, he is also admonished not to act. He must act against Claudius without acting against his mother. He is, as we shall see, asked to differentiate between that which corrupts and that which is corrupted. He is faced with the necessity not only of distinguishing reality from appearance in a baffling world, but of distinguishing within the realm of reality degrees of human error, of distinguishing human frailty from corruption.

The difficulty of making such a distinction is implicit in the words of the ghost himself. The luxury of the royal bed is shared by Gertrude's sensuality and Claudius' evil, with the symbol of the incestuous couch emphasizing the difficulty of making the separation. Indeed the ghost himself seems to have a problem in making this separation: he dwells upon Gertrude's sin to such an extent that his tale of murder is interrupted, and he is finally stopped from "unpacking his heart with words" against the queen's fault only by the scent of the morning air, which reminds him that he must hurry to return to his tale. Thus Hamlet's preoccupation with the lust of his mothers bed, a preoccupation carried to such an extreme that it intrudes between him and his revenge, is also found in the words of the ghost when he imposes the task.\(^3\)

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\(^3\)The ghost's use of the word *adulterate* has led some critics, notably Bradley and Dover Wilson, to argue that Gertrude was false to King Hamlet while he was alive. However, the evidence to support these arguments is not convincing (see A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy [New York, 1955], pp. 136-137; Wilson, pp. 282-294). The word *adulterate* is coupled with *incestuous*, reminding the reader that the Church, Protestant or Catholic, would consider the union of Gertrude and Claudius no marriage at all. In the bedroom scene Hamlet does not accuse his mother of deceiving his father while he was alive, as he certainly would have if he had understood the ghost's words to mean that. And, as Bradley points out, the queen in "The Murder of Gonzago" is not an adulteress. Gertrude, the woman who used to hang on King Hamlet "as if increase of appetite had grown/By what it fed on," committed "adultery" by marrying his brother soon after his death. That this woman to whom

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Also implicit in the ghost's words, however, is the separation which must be made. The responsibility of the corrupter is clearly fixed: we see the difference between Claudius' "wicked wit and gifts" which have the power to seduce and win the queen "to his most shameful lust" and her weakness in allowing herself to be seduced. In the ghost's words, then, are the distinction which Hamlet must make (he must act against one of the sharers of the lustful bed and not against the other), the difficulty of making such a distinction (even the ghost almost forgets his purpose), and the clue which will lead to the distinction (that Claudius is the corrupting influence).

The task itself is further complicated for Hamlet, for as we see in his first soliloquy, his mother's fault has seemed to him a corrupting force; it has corrupted the entire world to the point that "things rank and gross in nature Possess it merely." The position of this soliloquy in the play, as our first insight into Hamlet's distraught state, places primary significance upon Hamlet's view of his mother's act. Given his attitude, it is well-nigh impossible for Hamlet to make the distinction which the ghost demands: to see that although her fault has corrupted the world for him, behind her act is a corrupting influence that has made her corrupt. The necessity of tracing the responsibility back through the chain of corruption until he can see that "the King's to blame" is almost impossible for Hamlet, immersed as he is in the results of his mother's sin. Before he can see and accept Claudius as a source of evil, Hamlet must see his mother as merely weak and subject to corruption. But such a tolerance of human frailty is, in the first part of the play, impossible for the young man who is subjected to repeated shocks as he sees around him human being after human being caught and corrupted in the king's web. For a man of Hamlet's moral sensitivity the fact that these individuals can be corrupted is a fact not easily accepted. Thus he has difficulty in getting beyond their corruption. Only after emotionally reconciling himself to man's frailty, to his liability to corruption, can Hamlet see beyond to the corruption that corrupts, to Claudius.

Hamlet is asked to accept the corruptibility of human nature in its most heart-rending form. It is not so hard to accept the fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the privates of fortune, the baser natures, are liable to corruption. But Hamlet is asked to accept that "she, even she" [my italics], his mother ("would it were not so"), has proved corruptible. Hamlet, like all men, harbors one of the vainest and yet one of the most tenaciously held secret hopes of the young, that somehow one's mother is the exception to general human corruptibility. In the very first scenes of the play, then, we have Hamlet's inability to accept his mother's fault, his confusion of corrupted and corrupting, before he is asked by the ghost to make the all important distinction.

The question of the difference between human frailty and corruption is also introduced early in the play. While Hamlet is waiting for the ghost to appear, he muses on the small portion of evil which, to the minds of men, corrupts the whole of a noble nature:

"the world is a place constructed simply that people may be happy in it in a good-humored sensual fashion" (Bradley, p. 137) would have played the hypocrite, would have used her intellect to deceive the husband she clung to while he was alive, is not substantiated by the play.

A major effect of Hamlet's blurred judgment is, of course, his mistreatment of Ophelia, just as his profession of love in the burial scene is a reflection of his reconciliation.

So oft it chances in particular men,
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As in their birth—wherein they are not guilty,
Since nature cannot choose his origin—... Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect, Being Nature's livery, or Fortune's star—
Their virtues else—be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo—
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault. The dram of eale
Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
To his own scandal. [my italics]

The importance of these lines, following as they do Hamlet's confusion in his first soliloquy (and this is his first long speech since that soliloquy), cannot be overestimated. Implicit here is the problem with which he will be faced, the problem of the one defect which makes men forget the virtues of an otherwise noble nature. As we saw in his first soliloquy, he is acting towards his mother as does the "general censure" in these lines: he is allowing her fault of sensuality to completely obscure her good qualities. The position of this speech in the play gives it extraordinary dramatic importance. Hamlet is thinking about the question of human frailty and corruption immediately before the entrance of the ghost, who will impose the task of differentiating between the "dram of eale" in an otherwise sweet and loving nature and the greed and lust that will use others to secure its ambition.

By the time, then, that the ghost imposes the task, we have been introduced to the problem with which Hamlet is confronted, as well as to the state of mind that will make it so difficult for him to draw the fine line between that which corrupts and that which is corrupted. It is against this background that the ghost imposes the almost impossible task.

Many critics have noted that the Hamlet of the fifth act is a changed man. He is no longer tortured by the dishonesty of man and woman, but appears to have accepted the limited human being with his infirm purposes in a world in which "there's a divinity that shapes our ends,/Roughhew them how we will." We know that at his death Hamlet exchanges forgiveness with Laertes. Where has the change occurred? Maynard Mack has argued that the graveyard is the ultimate symbol in which Hamlet confronts "the mystery of human limitation." But before he confronts the ultimate manifestation of man's finiteness, Hamlet has, as we shall see, accepted the immediate, inescapable reality of human frailty. The scene in which this happens is the bedroom scene.

Hamlet is overwhelmingly aware of man's middle state, caught between the angel and the beast, between nobility and frailty. The predicament of man, Pope's "glory, jest, and riddle of the world," has driven Hamlet to despair, has wrung from him the cry, "And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" His mother's lust has been for him the concrete example and symbol for the corruption of the world in which men are passion's slaves. Thus Hamlet's obsession with it, his inability to accept the fact of his mother's fault. This torment with man's corruptibility, a torment which centers upon the queen's weakness and its implications, reaches its climax in the bedroom scene, to be heard no more after that scene.

The events which precede this scene show us again Hamlet's problem. Imme...
diately after "The Mousetrap" has convinced him of the ghost's word and he is ready in his certainty of evil to "drink hot blood" ("'Tis now the very witching time of night"), he is summoned to his mother. The juxtaposition of his certainty and of the summons places before us in its most vivid dramatic form his problem of acting and not acting. This is the first time in the play that he has been firmly convinced of Claudius' guilt and the honesty of the ghost, but at this point, when one would think that action would follow immediately, we are reminded that at least in one area he has been admonished not to act. His Laertes-like speech is broken by the need for self-control which would have been impossible for the rash brother of Ophelia:

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.

The speech of Rosencrantz in the next scene re-emphasizes by its use of the wheel image the complexity of Hamlet's task:

The cease of majesty
Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw
What's near it with it. It is a massy wheel
Fixed on the summit of the highest mount,
To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
Are mortised and adjoined; which, when it falls,
Each small annexment, petty consequence,
Attends the boisterous ruin.

It is ironic that these sycophantic lines should in one sense sum up the play's themes of creeping corruption and the vortex of catastrophe. The image suggests that the cease of nobility in the king causes his corruption to infect others around him. Corruption and human frailty are "mortised and adjoined."

Hamlet has been given the task of bypassing the spokes of the wheel in order to get to its center.

These two speeches, then—Hamlet's on the witching hour of the night and Rosencrantz's on the cease of majesty—gain great importance by their position in the play: both speeches occur between Hamlet's proof of Claudius' guilt and the two scenes in which he confronts, separately, the sharers of the lustful bed, Claudius and Gertrude, the evil against which he must act and the weakness which he must spare.

Hamlet's sparing of Claudius, no matter what his motives, and his going directly to his mother to deal with her fault give dramatic expression to the problem with which he is faced. The juxtaposition of these scenes recalls the ghost's command to seek complete revenge against Claudius without contriving against Gertrude. But Hamlet must come to terms with his mother's fault before he can deal with the instigator of the evil in the play."

The meeting with his mother, interrupted as it is by the appearance of the ghost, falls into two dramatically distinct parts. In the first part of the bedroom scene Hamlet reaches the height of his vehemence against the enormity of his mother's sin and its implications. Again we see Hamlet immersed in the results of his mother's act, see that his vision of the universe itself has been colored by it:

Heaven's face doth glow
Yea, this solidity and compound mass,
With tristful visage, as against the doom,
Is thought-sick at the act.

7 As Mr. Tillyard has said (p. 23), "Interpretations of the play-scene, of the sparing of Claudius, and of Hamlet's words to his mother vary and will continue to vary; but such variety will not affect the plea that the scenes must be considered together in correspondence with the master-motives as set forth in the first act, and that thus they give the play a recognisable shape."
Although he has made her see the “black and grainèd spots” in her inmost soul and thus fulfilled his need to awaken her conscience, he continues to rant against “the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,/Stewed in corruption,” to rant against the symbol of her corruptibility. The ghost’s entrance cuts short Hamlet’s tirade and recalls, now without the complicating injunction concerning the royal bed, the dichotomy which Hamlet must make: the visitation is to whet Hamlet’s almost blunted purpose of revenge against Claudius, but the ghost once more reminds Hamlet that he must not hurt his mother, that her weakness needs help: “But look, amazement on thy mother sits./Oh, step between her and her fighting soul.”

The last part of this scene, after the departure of the ghost, shows Hamlet trying to help his mother. In place of the earlier harangue he gives practical advice on how to refrain from lust, recognizing that the queen shares the dual nature of man compounded of virtue and evil: if Hamlet has cleft her heart in twain, he begs her to “throw away the worser part of it,/And live the purer with the other half.” Having come to terms with his mother’s nature, Hamlet wants to exchange forgiveness with her: “And when you are desirous to be blest,/I’ll blessing beg of you.” Hamlet has indeed come face to face with his mother’s weakness. Although he has one last burst of bitterness as emotional protection against the vulnerability of his position in trusting her (if she should prove untrue!), he is now able to see the virtues which that “dram of eale” had previously obscured for him.

At the end of this scene Hamlet trusts his mother with information which is vital to his plan: not only that he is merely “mad in craft” but that he intends to hoist Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by their own petard. To this point in the play, Horatio, the man in whom blood and judgment were so commingled that he was not passion’s slave, was the only individual that Hamlet could trust and thus the only person he has taken into his confidence. But now he trusts his mother, the individual whom before he had seen as the corrupting force, with the particulars of his plot. He has come to see her sin in some perspective, so that he can now see what good qualities this weak woman does possess. That Hamlet is right in trusting the queen’s solemn vow to preserve his secret is evinced in the first scene of Act IV, in which Gertrude does not betray her son. In answer to Claudius’ questions she withholds the vital information that her son has shared with her.8

In the bedroom scene, in the room which contains the symbolic couch, Hamlet has come to terms with his mother’s fault and has recognized that in her remain qualities that deserve his trust. It is after this acceptance of his mother’s weakness that he can accept without torment man’s corruptibility and thus be free to act against the instigator of corruption, Claudius. It is in the bedroom scene that Hamlet is freed to make the vital distinction which the ghost demanded.

In the general slaughter of the end of the play we see Hamlet’s reconciliation with the “dram of eale” in human nature. Thus he can forgive Laertes. Aware that Laertes has proved corruptible, has in his frailty lent himself to Claudius’ plot, envenoming the point of his rapier while trusting in Hamlet’s “generous” nature not to suspect his treachery—aware of such corruptibility in man, Hamlet exchanges forgiveness.

We should note that Laertes in his confession indicates the source of the

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8If one argues that Gertrude does consider Hamlet mad and is not holding back but is speaking the truth as she understands it, it is almost inconceivable that she would not tell Claudius the important news that the “madman” intends to blow Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as high as the moon.
poison: the responsibility for the poison, both literally and figuratively, is the king’s. Again we are reminded of the ghost’s words in which he too had placed the responsibility for corruption upon Claudius, words which Hamlet had been unable to heed. But now Hamlet can make the distinction which was impossible for him when he was given the original task.

After forgiving Laertes his fault, Hamlet says his last adieu to the “Wretched Queen,” and in this farewell, with its juxtaposition with the forgiveness of man’s corruptibility, we see Hamlet’s final reconciliation with his mother, with the wretchedness and misery of frail human kind. Hamlet has recognized that the “dram of eale” can exist within a “noble substance” without the virtues of the individual taking “corruption/From that particular fault.” The task imposed by the ghost has been painfully accomplished. And Hamlet, the exceptional man, in discerning the fine line between human frailty and corruption, has clarified for all lesser men the heroic and tragic implications of the task’s complexity.

Hamlet: Six Characters in Search of a Play

SANFORD STERNLICHT

RICHARD II HAS LONG been recognized as an “actor-personality.” He dramatizes his own lot, he exults in his own downfall, he seeks the center of the stage invariably, and he plays out his personal tragedy with masochistic pleasure. Critics have been less aware of Hamlet’s histrionics, although Mark van Doren has stated: “that Hamlet is histrionic is no less clear than that he is high-strung, cerebral, magnanimous, and sometimes obscene. . . . Hamlet is so much of a professional that the man in him is indistinguishable from the mime. His life as we have it is so naturally and completely a play that we can almost think of him as his own author, his own director, and his own protagonist.”

Hamlet seems to be, by nature, a theatrical personality, a natural actor who, in his life, plays many roles, and who cannot seem to find the role for which God or fortune has destined him. This aspect of his character is related to, and, in part, responsible for his destruction and the catastrophe that befalls the Court of Denmark.

The following interpretation is not to be regarded as the only substitute for the prevailing theories concerning Hamlet’s character, action, and dilemma. It is intended only to focus a narrow spotlight on a facet of the play hitherto not illuminated.

I am indebted to an unpublished address by the late Professor Ernst J. Schlochauer of Queens College for a description of the “actor-personality” in literature. He suggests the German expression: Schauspiel-Mensch, which he translates as “essential actor” or “natural actor” and I shall freely render as “actor-personality.”

Professor Schlochauer has stated that the “actor-personality” “. . . may, of