THE "LETTERS SEAL'D" IN HAMLET AND THE CHARACTER OF CLAUDIUS

As long ago as 1918, Howard Mumford Jones expressed the opinion that Claudius' decision to have Hamlet murdered in England was not made until after he learned that Hamlet had slain Polonius.¹ In this opinion Professor Jones has had no support, it seems; critics writing before and after, including such eminent authorities as Bradley, Kittredge, and Granville-Barker, have placed the King's decision for the murder either before the Mousetrap or in the interlude between the Mousetrap and the death of Polonius. The confusion is understandable, since the whole matter of the letter ordering Hamlet's murder seems to have been treated by Shakespeare with that splendid indifference to the lesser details of plot which so disturbed some of his eighteenth-century critics. In his essay Professor Jones did not trouble, moreover, to work out the very complicated problem in timing brought up by the issue of the murder, but was content simply to affirm his belief that the King's crime against Hamlet was a desperate, last-minute remedy for what had become an intolerably dangerous situation.

It may be that in the play as Shakespeare actually wrote it the details of the projected murder were satisfactorily explained. Our understanding of this important matter is somewhat hampered by the fact that two of the key passages bearing upon it (III.iii.1–26, and III.iv.200–102) are omitted from the First Quarto,³ and lines 202–10 in the second of these passages are omitted from the First Folio. Thus it appears that even Shakespeare's contemporaries were uncertain about the whole question of the murder. Still, all the key passages do show up in the Second Quarto, which is considered by many scholars to approximate most nearly to the genuine text; Qr is a notoriously bad text, with a great many omissions; and Fr does retain in the second key passage mentioned the two lines (II. 200–201) which are of primary importance for our investigation: in them Hamlet reminds his mother (toward the end of the bedroom scene) that "I must to Eng-

² Unless otherwise noted, the text of Hamlet referred to in this paper is The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, ed. George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, 1939).
land; you know that?” and she replies, “Alack, / I had forgot! ’Tis so concluded on.”

The importance of the letters to England in Hamlet is, I think, generally underestimated. The writing of the letter containing Hamlet’s death warrant is the first crime, within the strict confines of the play, of which the King is guilty. His ambition was to become King, and having attained that ambition, he thinks he can forget the hideous means he used and henceforth lead an exemplary life. He wants desperately to be a good king, a good husband to Gertrude, and a good father to Hamlet, and so is willing to endure insults and even threats to his safety rather than commit a second terrible crime, the consequences of which even he could not escape. The writing of Hamlet’s “death” letter is therefore almost as significant a turning point in the moral history of the King as is his failure to repent in the prayer scene.

In this paper I shall try to show that the King does not write the letter ordering Hamlet’s execution until after the prayer scene, and that probably he does not write it until after being informed that Hamlet has slain Polonius. The delay is caused, I believe, by the King’s genuine effort to live a reformed life, an effort which makes him shrink from committing a second murder. If my argument is correct, the forbearance the King displays in this affair is strong evidence that he is a man of conscience.

The search for an answer to our question of when the death letter in Hamlet was written must begin with the understanding that almost certainly we are here dealing with two distinct kinds of diplomatic letters. There is an initial difficulty in knowing what to call the two kinds, so loose is Shakespeare’s terminology. The first kind I shall call the “commission,” that being Shakespeare’s term for it on the one occasion when he refers to it (III.iii.3); the second kind I shall call the “mandate.”

4 Shakespeare’s sources for Hamlet do not settle for us the problem of how many letters there are in the play itself. In the English translation of Belleforest, Fenton (Claudius) only decides to send Hamlet to England, and to have him put to death there, after Hamlet has slain Fenton’s counselor; hence the only letters mentioned are those written by Fenton after he has made this decision; they are carried by the two Courtiers (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) (see The Hystorie of Hamlet, chap. III, in the Variorum Hamlet, ed. Horace Howard Furness, 5th ed. [Philadelphia, 1877], 11, 103.)

Similarly, in Der Bestrafte Brudermord a letter is mentioned for the first time only when Hamlet is about to depart for England (see Fratricide Punished, or Prince Hamlet of Denmark, III, 1, in the Variorum Hamlet, 11, 135).
ambassador's credentials and indicates generally what his duties are to be. In medieval and Renaissance diplomacy, every ambassador had to be provided with credentials; they were the "formal official evidence of his ambassadorial character." In *Hamlet*, the "true" commission (alluded to in III.iii.3) is the document that gives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "custody of the mandate and of Hamlet and directs them to deliver it and him" to the English king.

A commission alone did not empower an ambassador to bind his principal. In order to "make his signature to an agreement worth anything, the ambassador had to be holder of a specific mandate, a grant of power like a power of attorney, executed in due form." In *Hamlet*, the mandate which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern finally carry is the sealed document addressed to the English king ordering him to put Hamlet to death.

Only once in *Hamlet* does Shakespeare refer to this document as the "mandate" (III.iv.204). Elsewhere he calls it "letters seal'd" (III.iv.202), "letters" (IV.iii.66), and even "commission" (V.ii.18,26). This verbal ambiguity makes it rather difficult for the reader to keep the two kinds of documents separate in his mind.

The first mention of a commission in *Hamlet* appears in III.iii. Goaded by the Mousetrap into taking immediate action against Hamlet, Claudius issues the following directive to the two courtiers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

I like him not, nor stands it safe with us
To let his madness range. Therefore prepare you;
I your commission will forthwith dispatch,
And he to England shall along with you. (III.iii.1-4)

We recall that the King had first broached his plan of sending Hamlet to England in III.i, after eavesdropping on Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia in the nunnery scene. The voyage to England was then seen as a means of ridding Denmark of a potentially dangerous madman and at the same time effecting a cure of his madness (III.i.170 ff.). To save appearances, Hamlet would be assigned a diplomatic mission, the purpose of which would be to demand of the English king "our neglected tribute." This plan of Claudius' was not, however, put into immediate effect, Claudius having been persuaded by Polonius to delay it until Polonius' own theory on the cause and cure

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6 Kittredge's note on IV.iii.66.
of Hamlet's melancholy should be tested (III.i.184–96). After the Mousetrap, the plan is at once set in motion. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to accompany Hamlet, as guards presumably, though once again, in order to keep up appearances, a diplomatic mission will be arranged, which will require that the two courtiers have a commission.

Before considering why this commission has not yet been "dispatched" (that is, drawn up), let us look ahead to the conversation between Hamlet and Gertrude in the closet scene (III.iv). Toward the end of the conversation, the following exchange takes place:

*Ham.* I must to England; you know that?

*Queen.* Alack, I had forgot! 'Tis so concluded on.

*Ham.* There's letters seal'd; and my two schoolfellows,
Whom I will trust as I will adders fang'd,
They bear the mandate; they must sweep my way
And marshal me to knavery. (III.iv.200–05)

Here "letters seal'd" (probably a single letter) and "mandate" refer to the same document. The mandate for the embassy to England has been written by the King; it is in the form of a sealed letter (to be opened by the recipient); and it is to be carried, not by Hamlet, but by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Hamlet is probably unaware at this point that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not yet have their commission, even if they do have the mandate. This brings us to the question of why the King has withheld the commission. The most likely reason, it would seem, is that the King had agreed with Polonius (in III.i) not to send Hamlet to England until Polonius had had a chance to ferret out Hamlet's secret in his own way; accordingly, although the King had prudently composed the mandate for the embassy to England, and even alerted Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (and perhaps Hamlet, too) to the possibility of their going, he was waiting for the success or failure of Polonius' alternate plan before actually drawing up their commissions. And, as I shall try to show, until the revelation of the Mousetrap, the King does not feel that he need take any drastic measures to curb Hamlet.

Having noted that at the time of the closet scene the mandate for the embassy to England has been written, but that the commission for the ambassadors has not, we are now ready to inquire into the contents of this mandate. It seems to me almost certain that the man-
date to which Hamlet and Gertrude refer in the closet scene is not the same mandate which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern carry when they and Hamlet finally depart for England in IV.iii. My reason for this belief is a simple one—that at the time the King wrote the original mandate, which must have been shortly after he discussed with Polonius his plan for sending Hamlet to England, he could not possibly have known that Hamlet suspected him of the murder of the elder Hamlet, and he would therefore have had no real cause for wishing to dispose of Hamlet permanently. The King is undoubtedly shrewd, and after he overheard Hamlet in conversation with Ophelia, his suspicions are vaguely aroused (III.i.170 ff.), but not, surely, to the point where he is willing to commit a second murder. It is natural that he should wish to protect himself and his subjects from possible harm, and since he cannot confine Hamlet merely for behaving oddly, he takes the alternative measure of sending him abroad. One might even, at the risk of being called sentimental, grant him some sincerity, at this early stage in the action, in his professed hope to see Hamlet cured of his melancholy by the voyage at sea and the foreign surroundings (III.i.179–83). For a number of legitimate reasons, not the least of which would be a concern for Hamlet's dignity and reputation, the King deems it advisable to give the voyage the appearance of a diplomatic mission, the purpose of which will be “the demand of our neglected tribute” (III.i.178). The mandate which he proceeds to write—at some time after his conversation with Polonius and before the Mousetrap, which takes place on the evening of the same day—merely authorizes Hamlet to press for the tribute owed Denmark by England. He does not write the second mandate—the one ordering Hamlet's assassination—until after the Mousetrap, and probably not until after he learns that Hamlet has slain Polonius.

If my theory is correct, Claudius has been unfairly treated by the many critics who assume that he wrote Hamlet's death warrant before the prayer scene (III.iii). The assumption does indeed place Claudius in an extremely bad light. If in the very struggle to repent for having

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8 Note that the King is merely apprehensive lest Hamlet's melancholy result in “some danger” (III.i.175)—he does not say to himself, nor does the phrase suggest, that he considers the danger grave or imminent. If he did, he would not agree to the delay which Polonius' alternate scheme entails. And if he sensed any great danger to himself, he would doubtless inform the audience of the fact in a soliloquy or an aside. In Der Bestrafte Brudermord, it is interesting to note, the King is sufficiently aroused by Hamlet's antics in the nunnery scene to contemplate Hamlet's murder; but he tells the audience of his plan in a soliloquy (II.iv).
murdered his brother, Claudius is contemplating the murder of that brother's son, we are forced to look on him as perhaps the most hardened, soulless villain in all of Shakespeare. Such shocking unconcern for divine retribution Bradley would attribute to Claudius' "sanguine disposition":

He thinks he can over-reach Heaven. When he is praying for pardon, he is all the while perfectly determined to keep his crown; and he knows it. More—it is one of the grimmest things in Shakespeare, but he puts such things so quietly that we are apt to miss them—when the King is praying for pardon for his first murder he has just made his final arrangements for a second, the murder of Hamlet. But he does not allude to that fact in his prayer.9

By "final arrangements," Bradley presumably means the King's order to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to make themselves ready for the journey, and his intention to draw up their commission "forthwith."

Many other critics, Kittredge,10 Granville-Barker,11 and Schücking12 among them, although they do not comment directly on this matter, appear to share Bradley's view that the King had already set in motion his plan for Hamlet's murder before he made the attempt to pray.

Whether or not my own explanation of the mandates is correct, I think I can at least show that the theory of Bradley and the others is untenable, for the simple reason that it ignores one of the principal functions of the Shakespearean soliloquy, which is to keep the audience informed about the secret thoughts and intentions of major characters.13 Claudius' "prayer" is uttered as a soliloquy, and if he were at this time contemplating the murder of Hamlet, he would announce the fact during the soliloquy. I can think of no soliloquy in a tragedy of Shakespeare's in which the speaker holds back anything as shocking to the audience as the intent to commit murder. In respective soliloquies, Iago tells the audience that he hates Othello and will destroy

10 See Kittredge's notes on III.i.177; III.i.3; and III.iv.200.
11 See Harley Granville-Barker, Prefaces to Shakespeare (Princeton University Press, 1946), 1, 227, where he says that in the prayer scene Claudius "was not purging his soul, but (so we shall gather later on) planning how to save his skin by ridding himself of son as well as father." The actual writing of the death letter takes place, according to Granville-Barker (1, 100), immediately after the prayer scene.
him; Edmund, that in order to gain his ends he will ruin his brother, betray his father, and send Lear and Cordelia to their death; Lady Macbeth, that she will drive her husband to murder Duncan; Macbeth, that he will murder the wife and children of Macduff; and so on through the tragedies. Claudius himself, when the time is ripe for him to reveal his plan to have Hamlet assassinated, reveals it—in a soliloquy (IV.iii.60–70); and in a soliloquy (III.ii.410–17) Hamlet reassures the audience that he will not murder his mother. In the light of this common practice, it is illogical to maintain that Claudius, in his soliloquy in the prayer scene, is withholding from the audience his plan for Hamlet’s murder. It is also unfair to Claudius.

Kittredge, incidentally, although he apparently believes that the death letter was written before the prayer scene, remarks apropos of the King’s first announcement of his plan to send Hamlet to England (III.i) that if the idea of having Hamlet killed on his arrival “were now in the King’s mind, that fact would be revealed to the audience in a soliloquy or an aside.”

It is my contention that Claudius neither wrote nor intended to write the mandate ordering Hamlet’s execution before the prayer scene. Before the Mousetrap he lacks sufficient cause to perpetrate so terrible a crime. Between the conclusion of the Mousetrap and the prayer scene he has neither the time nor the opportunity to write it; events move very swiftly at this point, and furthermore he is in the company of either Rosencratz and Guildenstern or Polonius during most or all of this interval.

I further contend that Claudius does not actually write, even though he may contemplate writing, the deadly mandate until after he has been informed (in IV.i) that Hamlet has slain Polonius. Before that climactic incident he is prevented, I think, both by his aversion to committing a second murder and by the fact that the danger to himself, while considerable, is not yet so imminent as to warrant murder. After Hamlet kills Polonius, however, Claudius knows beyond doubt that he stands in immediate peril of losing, not only his life, but also those treasures he values above his soul: “My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen” (III.iii.55). As he remarks to Gertrude upon hearing the grim news of Polonius: “It had been so with us, had we been there” (IV.i.13).

14 Note on III.i.177.
15 John Erskine Hankins (The Character of Hamlet and Other Essays [University of North Carolina Press, 1941], p. 214) is of Granville-Barker’s opinion that Claudius

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One may ask whether there is time enough for Claudius to write a second mandate during the interval between Gertrude’s announcement of Polonius’ death (IV.i) and Claudius’ soliloquy in which he tells the audience of his plan for the murder (IV.iii). The interval has to be a fairly long one, long enough to allow Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Hamlet, and, before they can bring him to the King, to catch him after he has run off on some mad whim. It is true that during this time Claudius and Gertrude have assembled their counselors to inform them about Polonius and about Hamlet’s impending departure (IV.i.38–40), but following the consultation, which would be very brief, Claudius has an opportunity to be alone for a while—long enough, doubtless, to compose the mandate.

During the course of this discussion some questions may have arisen in the reader’s mind regarding the role of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the affair of the mandates. Why, for example, should the first mandate, if it is “innocent,” be borne by the two courtiers rather than by Hamlet? And why should it have been a part of the original plan for the courtiers to precede Hamlet to England—assuming, as Dover Wilson does, that that is the meaning of Hamlet’s “sweep my way” in III.iv? It is perhaps only natural that our suspicions, like Hamlet’s, should be aroused by such unusual procedures.

In answer to the first of these questions I would say that the King entrusts the mandate to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern simply because he does not feel that Hamlet in his present “madness” is capable of handling it properly. He may even have arranged with the two courtiers to precede Hamlet to England. This is a matter of interpretation, of course. These critics seem to me to underestimate the genuineness of Claudius’ spiritual struggle in the prayer scene. That struggle would not, I think, have ended all at once.

Fredson Bowers (“Hamlet as Minister and Scourge,” PMLA, lxx [1955], 742, and footnote on 747) thinks there was not time, and partly on this assumption concludes that the plan to have Hamlet murdered in England was “set in motion” before the prayer scene.

He apparently is playing a game of hide-and-seek. See Kittredge’s note on IV.ii. 31. After the meeting with the counselors, Claudius and Gertrude part. At least she is not present when Claudius bids farewell to Hamlet in IV.iii.

There should be enough time also for Claudius to write the commission for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.


The fact that in Belleforest the letters, after Fenton’s death, are carried by the two courtiers who accompany Amleth may have influenced the play at an earlier point in the plot.
courtiers that they should conduct all the actual business of the mission, partly because of Hamlet’s incapacity, and partly because of Hamlet’s princely rank, which would make it his main function to lend prestige and authority to the mission. We must remember, too, that the mission is little more than a pretext for getting Hamlet out of Denmark and at the same time bringing about his cure. At any rate, I can see no reason why the consigning of the mandate to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should in itself make us suspect the nature of the mandate. Hamlet’s suspicions are based on his knowledge of the King’s crime; but the King is not yet aware that Hamlet possesses this knowledge.

The second question is more difficult to answer. Dover Wilson, interpreting Hamlet’s remark, “my two schoolfellows . . . must sweep my way” (III.iv.202–204), to mean that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were originally supposed to precede Hamlet to England, explains that: “When such missions were undertaken by great personages, royal princes and the like, it was customary for the sealed commission in charge of some trusty gentleman or gentlemen to be sent on in advance.”22 This sounds plausible enough, although Wilson cites no evidence to support it, and he is disputed by Greg, who accuses him of weaving “a little drama of diplomatic etiquette” out of his own imagination.23 Be that as it may, one is certainly not compelled to accept Wilson’s interpretation of “sweep my way.” The phrase appears in a passage abounding in figures of speech, and is probably simply a figurative expression for “smooth my path,” or some such idea, and is spoken by Hamlet ironically. Thus we need not worry over the problem of whether Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were to precede or accompany Hamlet, and the implications of either course.24

The whole matter of the letters to England in Hamlet and their bearing on our judgment of the King’s character may be summarized as follows.

At some time shortly after Claudius first mentioned his plan to send Hamlet to England for his health and for the safety of Denmark (III.i), he composed a mandate which would empower Hamlet to demand of the English king the tribute owed Denmark by England.

22 What Happens in “Hamlet,” p. 258.
24 I agree with Kittredge that, in spite of Hamlet’s suspicions, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are ignorant of the contents of the sealed mandate, and are otherwise innocent of the projected murder. See Kittredge’s note on IV.iii.66.
This mandate contained no statement that would endanger Hamlet, simply because Claudius did not as yet wish Hamlet any serious harm. It is to this mandate that Hamlet refers when he reminds his mother, in the closet scene (III.iv), that he must depart soon for England. At that time no other mandate exists.

Claudius does not write the second mandate, ordering Hamlet's death in England, until after he has learned (in IV.i) that Hamlet has killed Polonius. He has no reason to write it before the Mousetrap; he has no time to write it in the interval between the Mousetrap and the prayer scene (III.iii); and his conscience prevents his writing it until after the slaying of Polonius compels him in self-defense.

The evidence I have set forth here should, I think, enable us to see the injustice of one serious charge often brought against Claudius—of monstrous hypocrisy, as revealed especially in the prayer scene. And against the erroneous notion that Claudius is a villain without a conscience, I have also argued that he deliberately refrained from ordering Hamlet's murder even after he knew from the Mousetrap that Hamlet would probably destroy him.

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