The Ghost of History

HAMLET AND THE POLITICS OF PATERNITY

Anselm Haverkamp

Abstract. Shakespeare’s Hamlet, following the Bible and possibly the Koran, has been the subject of the most and best commentary of any text in the world. This situation is so overwhelming that it can no longer in itself be commented on. It does not mean, however, that there is nothing new to be said about Hamlet. It only proves, assuming it proves anything at all, the persistence of desires that are deceptively rewarded in literary works. This is not only true of Hamlet, but of all great works. They give rise to the idea that they achieve their greatness through progressive development as types of fascination—endless spiritual preoccupations through which culture is cultivated and renews itself. This self-delusion does not reside in the fascination that keeps the reader imprisoned, but rather in a deceptively deepened perception of the works’ identity.

Adieu, fantomes! Le monde n’a plus besoin de vous.

Historically, the Hamlet commentators have been willing to leave certain ideas alone, as if identifying ambiguities and inconsistencies over explaining them was the goal. In the case of Hamlet there are mountains of literature on such forms of defense or denial, and every attempt at a new interpretation must inevitably run the risk of its own belatedness, that consequently confronts it with the obvious question: why didn’t someone come up with it before. Even in the densest of receptions like Hamlet’s, the latency of that which has not been discovered lies relatively motionless beneath the surface of the thousands of known details of a story that has by now been retold and
replayed thousands of times. It was the success and the achievement of New Historicism that it was able, schooled in the reading of Shakespeare, to bring such latencies into motion. But it is a widespread error to assume that this motion was affected by an ever broader historical contextualization and by an ever greater precision in connecting the texts back to the historical referents they contain. It is indeed rather the reverse: Every new observation in a text, brought from its latency into a manifest state, does so thanks to a radical de-contextualization, which must occur before interpretation can become fertile again in the light of historical details and produce a new historical context. Every new reading of literature allows history to be rewritten. This is what makes it literary: that it allows the old stories in history to be reconceived and rewritten.

As part of its ongoing legacy, Shakespeare’s theater revolutionized this rewriting of history, and re-conceptualized the function of literature—its ability to reconceive of history—in the epochal sense of a Copernican revolution. It was Walter Benjamin who recognized the metamorphosis of the concept of classical tragedy in Shakespeare’s \textit{tragical histories}, and has understood \textit{Hamlet} as the quintessence or meta-drama of a modern, historical concept of the tragic, in which history emerges in the place of older mythical constructions.\footnote{In \textit{Hamlet}, the transition produced by this reinvestment leads to a kind of Copernican reversal. Unlike the tragedies of antiquity, \textit{Hamlet} cannot presuppose, memorialize, and represent myth as the constitutive moment of its production. Instead, \textit{Hamlet} must establish the priority of the mythic event as a quasi-mythic analogue within its own reception. In \textit{Hamlet} this necessity seems so perfectly accomplished that the modern history of its reception has promptly re-mythified it, and, in retrospect, has celebrated it as the perfect return of classical tragedy within modernity.}

Nietzsche’s \textit{Birth of Tragedy} re-inscribed this effect, \textit{Hamlet}’s modern intensification of the tragic, in the form of the Dionysian origin of ancient tragedy. It was from this that Freud’s \textit{Interpretation of Dreams} drew its negative account, recognizing in Hamlet the return of the Dionysian—\textit{Hamlet} as Nietzsche’s “Dionysian man” par excellence. According to Freud, \textit{Hamlet} falls victim to cultural repression, to the Oedipus complex.\footnote{\textit{Hamlet}, in other words, was bound to present the syndrome produced by its own influence as a pre-existing parameter of old narratives (like Oedipus for Freud), and could not but confirm it in its historical, mythical functions. Thus, even today, we}
tend to take the ghost of *Hamlet* at face value, as an objective ghost through which justice and order impose themselves during a time that has gotten “out of joint” (as Hamlet comments during the ghost’s appearance) and the great mass of post-Romantic interpretations, finally those following Nietzsche, take this as an enigmatic but universal, trans-historical matter of fact. Thus, they interpret Hamlet’s task as the mission of the modern subject itself—
the task of standing up against incomprehensible forces of murderously violent power-relations and ridding states like Denmark of whatever may be “rotten.”

The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right.56

Hamlet’s words of pathos are ironic, like all pathos in this play, and are first illuminated only by the ending of the play. The grandiosity of a great birth is, as will come out in the course of the acts to follow, a curse—“o cursed spite”—that includes the righteous act he is called upon to perform, the act which, once done, will restore order and the equilibrium of power in the state.

As a curse rather than a blessing, Hamlet’s language parodies the happy annunciation of the Christian epochal transformation. Instead, this phrase suggests that Hamlet sees repression instead of rebirth. And, as the ghost unmistakably makes known, this repression is Christian: The name of the bedeviled Claudius seems to locate *Hamlet* as an early Christian play from the time of Seneca or, more precisely, Tacitus’ history of the Claudian royal house under Nero.

I shall begin, therefore, with the “curse,” by which Hamlet comprehends the time that has gotten “out of joint,” and unpack it in three theses, which strike me as overdue given the current state of scholarship. These propositions have, over the last hundred years, come into view and have more recently had a number of occasions to manifest themselves.

My first thesis has to do with the ghost whose witching hour represents for Hamlet the occasion for announcing that “time is out of joint.” This spirit—my first thesis, according to an old suspicion—*is a liar*: He is a phantom who is not the ghost that he claims to be; it is the ghost in which History takes the stage and presents itself as a phantom full of lies.

The second thesis concerns the historical relation of Hamlet to Fortinbras and the state that threatens from the margins of the drama, threats that highlight the present disjointedness of the state of Denmark on the main stage,
while Fortinbras waits in the wings. *Hamlet*—my second thesis—is not, as it appears, only the story of Hamlet, but is—last but not least on account of the ghost—the *anamorphosis* of a different story and history: there is always another history buried in History.

My third thesis pertains to Hamlet’s relationship to Claudius and Gertrude, which, in the course of the drama, uncovers a kind of disjointedness pertaining to Hamlet himself and his conception of his own historical origins. It is entirely possible and conceivable that Hamlet is not even the son of the dead King, but of his murderer, Claudius. It is this specific uncertainty that makes him ask—last but not least—the question whether “to be or not to be.” The uncertainty of conception—one’s being as being of uncertain origin—is a mortgage that fuels history.

A possible fourth thesis, which is already subsumed in the third, but is not easily included without further supplementation, belongs to the “jointress,” Hamlet’s mother Gertrude, with regard to whom he refers to the time as “out of joint.” It is the power of the mother, and the role of Queen that goes along with it, in which the hidden historical-political point of the play is invested. The mother is the figure that through childbearing and birth joins two distinct periods of time. She links the generations, bringing the past to bear on the present. This is perhaps why Hamlet considers Gertrude the focal point of his anguish, because, as per thesis two, Gertrude’s deception has, potentially, “joined” Hamlet to a history (embodied in the figure of Claudius) he cannot comprehend.

Unfortunately a sketch cannot include everything on which it depends. For this reason, I will concentrate on Hamlet’s ghost and the role of Fortinbras, but I will have no time for this drama’s other drama, the story of Polonius, Laertes and Ophelia. I will treat the story of Claudius and Gertrude, but largely neglect the background of Nero. I will also almost entirely neglect the closer analysis of Shakespeare’s language, even though I owe my own findings to a closer analytic reading and rhetorical analysis, based on aspects of constitutional and criminal law. Since the theses are too interconnected to allow them to be treated completely separately, I have subdivided the material into two parts according to the conventional concerns of *Hamlet* scholarship, to which I also hope to respond. The first deals with the appearance of the ghost and the political situation of revenge thereby defined. This aspect is conventionally understood as a historical problem. The second develops the psychological problem through the analysis of Hamlet’s character and the delay.
of vengeance. The psychological dimension of the mortgaging power redefines the theatrical impact and historical profile of the play.

**THE HISTORICAL ENIGMA**

Recall first the story as we know it: The appearance of the ghost king at the beginning of the play prompts subsequent uncertainties. Without ourselves believing in ghosts, we have thought it necessary, ever since Romanticism, to take this spirit as a given of a superstitious era. A preliminary decision is thereby made, but the decision causes great anxiety for the hero of the play. After all, there is no certainty that either he or his contemporaries unquestioningly believed in ghosts, and this is certainly not inconsequential for the course of the play’s events. If one takes the ghost of the father and his call for vengeance as the voice of justice (which in all seriousness it cannot be), then the remainder of the play heads inexorably in the direction of the plodding completion of a task whose detours can only lie in the weak character of the protagonist. Freud’s formulation still hits on the main point: “The play is built upon Hamlet’s hesitating to fulfill the task of revenge that is laid upon him. Whatever the reasons or motives for this delay may be, they are not admitted in the text; even the most elaborate interpretive attempts have been unable to say what they actually are.” Wilhelm Meister, Freud’s primary point of reference (and, implicitly, a source for the entire interpretive tradition) was the source that provided the most auspicious reading because of its empathy for Hamlet’s situation: “a great deed placed upon his soul that was not adequate to the deed.” This is the key to a play in which “the hero has no plan, whereas the work itself reflects design.”

Taking to the stage in the character of a “melancholy man,” Hamlet’s responsibility for his own actions is limited, and this indeed seems to be his tragedy, because rather than resolving to avenge the murder of his father, doing away with his murderer, and taking over the power due to him by inheritance, he begins by killing Polonius, the father of his beloved and thereby drives her to suicide. He then he sends two friends of his youth, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to their deaths, and finally brings the whole thing to a devastatingly good close by killing Gertrude—and all of this ultimately only to accomplish a by now somewhat costly vengeance against the brother and murderer of his father. In the process, Laertes, brother of Ophelia and son of Polonius, who has
more than a little occasion to want revenge against Hamlet, also loses his life, as
does, for good measure, Hamlet himself. Only two survive: Horatio, friend and
witness, and Fortinbras, secret competitor and eventual successor.

There are three questions that take shape in this overview of the plot: ques-
tions concerning the beginning, the middle and the end – one after the other.
What does the specter have to do with the dramatic events that it sets in
motion? Why is Hamlet unable to carry out the deed in question in the way it
is pronounced? What is the logic of these events if they are not determined by a
deed to be committed but only by their own enigmatic deferral? What is the sig-
nificance of an ending that is only an end insofar as all are suddenly dead and the
stage accordingly empty? The play begins wildly and violently with the super-
natural apparition of a ghost, and it ends, as if coincidentally, without any proper
sense of its own ending, in a series of lethal cases of mistaken identity. Unable to
get an overview of events, neither at the beginning nor at the close, the
machinery redoubles itself in the middle of the play as a doubly doubled the-
ater of a theater within the theater. If one reads the duplication in reverse, then
the piece becomes as opaque as the pantomime that is performed, as the pre-
lude of the play within the play, the dumb show, in which the ghost’s story of
murder is mutely exposed. Nothing, in other words, appears more unambig-
uous than the prehistory, the veracity of which is attested, for us as for Hamlet
himself, only by the ghost. And thus nothing appears less clear than the result-
ing story, which passes over us in confusing detail. As far as the ghost is con-
cerned, it has been attempted, with great effort, to keep the Catholic aspects
separate from the pagan ones, in order to plausibly turn the ghost into a com-
promise-formation from older, feudal days. This hopeless endeavor creates
great difficulties, however, for the figures of Hamlet and Horatio, reformed
students from Luther’s Wittenberg. Undoubtedly, Shakespeare’s own public
would have had an equally hard time with it. This ghost is not believable and
the task incredible. It is true though that revenge, after Shakespeare and
through him, changed its character and became an essential element in the
course and motivation of courtly intrigue. But these changes find their
momentum in themselves and could just as well do without antiquated commis-
sions of the older, feudal kind. Bacon’s definition of revenge as “Wild justice,”
which applies to the prehistory of Hamlet, from Kyd’s Spanish Tragedy to the
supposed Ur-hamlet, turns overnight into a social play of intriguers, and the
ghost who requires the revenge is transformed into, or becomes equivalent to,
the rumors produced by the many courtly Iagos, to whom Shakespeare would
deliver their timely diagnosis in *Othello* (directly following *Hamlet*). Spying and secrecy do not only characterize an over-complicated realm within the represented action, in which revenge becomes the maxim and essence of political action, but they reflect a radically new presupposition for theatricality itself.11 As a ghost of the older kind, the spirit of King Hamlet is an untimely fellow whose business is just as passé as his task is ignoble—and indeed equally ignoble from all perspectives, theological, ecclesiastical, and juridical. In contemporary terms, it is an evil spirit and his apparition therefore is not the simple plot device that later eras have taken it for, while seeking to raise it to the level of great auspiciousness in the formation of the modern individual. As out of date and even as ridiculous as it must have appeared in the new era of the intriguer, this ghost must have served as an even better, though at first sight, puzzling reflection of the new relations of revenge and intrigue.

As Hamlet and his audience knew, and as Horatio puts it, in the most precise formula of Shakespeare’s time, the ghost can only be false, a devilish and deceiving phantom.12 It takes the stage in the armor of the old King, which he had worn for a very particular occasion, but it otherwise bears no individual features that the son could recognize. Its speech emerges from nothing but this mask, as an “it,” but never as a “he” that could be the father it appears as. In the eyes of Christian communis opinio, beyond all differences in types of confession, it can be nothing other than a devilish phantom. It is therefore not at all easier to deal with him than, for instance, with a visitatio of the dead in the Middle Ages, when it was still possible, or advisable, to trust a ghost. To the contrary, as a false and devilish apparition, this ghost moves according to a different trajectory than that of a revelation from the beyond. He may for his own part even be presenting a truth, but it is a distorted truth like that spoken by the damned in Dante’s *Inferno*.13 His desire for revenge proves how far he is from making atonement for his earthly crimes, “the foul crimes done in my days of nature.”14 Incorrigibly entangled in his vengeance, this ghost takes the stage in the shape of one who comes from purgatory, but the way he speaks reveals that he must come from hell. He comes from the inferno, while at the same time pretending with greatest cunning that he comes from purgatory and is deserving of pity—a pity that Shakespeare does not deny him completely: Mixing the infernal thrust of his rhetoric with the symptoms of an unspeakable suffering, this rhetoric appears tragically overwhelmed by its own falseness.15 This falseness is illustrated by the overt repetition of the woeful “O list” which
might err on the side of affectation. It is a spirit, in other words, who uses the pretext of the fires of atonement in order to accomplish a hellish intention that is the mark of the devil and the theater alike: to draw what comes after into the same deceitful orbit of compassion.

The demand of revenge both marks and masks a mystery that is anything but resolved—as the call for vengeance would have done in earlier ages—by the deceitful shape behind which it hides. “It” takes the stage and is assessed by Horatio according to the rules of art (“crossed” is the specialized expression), but Hamlet himself is not in the position to bring it under control. “It” unleashes something in him that lies hidden in the revenge demanded. Insofar as “it” in no way causes its desired revenge to appear in the form of the pointless delay that it will eventually become, the ghost is able to construct a highly sophisticated double bind: It proves revenge as a double bind by doubling the amount of the losses, whereas the loss that was supposed to be avenged is merely sealed in the vengeance. Not only can no revenge make up for the loss, revenge provides the retroactive justification for that against which it reacts. It “avenges itself” in a double sense—it hurts itself in deepening the trauma. And this likewise conforms to the structure of Dante’s *Inferno*, which Machiavelli took as the state of human blindness, not just in hell but always already in this world.

The ghost presents an interesting double bind for the audience, and defines a new type of theatricality. The ghost, in whom the public does not believe—belief would be forbidden both religiously and morally—achieves his effect only in retrospect. Paradoxically, we learn as the plot unfolds that the ghost, in the truth of his untruth, cannot actually be doubted in the slightest. Freud, who discovers the Oedipal situation in *Hamlet*, at the same time also found the reason for a similarly necessary self-misrecognition of the modern audience. Whatever the case may be with Oedipus, Freud was able to clearly see how the phantom’s spectral influence on Hamlet extends itself to the audience. As little as the ghost is real, it is the stage itself, and as undeniable as the phantom is, it is the theater itself. The enigmatic nature of the ghost is indeed a self-thematization of the stage (and the equal of Nietzsche’s later speculations) as an apparatus of historically immemorial insinuations. Revenge is the haunting of history ever since the murder of Cain at the dawn of time. With advancing modernity and finally, since Romanticism—though they had put it behind them—*Hamlet* nails the audience fast in ghostly entanglements that it had tried to avoid from the beginning.
and which, in the end, it appears to have successfully escaped. The ghost does not appear on stage again at the end, as convention would have demanded, offering instead indirect confirmation that it is not this ghost’s revenge that has found its fulfillment in the ending of the play. With Hamlet “running out of time” and breath, revenge at the end is the play is an anticlimax. The last scene is characterized by Hamlet’s flailing, not purposeful, not precise, execution.

In the end not only the fratricidal usurper Claudius meets death, but all of the *dramatis personae*, with the exceptions of the witness Horatio and the winner Fortinbras, are dead. The former, Horatio, is seen at Hamlet’s side during the entire length of the play, while the other, Fortinbras, is a topic of discussion from the beginning and is seen, however fleetingly, crossing the stage with his army in the middle of the play. Both of his appearances are just long enough to allow the audience to recognize him when he comes back at the play’s closing and takes over political power. Horatio, on the other hand, is bid by the dying Hamlet to bear witness to the events the audience has just witnessed. With his back to the audience and as its double, he appears, despite all sympathy we may have with him, not really up to the task. Fortinbras receives in the “dying voice” of Hamlet the *votum* that secures him the princely succession and his inheritance. He, Fortinbras, is the *alter ego* of Hamlet, of one who was not born to play the hero. Yet he became one *malgré lui*, and he is only instated into his own rights after the fact by the one whose succession he admits with his dying word, thus in death reacquiring the princely inheritance of which he was robbed during his life. The play ends with the corpse that Fortinbras, in a most emblematic manner, lays out, the corpse of a King who Hamlet had never been in this play.

But Fortinbras is more than a *rex ex machina* in the place of the *deus ex machina*, who brings order to the proverbially rotten state of Denmark. He is not just the reversal of whatever was “rotten in the state of Denmark,” the rottenness responsible for conjuring up the *diabolus ex machina* in the first place, in the shape of the specter of old King Hamlet. The appearance of Fortinbras’ army in the middle of the play (unexpected, poorly motivated, cut in many productions) permits an external political threat to come suddenly into view: a threat from beyond the stage, from an elusive offstage whose dislocation into the beyond makes it comparable to the threatening spirit at the beginning—similar in a way to the ghost’s
injection of history and intrusion on the present state of affairs. If all of these indications at the margins of the drama are taken and added together, the story of Hamlet appears instantly transformed and displaced into a quite different story: that of the Norwegian conquest of Denmark made possible under the pretext of an invasion of Poland. It is in this capacity that Fortinbras comes up at the beginning and is seen crossing through Denmark on his Polish expedition, just in time to put himself in place and assume power in Denmark.\textsuperscript{17}

In this barely perceptible framing of the vengeance plot, which the ghost sets in motion, a back-story is concealed that need have nothing to do with Hamlet himself, if he would only follow the words of the ghost, but which in the end does pertain to him, and indeed in such a way that, in the advent of the ending, if it ends up having to do with revenge at all, the revenge cannot be that of old Hamlet but, rather, of Fortinbras on old Hamlet. Because did not the latter, old Hamlet, in the prehistory of the play, have the treacherous murder of Fortinbras’ father on his conscience and the usurpation of the Norwegian throne? This was of course not the Danish version of the story, as Horatio makes clear in his assessment of the initial situation, in which he holds entirely to rumor and hearsay: “At least the whisper goes so.”\textsuperscript{18} And did old Hamlet—“our valiant Hamlet (For so this side of our known world esteem’d him)”\textsuperscript{19}—not wear, on the night that Horatio recognized him, the same armor he wore for his conquest of Fortinbras and his kingdom? It is Horatio who recognizes him and not Prince Hamlet, while the latter is of the same age as Fortinbras. Directly following this report, we hear more about Fortinbras in Claudius’ grand welcoming monologue, in which he presents his politics on how he plans to use the turnover of power in Denmark to his advantage.

\begin{quote}
Now follows that you know young Fortinbras,
Holding a weak supposal of our worth,
Or thinking by our late dear brother’s death
Our state be disjoint and out of frame. \textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

Not only do we learn about Fortinbras’ threat and about the Norwegian estimation of the Danish situation as “disjoint” (which will, only a little later, following the entrance of the ghost, be repeated in Hamlet’s sentence “The time is out of joint”), but only slightly earlier we hear the legal definition whose terms tie Claudius’ succession to the marriage of the Queen:
Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
Th’imperial jointress to this warlike state,
are we […]
Taken to wife. 21

Both Hamlet and Fortinbras doubt this joint, irrespective of the “jointress.” The latter, Fortinbras, does so in his unmistakable affirmation of the state of exception, the “warlike state”—which is in fact the reason for Claudius’ haste. The ghost of old Hamlet, who makes his entrance at exactly the same time as Fortinbras, and who thereby accompanies the danger embodied by him, could just as well be the ghost of old Fortinbras, who like Claudius, passed on his inheritance to his brother and not his son. The conclusion of Hamlet even allows the revenge of the one son to be distinguished from the revenge of the other.

Hamlet, rather than the drama of Hamlet’s revenge, might as well be taken as an anamorphosis of the revenge of the other prince, Fortinbras. Already in Richard II, in many respects a dramatic predecessor of Hamlet, Shakespeare had used the highly sophisticated technique of anamorphosis, the representational device of a cylinder showing an indecipherably distorted image that is to be decrypted through the reflection of a surrounding mirror. 22 Likewise Hamlet’s story, in the hidden mirror of a princely code, reveals the story of Fortinbras, while remaining, viewed in and of itself, strictly unrecognizable: mired in melancholia. The loss of Hamlet’s story to Fortinbras corresponds to, and even serves as, the basis for the loss of the father that Hamlet must mourn, and the loss would be decidedly not the one that the ghost called upon him to avenge, on the contrary, it would be its mirror image only—revenge exposed as a sham of justice.

However one may wish to comprehend the doubled revenge-plot in its framing function, the legal position of new King Claudius is left untouched by it. Claudius, like his counterpart in Norway, apparently understood how to avoid the right of the firstborn or to defer it and even, with the Queen as “jointress,” to acquire the cabinet and the approval of the people without taking a back seat to the dying voice, but still prominent legacy, of his predecessor. 23 The legal transition signifies the legitimacy of Claudius and displaces Hamlet (like Fortinbras in Norway) to the next place in the line of succession, a place which Claudius ostentatiously confers to Hamlet upon his homecoming, first in calling him “my cousin Hamlet, and my son” (parallel to “our sometime sister, now our queen”), and when Hamlet will not let pass the thoughts of his father, in the official proclamation:
for let the world take note,
You are the most immediate to our throne,
And with no less nobility of love
Than that which dearest father bears his son
Do I impart toward you.  

Claudius’ irreprouachable and diplomatic attitude has been constantly noted as a reaction to Hamlet’s excessive grieving, but also as an attempt by Claudius to console his nephew over the loss of the immediate succession, thereby simultaneously recognizing his grief and attempting to allay his concrete political loss. More difficult to get a hold of is the possibility that Claudius may at the same time be engaging in some deception regarding his brother’s murder. His effort to keep the duped heir to the throne at home instead of giving him leave to his distant life as a scholar in Wittenberg does not suggest it. Rather, he seems to believe Hamlet capable of the same thing he has just diagnosed in Fortinbras: mustering troops against him. Hamlet, who does not allow his own contentment, wears the mask of madness and, with entirely apparent intentions, stabs the Secretary of State Polonius, who was certainly not uninvolved in the uncle’s coup, and only at this point does Claudius attempt to get his nephew out of the way by sending him on a diplomatic mission to England. Hamlet shows how little he actually is the crazy melancholy figure incapable of action—the characterization through which Polonius wants to sideline him—in the display of the brutal bravura by which he withdraws himself from the affair at the expense of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Claudius protrudes out of the Danish-Norwegian double-mystery that serves as the frame for Hamlet’s story and into the Oedipal saga, but the psychological intricacies of the latter have caused many to forget the politically conditioned framework that literally hovers at the edge of the family saga. The framework itself might be quite simple and easy to forget if it did not so strikingly accentuate the fact that beyond this frame, except for the triumph of Fortinbras, nothing remains. After Hamlet utters his last words: “The rest is silence,” Fortinbras’ troops take the stage and Horatio’s touching “sweet prince” eulogy echoes “And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.” As always in Shakespeare, the pun is intentional: Hamlet’s final rest is a silence, in which the angelic processions bring him to rest. Or so confirms the accredited witness who is supposed to protect the “rest” from sinking into silence.
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ENIGMA

What attracted attention from the beginning—and finally that of the modern audience—was the psychological effect of the ghost upon the son, which in the course of the plot becomes so fixated upon Hamlet that the whole outer history begins to vanish before his inner story. The psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham spoke of a “bait” through which the phantom (as the spirit of the father) is able to make its demands so irresistible. The secret of this bait, according to Abraham, “masks another secret, a real and authentic one, with which the father has burdened his own conscience without the knowledge of the son.” What is the nature of this open secret that has eluded the son and with him the audience, which identifies with the task imposed by the father in the mask of the phantom? The structure of the secret is laid bare in the story of the Prince’s alter ego Fortinbras and is comprehensible when viewed from the margins of the story. Fortinbras and Hamlet, in strict parallel, are both born upon the same day, both lose their fathers to murder, and both lose their rights to succession to their father’s brothers. Both of the stories are furthermore complementary (though no longer parallel) in that one father (old Hamlet) overcomes the father of the other (old Fortinbras) through treachery, and both display inverse complementarity in that the ghost appears at the same time as Fortinbras, and the murder of old Fortinbras is committed by the same means of a poisoned blade in a duel. It is the same means used in the third revenge-story of the play, Laertes’ revenge against Hamlet for the murder of his father Polonius and the death of his sister. Laertes executes the revenge on Claudius with the same blade, and he realizes its poison in the very same instant, thereby making Fortinbras the heir of the one who had killed his father and robbed him of his own inheritance. In the execution of this revenge, the vengeance of another avenges itself upon Hamlet, and thus he pays, through the justice that he allows to be passed upon his father, for the injustice of the same father. But this is not the whole story.

Only in death, when he experiences poisonous treachery upon his own body, does Hamlet come to realize the secret of the ghost. In the belatedness of the enigma’s solution, the philosopher Stanley Cavell found one of Shakespeare’s epochal accomplishments, namely, that which had been withdrawn as the secret of representation and can only take its effect in its withdrawal, achieves a retrospectively “deferred representation.” In the equivalency of the two stories, which takes root in the co-origins of their claims, Shakespeare is able
to allow both strands to run their course until they abruptly reach their end and dissolve into nothingness. The mock moral of the story is a moral that the older revenge-tragedies before Shakespeare did not possess and could not have contained, because this moral would have made them completely impossible by revealing a basic amorality, uncovering that which is lacking in their (as well as their hypocrite audiences’) moral register. Hamlet leads the revenge tragedy (which could have been the content of the hypothesized Ur-hamlet) into the absurd by showing how deceptively, behind the backs of the sons, the mortgaged power of dead fathers extends itself, and is executed. “Mortgage,” a concept borrowed from the French during Shakespeare’s time, originally referred to the money that we owe to the dead, those to whom we remain permanently indebted without need of repayment. A mortgage due to the dead, whose spectral intercession can only further entangle in always greater debts of deep, unknown proportions. In the best case scenario of theatrical retrospection—as Freud, no coincidence, found confirmed in Hamlet—it may become negotiable (in Greenblatt’s use of the word) following the performance on stage. In reading it may become possible to achieve a kind of enlightenment (Aufklärung), whose trace Hamlet follows and which he may even in the end have achieved for himself.

This is not, however, to say that Shakespeare used such a generalized historical moral as the material point that would update his Ur-hamlet and bring it into line with some more contemporary and enlightened understanding. The background standard of political morality, if not political correctness, that we must grant to Shakespeare and his time, is only what first places him in the position to make his dramatic point and to elaborate what hides as the “unspeakable ignominy,” postulated by Abraham, and to highlight it as an unparalleled scandal of, as it turns out, trans-historical proportions. In this articulation of standards, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, acquires traits of an abyssal Mirror of Princes, concerning the tragic story of Kings on the verge of enlightenment. Shakespeare inscribes the drama of the auto-enlightenment which Hamlet allows himself to undergo within the course of an apparent deferral—the deferral of a revenge to which Hamlet is summoned by the feudal raison d’être of the spirit of history that is precariously present in the ghost of fathers. What summons him to this calling is a morality prior to all reason and a reason prior to every moral. Thus the question gains momentum: What is it that may be called the “unspeakable ignominy” of a King who can leave nothing to his son but the ruinous form of a revenge in which the bankruptcy...
of the very foundations of his rule is revealed and the realm lost? When the ghost whispers to his son, “remember me,” it is not the memory of a beloved father Hamlet is reminded of, but rather a restitution of members, the remembering of a King who has been robbed of his power to beget offspring, robbed of the very member by which the son was begotten and fit for success according to the primogeniture of the succession.31

The murder of the King by itself, even by his own brother’s hand, might have been defensibly avenged according to the ancient code of honor. The ghost represents its applicability in the way he represents his own possibility of redemption as redemption from purgatory. Except that in this case, an additional circumstance arises, which endangers the succession itself and makes the possibility of restitution unobtainable. It is the same reason why the ghost seeks a revenge that has no chance, thereby turning his revenge against the circumstance itself. In this shame his kingdom is extinguished as if he had produced no offspring at all. Along with his life, Claudius not only robbed his brother of his Queen but also his son. Certainly, the risk of the *pater semper incertus* has always presented a classical form of destabilization, which could however be resolved by definite codifications, and which was in fact legally resolved long before through the declared implication that all children born within a marriage were begotten by the father and to be legitimized through him. Queen Elizabeth herself, throughout the entire period of her reign, was never completely secure in her legitimacy. Mary Stuart was a contender for the throne and threatened Elizabeth’s rule for the same reason. Henry VIII successfully accused Elizabeth’s mother, Anne Boleyn, of high treason—endangerment of the succession through matrimonial infidelity. Boleyn was put to death. Elizabeth had been declared legitimate by her father and declared heir to the throne, but this condition remained easily challenged in the light of her mother’s subsequent fate.32

In the ghost of the murdered King Hamlet’s accusation, ignominy transforms into the image of vengeance and outweighs the mere murder, in the telling of which the repressed truth presses hopelessly for expression. One should not misunderstand or falsely psychologize this scenario or Hamlet’s obvious entanglement in it. Freud’s intuition, and Goethe’s before him, was to see the genesis of the modern subject as a mortgage, taken out on an older, feudal constellation. According to this model, the trauma of princes became an example of narcissistic injury and castration anxiety, and the dissolution of the feudal *familia* with its principle of delegation—including the commissions
demanded by family ghosts—turned into the repertoire of the dynamics of the Oedipal relation. Goethe and Freud read this filiation of the modern subject into *Hamlet*, but this reading is Hamlet’s historical legacy and not inherent to the character in the text. The shameful aspect, according to the ghost’s tirades, is neither unspeakable in those words that the spirit utters nor in those that Hamlet theatrically amplifies behind the melancholy mask of madness. Nietzsche brought it to bear in the reading of *Hamlet* in *The Birth of Tragedy* with the “terrible wisdom of the forest god Silen,” according to whom the “very best” thing would have been “not to be born” at all, which means, as Nietzsche emphasizes, in a remarkable inversion of the meaning of “being,” “to be nothing.” Nietzsche is right, and much more literally than he was aware, when he read Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” as “to be born or not to be born.” In fact, “That it were better my mother had not borne me” says Hamlet himself, and that may have inspired Nietzsche. What troubles Hamlet are the questions of birth and the unspoken, but central, issue of conception. What the ghost does not say and still does not completely conceal (to the contrary makes apparent in his instruction that Gertrude is to be spared from the revenge) is the full measure of his wife’s complicity. Her complicity, in Hamlet’s eyes, is not so much in the murder of her husband as for her doubling of the regicide through the annihilation of the succession.

A second time I kill my husband dead,
When second husband kisses me in bed.

The confession of the Player-Queen, which Hamlet presents in the play within the play performed before the royal couple, is scandalous not only in its parodically inverted Petrarchism, according to which the “little death” of orgasm, *picol’ morte*, deepens the “big death,” in that the latter anteceded the former in this case instead of preceding and foreshadowing it. This second death seals and consummates the first one, to which it could otherwise only metaphorically have alluded. In the mouth of the Player-Queen, second death affirms the flat and literal way of all flesh, or “base respects of thrift, but none of love.” Hamlet laments the proverbial weakness of woman from the start, “Frailty thy name is woman,” even before he hears any accusations from the ghost. He does not do so out of repugnance at that incestuous, adulterate beast who has drawn the mother into the adulterous bed. The implication which the ghost cannot admit, and which it can only partially cover up with its
railing against incest, is the existence of the infidelity when he was still alive. That much was already present in the source Belleforest and has been emphasized, but not fully explained, since Bradley’s *Shakespearean Tragedy*: “she was false to her husband while he lived.” The logical conclusion, which readers seem to have avoided, is the possibility that Claudius might be Hamlet’s father. The ghost, who posthumously assigns the mission of his re-membering as father and King, cannot admit it, neither as a possibility nor as a reality.

The sheer possibility is sufficient—suspicion makes all proof superfluous—to make the story’s irony apparent: a literal irony in which metaphors become true and truth becomes metaphorical. Thus, for instance, in the apparent metaphor by which Claudius makes Hamlet into his “son” and thereby declares him as “his” heir, Hamlet finds himself declared a “son” he never wished to be and, instead, finds himself fearful of his new status. His mother says that much directly to his face in her instruction:

Do not for ever with thy vailed lids
Seek for they noble father in the dust.42

Where, if not in dust and ashes, would the real father be sought? Not as a specter to be sure. Gertrude completely overlooks this shape, which appears to her son in her bedroom to urge him to more promptly fulfill his revenge. “Do you see nothing there?” the son asks in a panic; “Nothing at all,” she says, cool, “yet all that is I see.” The apparition of the father fades before the reality of the mother; the ghost can never be more than the phantom of the father’s ideality. The irony is completed by the fact that the succession comes out the same way for Hamlet, regardless of whose son he is. Hamlet is the heir to the throne, even if he were not the old King’s heir, and even if he is the not the son of the father whose son he is supposed to be. Instead he would be the son of a murderer, through the murder of his biological father, and through his mother who is incestuously implicated in this murder. It would thus remain impossible for him to separate himself from cause and occasion of the murder.44 And so, at the end of the play, an ending, which for this reason can no longer reach its anticipated end, Claudius is dealt a vengeance at Hamlet’s hand that could just as well be a vengeful patricide. In the name of the father (in short: of old Hamlet) “young Hamlet” kills a biological father, whose name he does not carry (Claudius), but in whose name he is equally implicated as the usurper of that which had belonged to him under the rule of the old legitimacy.
A “common theme, is death of fathers,” Claudius mocks and points up the style of Machiavellian Princes, to whose number Hamlet does not wish to be counted. “Sovereign is the one who determines the state of exception,” as we have perhaps too quickly assimilated. In his application of this rule of thumb, Claudius tries to close the check without ever asking for the bill. The sovereign in the state of exception is the one who controls the principle of thrift that Hamlet’s Player-Queen calls by its name. In a time out of joint, the only one up to date is the one who makes transitions “fitting”—in other words: a “joiner” like the “jointress” Gertrude. What remains in the state of exception, the “warlike state” proclaimed by Claudius, is a “jointress” Gertrude, whose weakness is her absolute strength. She loved her son, but is unable to secure the succession for him as soon as he wanted to know too much. She is not the Virgin Queen Elizabeth, in whose final days Hamlet first took the stage, but she illuminates the underpinnings upon which Elizabeth’s decision—hardly understood to this day—brilliantly emerges, the decision not to allow her reign to be corrupted by “incestuous sheets” (according to a semantics that we would no longer use). As the Faerie Queen unreachable by sexual politics, she unhinged the politics of the Princes.

The “incest” that is spoken of so incessantly in Hamlet has a symptomatic contemporary significance. Differently than in its biological abbreviation, which governs contemporary usage, in Hamlet incest makes up the essence of a family politics whose sexual-political basis was supposed to accede to the universal trait announced in Schiller’s slogan “All men shall be brothers” (Alle Menschen werden Brüder), a skewed metaphor in which all sisters are made into brothers. In the supplementary role of a family politics for the supposed body politic, Marie Axton has perceived the Elizabethan crux of the metaphor of the Two Bodies of the Queen (and not just of the King). She invokes within Elizabeth’s thought—unfortunately without consideration of Hamlet—an idea to which Shakespeare may have even alluded in Claudius’ offer to Hamlet: “that if Mary [Stuart] would accept a husband chosen by the Queen of England, Elizabeth would [literally from Camden’s annals] ‘declare her, Her Sister, or Daughter, and England’s Heretrix, by Act of Parliament.’” As Queen, Elizabeth rejected the various alternatives posed by a society obsessed with succession. Raising the image of the Virgin Queen and the claim of a monarch above the problematic sexual-political pressures, she had felt the pressures on her own body nevertheless before
she came to stand above them. It seems Hamlet shares Elizabeth’s momentary utopia. He represents Elizabethan tragedy at the moment when the fabulous apotheosis of the Faerie Queen was coming to an end and the heir was at the door.48

POSTLUDE IN THE THEATER

Elizabeth died in March of 1603 and resolved the question of her succession at the last minute. James, son of the executed Mary Stuart and the favorite of Elizabeth’s cabinet, finally received her dying voice and first arrived in London from Scotland at the end of 1603. Prior to his arrival, he held court for the first time at Christmas at Hampton Court. Everyone with hopes of accomplishing anything under his reign did everything possible to be in attendance. One of the first official acts of the King and his Danish Queen (a tireless lover of the theater who knew all of the plays of the period) was the elevation of Shakespeare’s troupe to The King’s Men. They turned the royal estate at Hampton Court into a theatrical happening of the first order, which dominated the court’s social proceedings between Christmas and Twelfth Night.

Hamlet, one speculates, may have been on the program of Christmas 1603 at Hampton Court, where it must have represented an excessively bold idea for the celebration of these days. The piece was certainly not written for this diplomatic context, which only coincidentally may have come about, but many extremely fitting and unfitting aspects would be brought to light by this staging (and it may perhaps offer some explanation of the deviations undertaken in the first quarto-edition of 1603).49 In the royal box, the Queen from Denmark follows the show with her Royal Lord, both of them surrounded by a state that is on high-alert in the excitement of governmental changeover. And indeed, for the first time after fifty years of the Faerie Queen, there was a King and a Queen who would have found themselves confronted with the Player-Queen and Player-King, in a mirror inversion putting King James across from Queen Gertrude and her theatrical double of the Player-Queen. The staging, in its allegorical features, was approaching the most fashionable theatrical genre of the future, the court masque. A certain toning down is imaginable this way, yet it remains necessary to explain the tolerance needed in facing the provocation from this particular play in the celebration of this particular day—the Birth of Christ and the new state of
a Christian Majesty in elaborate conjunction. In short, this performance is only acceptable as a contra-factual speculation and it may be as such not completely useless, since it simultaneously illustrates and refutes the chances of relating Hamlet (or Macbeth, or Lear, at that) to James’ politics and interests, and thus to define, as unequivocally as the name of “The King’s Men” suggests, Shakespeare in the new sovereign’s service.50

On the threshold between Elizabeth and James, Hamlet displays a political alternative with excessive sharpness, in which the restored ideology of divine right seeks (as we know, without much success) to reestablish the pertinence it had lost under Elizabeth. Hamlet had not only implicitly stated the ultimate loss of the divine right but exposed its vain nullity. The solution presented in Elizabeth was thanks to the luck of the draw, but this chance was not only over in 1603, it could hardly even be perceived anymore by the majority of a public, which would continue to drift apart, toward an incorrigible ancien régime on the one side and Protestant anti-theatricality on the other. In 1603 Hamlet had already been historically surpassed; in Hampton Court its acid irony would have caused the occasion of the festivities to fade away in the aftermath of the Elizabethan epoch. Hamlet (as the Hamlet-reader Goethe’s Werther) is secretly dated at Christmas. This much is certainly correct, but Hamlet’s turning-point occurs in the negation of precisely this son, and the father who reclaims him is nothing but a ghost, the spirit of a deceitful, theatrically overblown era. The ghost is the spirit of History, and thus there is nothing heartening in this for a holder of divine right, artificially reincarnated in the royal spouse of a Princess of Denmark.

The “nothing” of the “thrift” contained in the “jointress” Gertrude (pronounced by her son’s Player-Queen as the principle of nothingness) could have been for James at best historical humbug. The fact that it lasted for as long as it did is almost unbelievable, an irony of history that historians still have no great idea what to do with. Elizabeth was ahead of her time, just as Shakespeare was ahead of his—thus ahead and, like all literature, always already long past. “The King,” complains Hamlet to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, after he has stabbed Polonius (alias: Corambis), “is a thing,” and he adds—following their horrified response, “A thing? [. . .] Of nothing.”51 He, the King, is the accidental product of a “thrift” which Elizabeth was nonetheless able to suspend for the duration of half a century. The Queen—Gertrude like Elizabeth—establishes “the thing that’s the king”; after her—Gertrude like the Fairie Queen—the future of Princes remains broken to the present day. Even the son of the second Elizabeth
and his Diana—furnished with the mythical name of a chaste Queen—in whose requiem Hamlet’s consolation was included, cannot but attest to it in a distant echo of the theatrical thunder of 1603.

1. This essay, translated by Kirk Wetters, first appeared in German as a chapter of Hamlet, Hypothek der Macht (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2000, 2nd ed. 2004). It has been revised by the author and improved by Peter Goodrich. To him and Stephen Greenblatt, the author owes more than could be made visible in notes.


3. Uwe Steiner, “Traurige Spiele—Spiel vor Traurigen: Zu Walter Benjamins Theorie des barocken Trauerspiels,” Allegorie und Melancholie, Willem van Reijen ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 32–61. This is an abbreviation of Walter Benjamin’s argument, The Origin of German Tragic Drama (1928); the last section of the first part displays the title “Hamlet.”

4. See Friedrich Nietzsche, Die Geburt der Tragödie (1872); the central passage at the end of section 7 (see supra note 34). Also see Sigmund Freud’s Die Traumdeutung (1900) (see Freud, supra note 7). A footnote to Freud’s introduction of the Oedipus Complex (appearing for the first time in the fourth edition) supplements the mere citation of the myth that had previously illustrated the point with the comparison between Sophocles and Shakespeare and the history of repression that lies between them. From Hamlet’s “secret” a “utopian promise for modernism” may even ensue according to Richard Halpern, Shakespeare Among the Moderns (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), namely “that of an unassimilable newness” (Id., at 249).


7. Sigmund Freud, Die Traumdeutung, Freud-Studienausgabe, last edition (1930), Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards, James Strachey, eds. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 1969–1975), 269. (Kirk Wetters provided the translation.)

8. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Wilhelm Meister’s Lehrjahre (1796), Goethes Werke, Erich Trunz, ed. (Hamburg: Wegener 1948–1960), 245–246 (Kirk Wetters provided the translation); this notorious passage occurs in Book IV.xxiv. Also see Book IV.xv: “the hero has no plan, but the play is carefully designed” (Id., at 254), a point which is taken up again later in Meister’s adaptation of Hamlet in Book V.iv with the emphasis of “the unity of this work, in which the hero in particular has no plan” (Id., at 296). A more competent reading of this highly influential commonplace from Wilhelm Meister will have to wait, but it might well show how much awareness Goethe himself invested, even in Meister’s adaptation, in the difference between the “external conditions” and the decisive motif that allows these “external, isolated, disparate and dissipating motives” to become the object of “substitution for a single motive” (Id., at 296). Goethe’s ability to stage himself in the solution to this problem that he brought into the world is equally noteworthy, but has gone largely unnoticed. I am tempted to see in it the beginnings of an anamorphic reading like the one I am advocating, whereby however Goethe’s insight remains especially significant: The anamorphosis lies in the lee of the melancholic predisposition, and consequently Goethe’s own deciphering must also remain entirely in the shadow of the prefiguration that he expounds.
9. Lee Sheridan Cox, *Figurative Design in Hamlet: The Significance of the Dumb Show* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974). This aspect of the play has been impressively developed by Cox in his analysis. Stephen Greenblatt also declared, in *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), that the scenes of the self-representation of theater through the theater are the center of the “symbolic acquisition” that transpires in Shakespeare’s new re-institutionalization of the institution of the theater.

10. J.W. Lever, *The Tragedy of State: A Study of Jacobean Drama*, (London: Methuen, 1987), correspondingly finds: “the typical situation of the revenge play is unrelated to the operation of the feud or the possibilities of recourse to law” (*Id.*, at 12). Eleanor Prosser’s *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967, 1971) still offers the most detailed discussion of the sources (133 ff.), tracing the origin of the revenge-motif to the allegorical personification of “Vice” in the moralities and makes the revenge’s lack of concrete motivation palpable through numerous examples. As the contemporary motto puts it: “Revenge now rules as sovereign of my blood.” The reasons for revenge are, like those of the contemporaneous melancholy, entirely without reason: “several [in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*] are immediately forgotten and at least five have no motivation whatsoever” (*Id.*, at 38). Revenge is, in other words, like melancholy, a chronic Elizabethan malady, the flipside of the manic-depressive disposition. Hamlet reacts in his melancholic mask to the imposition of the ghost, which for its part covers up another motive beneath the mask of revenge.

11. Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen trauerspiels, Gesammelte Schriften*, Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, eds. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–1986), I: 274. Benjamin’s *Trauerspielbuch* characterizes the figure of the intriguer, in its later, Baroque dimensions, as if he had Polonius in mind as an early prototype. Only recently, following Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967), did Patricia Parker show, in a series of texts, the full extent of spying and discovery, secret intelligence, and secret intents, in *Hamlet and Otello* and thereby uncovered an entirely forgotten layer of semantic latencies. Comparable to the microscopic readings of Empson, Parker’s analyses in *Shakespeare from the Margins* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996) show how indispensable rhetorical reading is for the discovery of these layers.

12. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Johannes Hoffmeister, ed. (Hamburg: Meiner, 1952), 523–24. Hegel’s treatment at the end of *Phänomenologie des Geistes* is impressive: “Thus the consciousness [Hamlet], which is more pure than the last one that believes in ghosts [Macbeth], and possessed of greater presence of mind, and more systematic …, hesitates to commit revenge and seeks to orchestrate other proofs—for the reason, apparently, that this ghost, who reveals the plot to him, might also be the devil” (translated by Wetters).

13. Roy W. Battenhouse, “‘The Ghost in Hamlet: A Catholic Linchpin?’” 48 *Studies in Philology* 161–192 (1951). Roy W. Battenhouse effectively compared Hamlet to Dante’s Inferno in this work. The ghost cannot come from Dante’s *Purgatorio* (164). To the contrary, as I am underscoring, he must be from the *Inferno*. The discussion following Battenhouse unfortunately failed to draw this conclusion, due to a misrecognition of the status of rhetorical corruption in the *Inferno*. As such it is not only decisive for Dante, but following him also for Machiavelli, as has been exemplarily shown by John Frecce, “Medusa and the Madonna of Forli,” *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, Albert Russell Ascoli and Viktoria Kahn eds. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 161–178. My presentation was written, although in continual contact with Stephen Greenblatt’s work, long before his work, *Hamlet in Purgatorio* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), was published. Greenblatt’s piece takes another, more refined view, thereby offering and exposing nevertheless, as it seems to me, the deeper underpinnings of the ghost’s “infernal irony” (this term, again, according to Frecce’s Dante). What Greenblatt does indeed add to the “long-standing critical game” (*Id.*, at 230) is the “young man from Wittenberg, with a distinctly Protestant temperament, (who) is haunted by a distinctly Catholic ghost” (*Id.*, at 240). *Hamlet* is a drama of secularization that, far from completing itself, was bound, in the historical double bind that is History, to fall back into being possessed, or repossessed, by what it is about to
leave, prematurely, behind: a mortgage that betrays our "desire to speak to the dead" (See Greenblatt, supra note 9) through the lies of History, the pursuit of revenge the biggest among them.

14. See Shakespeare, supra note 5 at i.v.12.
15. Bill Readings, "Hamlet’s Thing," in New Essays on Hamlet, Mark Thornton Burnett and John Manning eds. (New York: Palgrave, 1994), 52, makes this rare point: "The ghost cannot tell, cannot unfold, but unfolds the picture of one in torment." That does not mean, however, as Readings continues, that "What cannot be told, it seems, can be seen" and comes to be seen, as it were, in this scene; it remains to be heard within that "which passes show" (Hamlet’s maxim) in the untold of the falsely proposed.
16. William Empson, “Hamlet When New,”(1953), in Essays on Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 94. This passage, among others, is an extension of William Empson’s bold study “Hamlet When New.” Empson conceives the theatrical collusion of specter and protagonist, of revenge and melancholy, in the pointed sentence: "Hamlet was the rage" (94).
17. Despite all efforts of textual criticism, one fact remains obscure— and if it is addressed, its significance is left unexplained—that the Hamlet of the Restoration (in the version that Sir William D’Avenant produced from the last prewar quarto of 1637, and which first appeared in 1676) parenthetically excises all of the Fortinbras material in the final scene, because it, as the preface explicitly indicates, is the easiest to do without (as “least prejudicial to the Plot or Sense”) of the staged events in a play that is in any case far too long. Hazleton Spencer was the first to observe this in “Hamlet under the Restoration,” 38 PMLA 770–791: 777 (1923). Cf. Simon Jarvis, Scholars and Gentlemen: Shakespearean Textual Criticism and Representation of Scholarly Labor, 1725–1765 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 57.
18. See Shakespeare, supra note 5 at I.i.84.
21. Id., at I.ii.8–14.
22. Ernest G. Gilman, The Curious Perspective: Literary and Pictorial Within the Seventeenth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 126. Gilman demonstrates a highly complicated arrangement, projected across an entire series of countervailing structural symmetries, which oscillate between “right” and “wry” points of view when they are properly reflected toward each other. Instead to thematizing the device, Hamlet’s anamorphosis privileges an exclusively ego-centered perspective at the expense of a crassly de-centered outside perspective.
23. The legal-constitutional interpretation, which brings the events of Hamlet into a more precise focus, has been developed thanks to John Dover Wilson, summarized in his edition in the New Cambridge Shakespeare. This paper was also supplemented by John Dover Wilson’s edition. Interestingly, Rosencreantz speaks of “the late innovations” (See Shakespeare, supra note 5 at II.ii.330), which according to Horst Breuer (in “The Late Innovation” in Hamlet," Notes and Queries 232.2 (1987), 212–215), cast a politically ironic light (Id., at 215) on the transfer of power to Claudius. In Harry Levin’s “Shakespearan Overplot,” 8 Renaissance Drama 62–71 (1968), the general heading for this observation, the “overplot” is a means of political-dramatic irony, as in William Empson’s "double plots" in Some Versions of Pastoral (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935).
25. Dover Wilson’s commentary conceives the act in the formula: “Hamlet, in full council, receives ‘the voice of the king himself for his succession.’ It is a bid for acquiescence in the fait accompli” (See Wilson, supra note 23 at 150–151 and I.ii.108–109). “The voice”—which in Wilson’s edition, is a citation taken from the mouth of Rosencreantz (Id., at III.ii.343)—is the equivalent of the dying voice, which Hamlet explicitly passes on to Fortinbras and which he can only transfer to him on the assumption of this legal basis: “He has my dying voice” (Id., at V.ii.354).
26. See Shakespeare, supra note 5 at V.ii.365.
27. Id., at 364–65.
28. Nicholas Abraham, “Le fantôme d’Hamlet ou le Vie acte,” L’écorce et le noyau (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1978), 449. For myself, I only share Abraham’s starting presuppositions: “Si un fantôme revient hanter c’est pour mentir: ses prétendues ‘révélations’ sont mensongères par nature.” Hamlet’s intermediate situation “entre une ‘vérité’ fallacieuse et imposée et une vérité ‘vrai’ que de longtemps l’Inconscient avait devinée” shows itself ineluctably in the first act, when he anticipates the ghost in his own reflections the cold plates of the marriage feast and the manliness of the dead King, his father—reflections which follow precisely according to the Freudian family plot. The latency (“‘pregnancy’”) of this highly comedic exchange between Hamlet and Horatio—from Hamlet’s sudden intuition “methinks I see my father” to the affirmation “A was a man” (See Shakespeare, supra note 5 at I.i.183, 187)—has been analyzed by William Empson in The Structure of Complex Words (London: Chatto and Windus, 1951), 321–325. The latency is confirmed as something that Hamlet thinks he has always known and which, as an inking, he systematically elaborates in this scene: “O my prophetic soul! My uncle!” (See Shakespeare, supra note 5 at I.v.41).

29. Stanley Cavell, Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Cavell develops the mise-en-âme of the dumb-show to this conclusion (190). What spectrally haunts the play under the name of revenge is in the end revealed as the “destroyer of individual identity” (Id., at 188).

30. The term lends itself almost immediately after its introduction to figurative uses: most generally, “to establish a claim in advance immediately” and “hence pass. to be attached or pledged to something” (first use, according to the OED, 1530, fig. 1588). Shakespeare’s own Sonnet 134—“And I myself am mortgag’d to thy will”—includes in the many meanings of “will” not just the legal testament but also, (as Joel Fineman concludes in Shakespeare’s Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 284) being “thus possessed, or repossessed.” What matters here most, is the spectral implication within the figurative use of the term, which reinforces, like all associations with the financial sphere, especially usury, a devilish touch that comes to bear even in the most cunning defenses like Francis Bacon’s “Of Usury” with respect to “mortgaging” &c. in Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral, Michael Kiernan, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 126.

31. Hamlet’s pantomimed inscription of the ghost’s command on the tables of his memory—“My tables. Meet it is I set it down” (See Shakespeare, supra note 5 at I.v.107)—is completely ambivalent, and Cavell is right in his assertion, made under the especially fitting title Disowning Knowledge, when he claims that Hamlet in this scene does anything but merely mime obedient carrying out of the order: “[he] seems to go out of [his] way to show that the line […] containing the line ‘remember me’ is not what he sets down in his tables (See Cavell, supra note 29 at 184).

32. So goes the complicated web of suspicions that undoubtedly lasted for quite some time among those contemporary to the situation—something which becomes all the more apparent when read from the perspective of Hamlet. Far from reaching a satisfactory resolution, J. J. Scarisbrick’s classic monograph on Henry VIII (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) works through the various suspicions with admirable perceptiveness, even if he does not pursue the birth of Elizabeth—“probably the most unwelcome royal daughter and most celebrated woman in English history” (Id., at 323)—into all of the convoluted details of succession regulations. The double annihilation of Anne Boleyn in the annulment of her marriage simultaneous with her execution, points in the direction of the neuralgic moment through which Elizabeth remained consciously bound to her mother (Id., at 350). Wherein it is more than interesting, and has rightly been the object of Scarisbrick’s special emphasis, that also Elizabeth’s half sister and predecessor Mary was able to successfully establish herself in the succession through identification with her mother, thereby “with a terrible logic” driving her dead father like an evil spirit from the rest of his grave and destroying him literally in flames (Id., at 497)—a kind of precedence that deserves to be pursued in Hamlet’s historical mortgage.

33. It was Helm Stierlin who named “delegation” the basis for any Oedipal framework, under the explicit title, Delegation und Familie (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978). His work specifically references
Shakespeare (Id., at 28). The commission of spirits counts among uncompleted earthly business such as Dante’s concern for a “double immortality.” Arno Borst notes in *Barbare, Ketzer und Artisten* (Munich: Piper, 1988); such unfinished business seeks to secure the new, modern conception of fame through the extension of the expectations of the beyond (Id., at 189). Curses put to this purpose can only come by way of a hybrid causation, from the devil. The older apparitions of the dead, on the other hand, and the tasks they impose upon the living, secured the image of the father and along with it the patrimonial structure of the *familia*, which had most recently been exposed by Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Les revenants: Les vivants et les morts dans la société médiévale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 214. As the spirit of the dead, the father leaves behind and commands the family, in *Hamlet* the “name of the father” forbids the mother. This is something that Lacan made productive differently than Abraham, to the extent that the father, with the structure of the law behind him (which Lacan calls the “name of the father,” embodying the incest-taboo), leaves behind a mortgage that is nothing other than the inheritance of his sins.

34. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Neue Ausgabe (1886), Werke, Karl Schlechta ed. (Munich: Hanser 1966), I: 29, 30, 31, 33, 48, 130. Nietzsche introduces the motif of the “wise Silen” by way of King Midas (Id., at 29), intensifies it in the complaint of Homer’s Achilles (Id., at 31) and then varies it throughout the entire text, with Hamlet as its culmination (Id., 34 and 35, with Nietzsche’s own emphases). In *Disowning Knowledge*, Cavell refers to Nietzsche only most generally, but Janet Adelman’s *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays*, *Hamlet to the Tempest* (New York: Routledge, 1992), explicates the pertinent infantile fantasy that Shakespeare recapitulates (Id., 35). The genealogy of a collective spectrality in which Nietzsche senses a primal scene is the theme of Jacques Derrida’s *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Gallilée, 1993), among whose specters *Hamlet* stands in first place (Id., 10).

35. See Shakespeare, supra note 5 at III.i.123.

36. Nietzsche’s Silen cites *Oedipus at Colonus*, where the sentence is not spoken by a Silen but by the chorus. In Sophocles the sentence does not occur as a sudden insight but rather appears to be some popular, quasi-Dionysic wisdom (1224). [*Oedipus at Colonus 1220–24*, in *Sophoclis fabulae*, A. G. Pearson ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967)] The methodologically difficult question is to what extent this citation may have already been on Shakespeare’s mind (whose education in classics is often underestimated for no good reason). Nietzsche could at least have been under this impression, based on Hamlet’s “Hyperrion to a Satyr” comparison (See Shakespeare, supra note 5 at I.ii.40), in which Claudius figures as the satyr. The accent in Sophocles’ choral song lies however entirely on the negation and not on the being of Oedipus. Freud, who may have had this in mind, turns Hamlet’s insight back toward Sophocles to the extent that—as it is accurately put by Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard, *After Oedipus: Shakespeare in Psycho-Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1993), 111—“Hamlet knows that he knows but not what he knows,” and I can only briefly indicate here the importance of the fact that Hamlet utters this sentence to Ophelia. Whatever the case may be, Freud’s Hamlet-thesis found its foothold in this passage, which went far beyond that which he found in it in his fixation on Oedipus: a quasi-Dionysic pretext for the whole Oedipus Complex, which Sophocles’ choir attested, Nietzsche perceived, and, between the two of them, Shakespeare restaged. The complementary question, asked by Margarete de Grazia in “Soliloquies and Wages in the Age of Emergent Consciousness,” 9 *Textual Practice* 67–92 (1993), emphasizes the complicated theatrical genre of multiple address that ties this monologue to the ghost. In both scenes, Hamlet seems to use the same kind of a *vademecum*, memorizing some logical *quodlibet* (Id., at 74, 77). This would supply, along with the scholastic milieu, a humorous subtext, upon which it might be located, within the reformed mentality of melancholy, the quasi-Dionysic, satyric layer of *Hamlet’s* references to antiquity—a structure sustained in the canon-shaping capacity of Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, carnevalized in Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and largely maintained through Romanticism and up to James Joyce.

37. See Shakespeare, supra note 5 at III.ii.179–80.
The constant pressure that Elizabeth withstood over the years of the succession found a historical expression, according to the excellent reading of Marie Axton, in Shakespeare’s poem “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” published in 1601 (i.e. simultaneously with Hamlet) in a collection with the telling title Love’s Martyr. The pressure of succession is impressively documented by John E. Neale, Elizabeth I and her Parliaments (London: Norton 1953–1957). Ever since she declared to her first parliament in 1559 that

196
in the end it is “for me sufficient that a marble stone shall declare that a Queen, having reigned such
time, lived and died a virgin,” and the longer she held this improbable demand through the years, the
more she and her loyal public became exposed to the torture that is called a martyrdom in Love’s Martyr
and is justified in Shakespeare’s poem by recourse to higher reason. “Could a Sovereign,” asks Sir
Neale, impressed by the continual deepening of the problem, “have been in a more harassing situation?
virtually isolated and under remorseless, if loyal pressure” (Id., at I: 49, 111).

49. Alvin Kernan, Shakespeare, the King’s Playwright (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), has taken
this postulate to the furthest extreme, but unfortunately only the fact of the performance and not the
names of the plays performed have been passed down to us (Id., at 31). Kernan’s procedure of starting
with actual performances and their occasions is extremely illuminating, but it illuminates not least of all
the Janus-face of a Newer Historicism, whose attentiveness to the conditions of first performances is
accompanied by a negligence with respect to the status of the textual evidence—often with the crassest
misunderstanding of their actual words. The fact that the postulated performance of Hamlet on
Christmas of 1603 would have been “one of the great moments in Western theater, a true coup de
theatre” (Id., at 32) does not really prove that it took place; it instead proves the interest of a reading
that literally bypasses the entire text, which in turn is historically surpassed in the reading imagined.
Kernan proposes interestingly that the text could only have come into its own in a constellation, like the
one of 1603. The self-thematization of the “theater within a theater” would have come to the greatest
conceivable historical effect in a confrontation of King Claudius with a real King (instead of the real
Queen Elizabeth): “but what did James, watching from the other side of the stage, see in Hamlet?”
Kernan asks, rightly at a loss as to the result of his experiment with which he seems to intend to complete
Hamlet’s experiment. The continuation is useful, if only in the negative: to the extent, namely, that
James would have seen as much (that is, as little) as Claudius saw, and it is precisely this little—no the-
atrical coup, but historical irony—which may illuminate Claudius’ reaction in retrospect.

50. Kernan’s book is a rather simplistic product of this trend, which culminates in his interpretation of
Macbeth. Kernan has no aversion to declaring Shakespeare to be entirely dependent upon the aims of his
patron: “he differed little from his fellow artists in his basic patronage work” (Id., at 79). In Hamlet,
Shakespeare is said to have come so close to the Stuarts, that James would have felt himself truly under-
stood by the play (though I have no idea how). Carl Schmitt’s essay, Hamlet oder Hekuba: Der Einbruch
der Zeit in das Spiel (Düsseldorf: Diederichs, 1956/ Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1985), had propagated an
influential variant of this thesis. He essentially wrote an extension of Dover Wilson’s commentary,
in order to take the latter’s secret preference for Essex (as a model for Hamlet) as a pretext for seeing
Hamlet implied within James’ preparation for the takeover of power and for finding the drama of Mary
Stuart encrypted in Hamlet. The “Intrusion of Time” (Schmitt’s title) cannot be had so easily. Heiner
Müller, in a Shakespeare-lecture from 1988 (Shakespeare Factory 2, Berlin: Wagenbach, 1994), states
laconically: “The intrusion of time within the play is what constitutes myth” (Id., at 229). Although it
is easy to see why Schmitt would like to be able to pin down a premonition of “political theology” in
Hamlet, James would in this view rather appear as its belated coda. This is confirmed by Adriana
Cavarero, Corpo in figura: Filosofia e politica della corporeita (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1995), who makes free
use of Schmitt and Kantorowicz in order to show the gender-political symptomatics of the role of
Ophelia in the figure of the “grotesque” body. But that is not enough, since Elizabeth provided the pre-
cise counter-image to a “body natural” distorted by “gender anxiety.” It would be worth while to show
that Ophelia, a failed Elizabeth before her assumption of the throne (that is, Elizabeth beneath her
brother Edward, if Polonius and Laertes had succeeded), was fully aware of this.

51. See Shakespeare, supra note 5 at IV.ii.27–9.