

several father figures rather than a single father: the dead (idealized) old Hamlet, a martial warrior; the living, despised Claudius, who is King (and Gertrude's lover) in Hamlet's stead; and Polonius, the father as "wretched, rash, intruding fool," who can be killed by accident or mistake ("Is it the King?" Hamlet asks his mother, having stabbed the hidden intruder behind the arras). As we will continue to see, this technique of "splitting," producing several versions of a character type split into component aspects, is one of the most effective devices of *Hamlet*, and will culminate in Hamlet's dying recognition that all his rivals and friends (Horatio, Laertes, Fortinbras, the First Player) are in some ways aspects of himself.

We have noticed that the play is built on the comparison and contrast of various kinds of illusion: the apparently real illusion of the Ghost, verified by the evidence of Hamlet's eyes and ears, and by the apparent truth of his report; the patently false illusion that is the common language of the Claudius court, ambition and lust hypocritically pretending to be sympathy and mourning; and the deliberately fictive illusion of the players, the part of the play that is about its own materials, acting and playing. As he does so often, the First Clown, the gravedigger, speaks (like all wise fools in Shakespeare) more truly than he knows, when he ties together the several meanings of the word "act." "[A]n act hath three branches," he says, "it is to act, to do, to perform" (5.1.11-12). What is the difference between doing and performing? Why can Hamlet in the early scenes, before his sea voyage to England, "perform"—dramatize—but not "do"—not murder and revenge? Why, instead of running his sword through Claudius in act 1, does he choose instead to follow Polonius's procedure, and "by indirections find directions out"? Why does he arrange the elaborate stragem of *The Mousetrap* to terrify the King, and fright him, as he says, with false fire?

Hamlet as a play is from the first concerned with playing, and the play offers its spectators not only a series of nested plays, but a series of nested audiences. We watch the sentries watching the Ghost (1.1; 1.4). We watch Claudius and Polonius, the fathers, hidden behind a tapestry curtain, watching Ophelia "loosed" to Hamlet in the lobby (3.1). We watch Polonius, again concealed behind a tapestry, watching Hamlet talking to his mother in her closet (3.4). In the *Mousetrap* scene (3.2), we watch Hamlet watching Claudius watch the Player King and Player Queen. The audience of *Hamlet* never knows, securely, whether it is actor, spectator, or eavedropper. Thus, for example, Claudius's opening speech to his court seems straightforward enough, but it soon becomes clear that he is acting a part, the part of a bereaved brother and loving father. He is, in fact, himself a Player King, a man who is King in fiction, and by usurpation. The King is a thing of nothing, as Hamlet will say, under the guise of his own assumed madness, a "play" of its own. And likewise Gertrude is a Player Queen, hiding from the guilty knowledge she may suspect but prefers not to admit, even to herself. If we are not sure of these deceptions within deceptions,

we have the voice of Hamlet in the first court scene to remind the audience that there is an "outside" to such complicit fictions. "Seems, madam? . . . I know not 'seems.'"

In the same way, the scene in the Queen's closet is on one level a moment of agonized truth-telling between mother and son. Yet Hamlet's method is deliberately theatrical, holding up a pair of portraits, and demanding, "Look here upon this picture, and on this, / The counterfeit presentment of two brothers" (3.4.52-53). The "pictures" are probably miniatures, lockets worn as keepsakes. In productions Hamlet often wears his father's portrait on a chain about his neck, while Gertrude wears that of her new husband, Claudius. Hamlet's violent yoking of the two together will thus juxtapose not only the images of the two brothers, but also the heads of Hamlet and Gertrude. Even more startling, of course, is the fate of the other spectator beside ourselves, the hapless Polonius, feeling safely protected behind the arras that conceals him, until the sword of Hamlet runs him through. Polonius thinks he is a spectator. By the time he becomes an actor, he has become a corpse. The confrontation with reality in *Hamlet* often takes this tragic form, and knowledge becomes, almost instantaneously, knowledge of death.

If we look closely we will see that the entire play is structured as a series of scenes each of which is a play-within-the-play. It is no accident that a recognition of the transforming power of fiction and illusion will help Hamlet to objectify his feelings about life, that "fiction" will help him to discover "fact." He is able to move in the course of the play from a melancholy passivity and contemplation, rather like Orsino's in *Twelfth Night*, to something more like action, by attaining a sense of crucial detachment that allows him to think, do, and plan, as well as feel. He is able to move from the soliloquies, which dominate the first four acts—and which are rightly reckoned among the humanistic beauties of the play—to the active verbs of the final act, which contains no soliloquy, perhaps because there is no longer any need for one. The players and the plays function as a therapeutic displacement for Hamlet, providing spaces in which he can work out his own problems. One more citation from Freud, this time not focused on Shakespeare or on Hamlet but on the general case of memory, may help to make this structural point clear: "[H]e cannot escape from this compulsion to repeat; and in the end we understand that this is his way of remembering."¹⁶

The characteristic Shakespearean triple pattern (court-country-court) always includes a return from the enchanted place, whether that place is called a green world, a second world, a place of "antistructure" or of carnival. The middle place is often identified with imagination, art, wonder, and dream (if the play is a comedy or romance), or with wilderness, danger, and madness (if the play is a tragedy). In almost all cases it brings with it an element of disguise and of (temporary) social leveling. There is always a return from this middle place, at least for most of the characters in the play; but those who

return often return transformed. People do not come out of the Forest of Arden, or the Athenian wood, or the "heath" in *King Lear* or *Macbeth* (or the Egypt of *Antony and Cleopatra*) the same as they went in. *Hamlet*, too, contains a structure of journey and return. In fact, it contains two such structures, one before the other. The first is an existential journey into the alternative world of the players, while the second is a literal journey to England (where "the men are as mad as he" [5.1.142-143]).

The scene with the players is prefaced, yet again, by a fragment of a play, this time not a dumb show but a rehearsal in progress, as Polonius instructs Reynaldo how best to spy on Laertes. "Take you, as 'twere, some distant knowledge of him, / As thus: 'I know his father and his friends, / And in part him'" (2.1.13-15). Polonius is both playwright and director, though he occasionally forgets his own lines: "[W]hat was I about to say? By the mass, I was about to say something" (2.1.50-51). The whole scene is yet another evidence of the constant and deceitful playacting in Denmark. Polonius's confidence in his son, loudly voiced to his face, is now exposed as a sham. The father will send a spy to check on his son's behavior. It is this scene that is balanced, with superb effect, by the first news of Hamlet's antic disposition, announced to us through the familiar Shakespearean device of the "unscene," a vivid event that takes place offstage and is reported—in this case by the guileless Ophelia:

Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle,
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other . . .

2.1.79-82

Ophelia is a naïve and completely believable witness who brings this offstage scene to vivid life. She is one of the few Shakespearean women who can never break away from the sway of a parent. In her innocent account of Hamlet's appearance in her room we have a vision, not so much of one man's madness as of the madness of the world, the madness of the human condition. In contrast to Polonius's insinuating script, which must be memorized, and his tedious, far from brief, "words, words, words" ("More matter with less art," the exasperated Queen will implore him [2.2.97]), Ophelia's description of the antic Hamlet seems more like another dumb show, a silent apparition:

He took me by the wrist and held me hard,
Then goes he to the length of all his arm,
And with his other hand thus o'er his brow
He falls to such perusal of my face
As a would draw it. Long stayed he so.
At last, a little shaking of mine arm,

And thrice his head thus waving up and down,
 He raised a sigh so piteous and profound
 As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
 And end his being. That done, he lets me go,
 And, with his head over his shoulder turned,
 He seemed to find his way without his eyes,
 For out o' doors he went without their help,
 And to the last bended their light on me.

2.1.88-101

In its way this is very like the first mysterious appearance of the Ghost: pale, silent, beckoning, waving his arms, disappearing into darkness. Hamlet has in effect *become* a ghost. And Ophelia's report of his demeanor is enough of an "inexplicable dumb show" to generate misinterpretations. "This is the very ecstasy of love," concludes Polonius. Stereotypical lovers, at least in literature, did indeed sometimes present themselves in this kind of disarray—Rosalind describes such a lover in very similar terms in *As You Like It*—and Claudius is of course eager to agree with this diagnosis. But Gertrude has other suspicions: "I doubt it is no other but the main— / His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage" (2.2.56-57).

Everyone is an actor and a director. Polonius proudly acknowledges that he "played once i'th' university" (3.2.89-90). "I did enact Julius Caesar," he says. "I was killed i'th' capitol" (3.2.93). This is probably Shakespeare's joke about his company, for *Julius Caesar* was written and staged in the same years as *Hamlet*, and the actor who played Polonius could well have been seen by the same audience on another afternoon in the role of Caesar. But there is dramatic irony as well as an in-joke here, for ultimately Polonius will suffer a bathetic version of Caesar's death by stabbing. Polonius casts Hamlet in two of his own plays, the "loosing" of Ophelia in the lobby in act 3, scene 1 (watched, as we have noted, by Claudius and Polonius), and the episode in Gertrude's closet in act 3, scene 4, in which again he positions himself as a hidden spectator. Notice that Shakespeare places these two corrupt and cynical "plays" on either side of Hamlet's *Mousetrap* in act 3, scene 2.

The victim of social actors, Hamlet becomes one. He sees that the world around him is peopled by pretenders, that only those who know they are actors are "real." It is for that reason extremely appropriate for the players to appear, as if on cue. They have been conjured out of Hamlet's own imagination. The syllogism works something like this: Hamlet realizes that he is an actor, and that everyone in Elsinore is playing a role; the players arrive at the court and are announced. And they will disappear the same way, when their job is done. With the arrival of the players, the function of illusion in the play begins to shift. Hamlet begins to use it, and to use the players and their repertoire, to investigate his own society—as well as himself.

Before coming to the great play scene, however, it will be helpful, I think, to say a word about the play, or fragment of a play, that precedes *The Mousetrap*, because that older play is very much part of Hamlet's quest for answers. In act 2, scene 2, he asks the First Player to recite a speech from "Aeneas' tale to Dido," a speech that had apparently impressed him so much that he is able to recite much of it from memory. (Memory, and verbal memorization, are among the knowledge arts of the play, alongside reading and "writing fair," like a secretary or a scribe.) The play is about the fall of Troy, long thought by the English to be the source of their own civilization (one name for London was New Troy, or "Troynovant"). Aeneas, taking refuge with Dido in Carthage after fleeing the burning city, tells her the story of its fall. In *Hamlet* Troy seems very like the way Denmark is said to have been during the reign of old Hamlet—a golden age, brave, heroic, and warlike. "[R]everend Priam," the old Trojan king, seems in some ways to resemble an idealized old Hamlet, but on the other hand the desperate and grieving Hecuba, Priam's wife, running barefoot up and down, is sharply contrasted to Gertrude, who married again so quickly after her husband's death that "[t]he funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (1.2.179–180). Pyrrhus, an avenger dressed in black ("he whose sable arms, / Black as his purpose . . ." [2.2.432–433]), first pauses with his sword in the air, and then acts, avenging the death of his father. In short, Troy emerges from this speech, one Hamlet so fondly remembers, as a picture of what might have been, what should have been, an epic ideal. Like Hamlet's parting glance at Ophelia, looking over his shoulder, bending his eyes on her—and like the message from the Ghost, "List, Hamlet, list, O list!"—this is for Hamlet a look backward, at a different kind of world, a lost world. Here at the play's midpoint it is his last glance backward, and it accomplishes something crucial for both the character and the play. Through the players, though fiction, he finds not only emotion—a way of engaging and accessing his own suppressed and unarticulated feelings—but also what he so badly needs and longs for: action. He is ready to catch the conscience of the King—in a play. "Action" and "passion" are two sides of the same coin, here not so much opposites as counterparts of each other.

The play Hamlet chooses to confront and entrap Claudius is very different from the Pyrrhus play, "Aeneas' tale to Dido." The Pyrrhus speech came from a play with familiar epic values—Polonius, not surprisingly, found it classical and boring, not relevant to anything he knew or cared about. But *The Mousetrap*, or, to give it its other name, "The Murder of Gonzago," is a thriller, a modern (which is to say, a Renaissance) melodrama, a play of political intrigue. "The story is extant," says Hamlet, "and writ in choice Italian" (3.2.240). Modern, current (or "extant"), and Italian—all harbingers of audience titillation. Italy, the home of Machiavelli, was often presented in English Renaissance drama as the site of scurrilous intrigue and scandal. A playwright had only to set his play there, as Ben Jonson would do with *Volpone* or John Webster with *The Duchess*

of *Malfi*, he had only to give his characters Italian names, and it would be quite clear to the audience that they were being vouchsafed a glimpse into a world of decadence, sin, and forbidden pleasures—as well as of violence, betrayal, and murder.

In the course of the *Mousetrap* play the spectators first witness a dumb show; then hear a conversation, in rhymed couplets, between Player King and Player Queen; and finally see the entrance of the murderer. Throughout, Hamlet acts as interpreter—a role he will play throughout the larger drama, using his soliloquies and asides as a way of commenting to the offstage audience, just as his interpolations during *The Mousetrap* enlighten and disturb the onstage court. “You are as good as a chorus, my lord” (3.2.224), Ophelia will observe, with characteristic artlessness. Hamlet’s glosses are brief and to the point. “This is one Lucianus, nephew to the King,” he will explain as the murderer makes his appearance (3.2.223). Why “nephew” and not, as in the real case of Claudius and old Hamlet, “brother”? This is an explanation with an added menace—a glance backward that is also a glance forward. For it is Hamlet himself who is “nephew” to King Claudius. The past murder and the present threat are combined: Claudius has killed Hamlet’s father; the “nephew” quietly announces that he will avenge that murder with another. And then “[t]he King rises,” calling an end to the performance, yet another broken play, perhaps the most famous and most effectively truncated play-within-the-play in all of Shakespeare, structurally akin to “Pyramus and Thisbe” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the pageant of the “Nine Worthies” in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, and to Prospero’s masque in *The Tempest*.

But which play has the audience of *Hamlet* been watching? As always, our consciousness is closely knit with Hamlet’s, and Hamlet, clearly, has been watching not the stage but the King. The suspense for him is in what Claudius will or will not reveal, not in the outcome of “The Murder of Gonzago”—an outcome he already knows and that, indeed, he may in part have written in those elusive, added “dozen or sixteen lines.” Once again Claudius and Gertrude are the Player King and the Player Queen. We have been deceived by our eyes again. The play was in the audience. Claudius and Gertrude are the “guilty creatures sitting at a play” of Hamlet’s soliloquy (2.2.566), but they are also the bad actors he criticizes in his advice to the players: “O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, . . . that neither having the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor no man . . .” (3.2.25–29). The King and Queen are audience, but they are also players, players now caught in Hamlet’s play, caught in *his* mousetrap. Art now acts on life. The play catches the king. What seems to be a mere fiction or fabrication reveals a key truth.

From this moment, from the play’s principal turning point (3.2), Hamlet will himself begin to act, not only in the gravedigger’s sense of “perform,” but also in his sense of “do.” When he next appears, he will act, quickly and without remorse, in his mother’s closet, stabbing behind the arras at the intruder he is sure is Claudius, killing Polonius instead: