CHAPTER TEN

Hamlet:
Probing a Restless Self

IT IS APPROPRIATE that Hamlet, the play that poses so many questions, begins with one, Bernardo’s challenge to Francisco: “Who is there?” This is the first of the many identity questions, and it is one that originates in a confusion, for not the sentry at guard, Francisco, but the relieving officer, Bernardo, asks for the watchword; he is immediately corrected by Francisco: “Nay, answer me.” A dozen lines later, the confusion repeats itself when the relieved Francisco, rather than Bernardo, challenges the newcomers, Horatio and Marcellus: “Who is there?”

The slight irregularities with which the play opens are symptomatic of the sinister threat to order in Denmark that gradually reveals itself in other questions of identity. The appearance of the ghost on the dark platform of Elsinore throws an ominous shadow over the beginning action. This ghost, being as like to the dead King Hamlet, Horatio says to Marcellus, “as thou art to thyself,” yet defies Horatio’s attempt at identification:

What art thou that usurp’st this time of night
Together with that fair and warlike form
In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march?

(I.ii.46-49)

Apprehensions about the ghost’s identity and purpose carry over from the first scene to the second, from the dark platform to the lighted room of state, where the new king, Claudius, evokes the memory of “Hamlet, our dear brother’s death” with a “dropping eye,” and his marriage to his brother’s wife with an “auspicious” one. Claudius appears suave, efficient, and benevolent. The marriage
occurred with the approval of the counselors, but Shakespeare’s audience, like Hamlet, would have considered it incestuous. There appears now, almost as disturbing as the ghost, the dark figure of the prince in all the warmth, color, and light. When Claudius, having attended to urgent external and domestic problems, turns to him in apparently fatherly concern, “But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son—,” the uncomfortable young man sets himself apart from the kindness and complacency around him in a riddling aside: “A little more than kin, and less than kind.” He rejects the identity Claudius wishes to impose on him; he declines to be related to his “uncle-father.” When his mother asks him to cast his mourning garments off because, as she innocently says, why should what is common seem so particular to him, Hamlet takes offense. He refuses to be identified with his garments or, indeed, with any observances of grief that merely seem and, by implication, with all that is common and merely seeming in Denmark. He is nauseated by the identities that the others assume and by that which they wish to thrust on him, and he thinks of suicide. In his first soliloquy, he betrays a desire to leave the unweeded garden of a world possessed by things rank and gross in nature. He is prevented only by the religious injunction against self-slaughter.

The subject of identity arises in a different key in the following scene, as in a narrower room the members of the family of Polonius lecture each other on their proper roles in family, society, and state. At the brink of his departure for France, Laertes warns Ophelia not to show favor to Hamlet: the prince’s identity as designated heir to the throne will put him out of Ophelia’s reach. Ophelia offers some reciprocal advice on her brother’s virtuous conduct in France. Polonius then enters and dispenses to his son a string of maxims on morals and manners, capped with the admonishment to be true to himself. Such has not been the case with Ophelia, the loquacious counselor argues as he is left alone with her: “You do not understand yourself so clearly/As it behoves my daughter and your honour” (I.iii.96–97). Ophelia must give up Hamlet and isolate him further.

Hamlet’s crisis of identity reaches its first climax when he confronts the ghost. Its relationship to him is even more problematic than that of Claudius; but whether or not it is “a spirit of health or goblin damn’d” he will call it king, father, and royal Dane. Hamlet’s disposition is horribly shaken; his already restless mind is set into
violent turbulence. He accepts the challenge with the same overheated reaching for the ultimate with which he earlier protested his devotion to truth above appearances. He will stir in this revenge, but, strangely, he will do so by putting on an antic disposition. Whatever Shakespeare may have thought was the reason for Hamlet's psychological self-disguise, and even if he had no particular reason at all, the device of playing the madman gives Hamlet's restless mind something to do. He can put this antic disposition on and off like a mask, play fast and loose with his enemies, and take time to explore his own identity and that of the others.

Hamlet's actions and behavior proceed from a highly agitated and complex state of mind, which, from the beginning of the play, makes him uncertain about his place in the world. His melancholy, his bitterness and disillusionment, his feigned madness and real nervous shock give additional impulses to his churning intellect that cannot identify itself totally with anything—not with the state of Denmark, not with the world, not with his revenge, not with his grief. Hamlet is thus driven not only to avenge his father, but also to explore the basis on which all actions, good and evil, rest. He becomes concerned with self-knowledge.¹

That Hamlet considers self-knowledge an ultimate goal, we have his own words. The remark comes very late in the play, in the final scene when Osric invites the prince to the duel with Laertes (V.ii. 136 ff.).² The foppish courtier professes to give Hamlet a fair warning: "You are not ignorant of what excellence Laertes is—." Hamlet cuts him short: "I dare not confess that, lest I should compare with him in excellence; but to know a man well were to know himself." The remark is somewhat cryptic, and thus Dr. Johnson tried to straighten out its syntax and meaning. Hamlet, Dr. Johnson said, means "I dare not pretend to know Laertes lest I should pretend to an equality; but no man may completely know another but by knowing himself, which is the utmost of human wisdom."

But this paraphrase is not quite correct, for it ignores the inversion that gives the statement a more conditional turn: what Hamlet really says is that "to know Laertes were to pretend to know that I am as excellent as he; but I could do so only if it were possible to know myself." It will be said, of course, that this statement is part of Hamlet's game of puncturing Osric's turgid rhetoric, and it is; yet the phrasing of the interchange between Osric and Hamlet points to its having a philosophical significance worth recovering for the
thoughtful reader of the play. The key words of Osric's invitation that excite Hamlet's rejoinder are "ignorant" and "excellence." They were common in Renaissance moral tracts dealing with self-knowledge; Pierre de la Primaudaye, for instance, began the first chapter of his *French Academy* by marveling at the "excellence of man" and by warning that "ignorance of ourselves [is] the cause of much evil." Reacting as he does to Osric, Hamlet shows his sensitivity to the idiom of self-knowledge and proves himself aware of the importance and difficulty of the subject.

Hamlet's struggle for self-knowledge is a subject of utmost importance in this play, which, unlike any other of Shakespeare's, forces us to approach it through the hero's baffling and baffled consciousness. The pragmatic test of theater and of criticism proves that in *Hamlet* it is not, as in Aristotle's *Poetics*, plot before character but character before plot. And the greatness of the play does not derive from having as its hero a character most appropriate for the action, but rather one most inappropriate. *Hamlet*, the play, exhibits a mannerist tension between its form, that of a revenge tragedy, and its content, that of a drama of ideas. And Hamlet, the hero, suffers stresses and conflicts between one part of his nature and another, between himself and his task, between the real and the ideal. He is a much more deeply divided man than Brutus; his internal tensions are heightened beyond the normal scale. Eliot's observation that Hamlet is dominated by an emotion that is in the final analysis inexpressible was well made; Hamlet's passion is in excess of the facts as they appear. But it does not follow, therefore, that the play is a failure; rather, the very incongruity between the facts and Hamlet's emotions is one of the reasons for its success. If Aristotle will forgive me, I shall say that one reason for the appeal of *Hamlet* is that through the actions and reactions of its unique hero it purges us of the guilt feelings we have about our own maladjustments to this inadequate world by magnifying them.

In no play of Shakespeare's have the hero's soliloquies greater importance for getting a feeling of its quality; yet from the point of view of action, they are almost negligible, and the plot can be summarized with very little reference to them. Hamlet's soliloquies, which have been the focus of most critical interpretations of the play, are fascinating and perplexing exercises in self-analysis. Without them, *Hamlet*, the play, would not rise as far above Elizabethan revenge tragedies as it does. Without them, Hamlet, the hero, would
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look more like certain other characters and types we know from the stage. The soliloquies are surely a major reason why descriptions of him as an average young man fail to satisfy. No mere “young man's unreasonable disgust when he discovers that elders are as strongly sexed as himself” ⁸ accounts for the almost late-Tolstoyan sex nausea of Hamlet's first soliloquy, “O, that this too too solid flesh would melt.” And surely, the self-flagellation of the second soliloquy, “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!” goes beyond the customary self-reproaches of a typical avenger.⁹ Hamlet's most famous soliloquy, the third, which has been thought to show that he is a descendant of the medieval Everyman, ⁷ does not deal merely with the religious question of death and immortality, to be and not to be, but also with the existential question, to act or not to act and thus to be or not to be, and with the speculative question on the state of the soul after death. Hamlet's fourth and short soliloquy “'Tis now the very witching time of night” betrays no Christian conscience and makes him outwardly appear a typical bloodthirsty avenger; but the action it introduces is not the killing of the king, but Hamlet's moral lectures to his mother. The fifth soliloquy, “How all occasions do inform against me,” is hard to reconcile with any of the three mentioned abstractions—the average young man, the Everyman, and the avenger—and to designate him on its basis as a typical Elizabethan nobleman contradicts his hatred of code and court.

Hamlet is extraordinary, and he possesses an extraordinary mind. The quality and fascination of the play lie to a large degree in his strange and complex mental states that take in and simultaneously deny typical forms of experience. Whatever one may say about Hamlet, he is not static; restlessness is a major ingredient of his searching and suffering spirit.

Since the romantics at least, critics of very different persuasions have found Hamlet agitated by a spirit of this kind even though they have diagnosed his problem as due to divergent underlying causes. Although the descriptions themselves are often astute, the alleged causes are more indicative of cultural and critical climates than of the roots of Hamlet's behavior. We realize now that the romanticists' aversion to dramatic action, which made them incapable of writing actable plays, also distorted their view of both Hamlet the play and Hamlet the man. Coleridge's image—a kind of self-image of the prince's enormous intellectual activity, accompanied by a proportionate aversion to real action—is irreconcilable with the Hamlet of
the stage, who is constantly in motion, most of the time in actions that have at least something to do with his revenge or with his plan to baffle and evade the king. But although the romanticists were unduly concerned with Hamlet's inaction, they did recognize his intellectual restlessness. Even though Goethe put the emphasis on Hamlet's shrinking from his task, he observed how he winds, turns, torments himself, advances and recoils. Although Schlegel thought Hamlet's power of action crippled, he noted his calculating consideration, which exhausts all the relations and possible consequences of the deed. Hazlitt, who believed Hamlet's capacity to act was eaten up by thought, yet granted him high enthusiasm and quick sensibilities.

The diagnosis of Hamlet's problem as melancholy—whether in a general sense or in that of the Elizabethan humor disease—has similarly produced engaging descriptions of a Hamlet that is unstable, emotionally unhinged, gyrating between fits of energy and spells of lassitude. Nobody has given a finer account of a Hamlet whose mind totters and reels under the blows to his existence than A. C. Bradley. And even attempts to formulate Hamlet into a sterile prototype of a malcontent avenger have produced astute descriptions of the scintillating and contradictory nature that make him, as E. E. Stoll has it, "both vindictive and high-minded, active and reflective, ironic and pathetic, merry and melancholy, deceitful and decorous, insolent and courteous, cruel and tender, both suspicious and crafty and also (as Claudius himself has noted) 'most generous and free from all contriving.' "

Hamlet's mind is in restless agitation; he is propelled by a turbulent spirit, one we feel to be very much akin to our own. But this conception of the spirit was by no means unknown to the Renaissance. The particular form it took in Hamlet owed, I believe, very much to a prevailing climate of mannerism and skepticism. The Renaissance skeptics described man as moved and distracted by a violently active spirit that is both his glory and his perdition. Pierre Charron, Montaigne's disciple, said that there was nothing so great in man as his spirit. Yet this precious gift was also "both to itself and to another a dangerous instrument, a ferret to be feared, a little trouble-feast, a tedious and importune parasite, and which, as a juggler and player fast and loose, under the shadow of some gentle motion, subtle and smiling forgeth, inventeth, and causeth all the mischiefs of this world; and the truth is, without it, there are
none." 11 "Irresolution on the one part and afterwards inconstancy and instability," said Charron elsewhere, "are the most common and apparent vices in the nature of man." 12 And Montaigne: "What we even now purposed, we alter by and by and presently return to our former bias; all is but changing, motion, and inconstancy." 13 The player-king in *Hamlet* puts it similarly:

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Purpose is but the slave to memory,
Of violent birth, but poor validity;
What to ourselves in passion we propose,
The passion ending, doth the purpose lose.
The violence of either grief or joy
Their own enactures with themselves destroy.
Where joy most revels grief doth most lament;
Grief joys, joy grieves, on slender accident.
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(III.ii.183-94)

It is tempting to think that these lines belong to the mysterious "some dozen or sixteen" of his own composition Hamlet instructs the actors to insert in the performance of the "Mousetrap." But whether they do or not, they characterize not only Gertrude's behavior, as they are intended to do, but also, and more appropriately, Hamlet's. And the view of man expressed in them is that of the skeptics.

The confident German critic who claimed that Hamlet was Montaigne had, I believe, an inkling of the truth. Not that the prince is an impersonator of the skeptic philosopher; rather, he is the kind of man Montaigne described himself as being. Montaigne, as subjective as he seems, really displays himself as the true, not idealized, specimen of general man. Like Montaigne's self-portrait, Hamlet is both extraordinary and yet has most of the features the skeptics considered characteristic of all men. Self-contradictions, hesitations, and changes of opinion are among the most notable features of Montaigne's portrait, as they are of Hamlet's character. "If I speak diversely of myself," said Montaigne, "it is because I look diversely upon myself." 14 A man of the kind portrayed by the French essayist is driven to examine all things; he possesses a restless spirit and is often possessed by it. Thus again and again, he is derailed from his present purpose, particularly if he is a man of keen intellect. As Charron explained,
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It is easy to see how rash and dangerous the spirit of man is, especially if it be quick and vigorous. . . . it will undertake to examine all things, to judge the greatest part of things plausibly received in this world to be ridiculous and absurd, and, finding for all an appearance of reason, will defend itself against all, whereby it is to be feared that it wandereth out of the way and loseth itself.}

Hamlet is endowed with a vigorous and restless spirit that drives him to exertions that change their purpose and direction. His thoughts and actions, far-reaching as they are, often become peripheral or else lose all relation to the task of revenge.

It is not that Hamlet loses himself in passion. It is rather that, unlike other tragic heroes, such as Richard II and Othello, he cannot lose himself in passion, or at least not in the kind of passion that escapes the control of reason. Hamlet's passion and reason cannot be easily distinguished; both drive him on to be the speculative, analytic, restless, and tortured figure he is. The conflict between reason and passion, as D. G. James has well said, is not joined in him. Hamlet speaks of the excitements of his reason and his blood that drive him to revenge (IV.iv.58). His adoption of the antic disposition, his self-comparisons with the actors and with Fortinbras, even his staging of the mousetrap, all serve at least in part the purpose of putting himself in the right—that is to say, passionate—frame of mind for his revenge. But these devices succeed in this purpose only temporarily, if they succeed at all. His meddling intellect interferes; he remains too conscious of himself, too much aware of the psychic resources and the immediate stimuli from which his efforts come, and he loses all spontaneity. He overshoots the mark or falls short of it. His first soliloquy is limitless in its metaphysical despair, and the queen is not altogether wrong when she claims that its occasion, the death of a father, is "common." In comparing himself with the actors and with Fortinbras, he thinks his passion too weak, although, in the first case, we find it too strong, even if not properly focused, and, in the second, too improperly related to the stimulant, Fortinbras's territorial ambition. Hamlet's whole design of producing passion intellectually is unworkable: at best, it produces pyrotechnical discharges; but these never give Hamlet relief from his tensions.

In all this self-conscious fretting about technique, there appears to be a concern that is not only Hamlet's but also Shakespeare's. Hamlet suffers and studies passion, and so does Shakespeare through him. No other Shakespearean character examines so closely the
cause, nature, and expression of emotions, obeying in this and other respects the demands of the nosce teipsum writers—but with a vengeance! It is significant that the word “passion” occurs more often in Hamlet (eleven times) than in any of the other tragedies, even Othello (eight occurrences), in which a gigantic passion is dramatized but not analyzed. Even more significant than the quantity of references to passion are the shifting connotations of the word. Hamlet gives “passion” two meanings quite new in the time, that of a sudden, violent emotion and that of the expression of this emotion in speech. In these senses, the word becomes equivalent to “ecstasy,” as it frequently does in the later, baroque tragedies. Hamlet, however, who can give “passion” this meaning, finds it difficult to supply the substance. Notably, “ecstasy” also occurs more often (five times) in Hamlet than elsewhere. This too was a word in the process of intensifying its meaning; in the earlier plays it denotes a fairly light transport of emotion, whereas from Hamlet on, it is a serious, violent derangement of the spirit, akin to madness, as when Ophelia finds the form and feature of Hamlet’s youth “blasted with ecstasy” (III.i.160). The word is used on one of the two occasions in which Hamlet’s passion rises most vehemently, during his reproaches of his mother, when he protests that he is not afflicted by “ecstasy” in the sense of madness (III.iv.139). During his second most passionate explosion, in the grief contest with Laertes at Ophelia’s grave, the word as such is not mentioned, but the prince seems to define the passion he evinces at this time as “ecstasy” when he later explains to Horatio that he feels sorry that “to Laertes I forgot myself; ... the bravery of his grief did put me / Into a tow’ring passion” (V.ii.76 ff.). In Cooper’s Thesaurus, ecstatic is translated as “an astonying, a damp, a trance, when one forgettest himself.”

But even on this occasion Hamlet does not really forget himself in an uninhibited and spontaneous outbreak. The cause of his passion is curious; it is certainly not the death of the unfortunate Ophelia. Rather, Hamlet is annoyed with Laertes’s hysterical ranting that piles Pelion on Ossa. It is almost as if he were hurt that the young man can achieve such a volume of passion—Hamlet’s vanity about his acting ability seems involved. At any rate, he sees in Laertes’s Herculean outbreak a histrionic effort that he himself must overtop—this surely is implied in the seemingly cryptic words with which he abandons his own effort: “Let Hercules himself do what he may,
The cat will mew, and dog will have his day" (V.i.285–86). Hamlet’s attempt to rival Hercules, the Renaissance model for hyperbolic passion, leaves him in the end with a feeling of absurdity. He uses an incident that has nothing to do with his revenge action in order to test his capacity for passion. His subsequent explanation to Horatio and his apology to Laertes show that he worries as much about his emotional reactions to the situations as he does about the situations themselves.

Whenever Hamlet concerns himself specifically with self-knowledge, his probing, restless mind involves itself as much with the technique of the process as with the goal. No Shakespearean hero uses more constantly the methods traditionally thought helpful for the attainment of self-knowledge. When he says to Osric "to know a man well were to know himself," he shows that he knows the most important of these methods, that of comparing oneself with others. Cicero, the philosophical mentor of the humanists, recommended in De Officiis (I.114, 146) that the virtuous man, who wishes to fulfill his duty to man and God, closely observe other men, and the Renaissance nosce teipsum literature propagated the idea that one’s fellow man is the glass into which one must look in order to see oneself.18

Hamlet uses this method to madness: he lets no opportunity go by to measure himself by others. When, to Osric, he modestly compares his fencing skill with that of Laertes, he does so in the presence of Horatio, who is not only his confidant but also his avowed mirror and model. In comparing himself with Horatio, Hamlet follows the idea—dating back to Aristotle’s Magna Moralia (II.15, 1213a)—that, in order to know himself, a person should study a friend whom he admires. Hamlet sees in Horatio the balanced man whose blood and judgment are well commingled; Horatio is Hamlet’s pattern of perfection. He is “as just a man / As e’er my conversation cop’d withal” (III.ii.52–53). It is for Hamlet surely as significant that Horatio is a man as it is that he is just. The word man is for Hamlet a title of honor that he bestows sparingly; besides his friend, only his father qualifies: “‘He was a man, take him for all in all” (I.ii.187). A man is for Hamlet more than a father and a king. In comparing himself with Horatio and with his father, Hamlet is put in mind of general manhood.

But in spite of Hamlet’s glowing tribute to the concept of ideal humanity in Horatio and in his father, these two representatives of the ideal remain strangely pale and indistinct. A good ghost, as
Shakespeare, but not some of his fellow dramatists, knew, must be elusive and mysterious, and the old king is a true specter of this kind. He is a gigantic hero of the past, walking in armor; he is an emissary from some outer region, come to tell a horrible story and incite his son to revenge; yet, in housegown, he is gently protective of his guilty wife. This is about all one learns of him from his appearances in the play; in Hamlet's affectionate recollection, he is, it is true, much more. His father, says Hamlet, had Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove, the eyes of Mars, and the stature of Mercury (III.iv.55). But this does not bring the man to life. Hamlet's montage of excellences resembles the technique of some mannerist painters admired by Vasari, who copied "the most beautiful objects and afterwards combined the most perfect, whether the hand, head, torso, or leg, and joined them together to make one figure, invested with every beauty in the highest perfection." Hamlet's father is something of a mannerist picture puzzle; the conglomeration of his excellences in his son's description blurs the portrait. Nor does it become more distinct when Hamlet sets himself and Claudius in relationship to it. Claudius, says Hamlet, is "no more like my father / Than I to Hercules" (I.ii.152-53). What exactly does this say about any of the three persons compared?

If, in spite of his high praises, Hamlet does not make his father into a clear and distinct figure, he distorts even more the image of Claudius, the non-man, who is for Hamlet a king of shreds and patches from everything he finds odious and despicable: he is a satyr, a moor, a "bloat king," a cutpurse of the empire, a vice of kings. Murderer and villain that Claudius is, he does not really deserve these epithets.

Perhaps it may be thought natural for Hamlet to brighten his father's image, whom he loves, and to blacken his uncle's, whom he hates, and thus to blur both. But it is certainly strange that there is so little in the play to bear out Hamlet's admiration for his living ideal man, Horatio. It is not in the play but in Hamlet's words that Horatio becomes the man who, in suffering all, suffers nothing and takes fortune's buffets and rewards with equal thanks (III.ii.65 ff.). The Horatio we know is merely the prince's shadow and mirror, a servant who goes no further than to advise his master against inquiring too curiously and to make the futile gesture of attempting to join him in death.

Hamlet, it will be said, aggrandizes Horatio in order to lower
himself. It is indeed true that Hamlet's friendship with the "poor" Horatio ennobles the prince and makes him less an egotist than he would otherwise be. And it will be said that Hamlet sees in Horatio a master over passion and fortune because he feels himself to be their slave. But Hamlet's character does not reveal itself so simply and clearly by his obsessive comparisons with others when we examine these in their context and with reference to his behavior. Hamlet is not exactly passion's slave. It will not do to saddle him with the "vicious mole of nature" of which he speaks to Horatio (I.iv.24) and call it melancholy. Hamlet's censure arises from a specific occasion, the addiction of the Danes to drink; what corruption of individual men by particular faults he has in mind is a puzzle; but it is much more natural to apply the remark to Claudius's grossness and Gertrude's sensuality than to Hamlet. And even if Hamlet thought of himself, the words still would leave the question whether the vicious mole is an "o'ergrowth of some complexion" or a "habit" that "o'erleavens the form of plausible manners." And in the latter case, the possibilities are infinite. It has even been suggested that the vicious mole, the "dram of eale," is the effect of the original sin that affects all men. Surely this is not a very helpful passage for an analysis of Hamlet's character.

And just what is the effect of the ghost's command on Hamlet? Is it really, as Bradley and Miss Campbell thought, that, were it not for his melancholy, Hamlet would have no problems? Hamlet never says so; he only asserts that the task is uncongenial to him: "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!" (I.v.189-90). If Hamlet here accentuates the "I," as is likely, the question arises why he, in particular, feels out of sympathy with the task. What kind of man was he born? It is not sufficient, I think, merely to refer to Ophelia's testimony that the Hamlet before his father's death was an ideal nobleman, that he had "the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword" (III.i.151). Ophelia's characterization is quite unsatisfactory for the Hamlet of the play; it is quite unsatisfactory, that is, if one associates, as is natural and presumably intended, the tongue with the courtier, the sword with the soldier, and the eye with the scholar. If, however, one associates the epithets with their referents in Ophelia's order, the characterization becomes much more appropriate: the Hamlet we know moves through the court with the critical courtier's eye rather than the polite tongue; he measures himself against Fortinbras with a soldier's
tongue rather than with the sword, and he reaches for the life of Claudius with a scholar's sword, searching for the truth even more than for the king's life. I do not mean to say that Ophelia's inversion of epithets is a Freudian slip rather than a rhetorical figure, but I suggest that Shakespeare could hardly have wished his audience to think that the obedient little Ophelia ever looked into the recesses of the heart of her enigmatic lover. Hers is at best a partial truth, that of Hamlet's outside. Can one really imagine him, who in his first speeches characterizes himself as a fanatic of truth and as a man who knows not seeming, to have ever been merely the "glass of fashion and the mould of form"?

The Hamlet of the play is not a glass of fashion but a frustrated seeker for an ideal human mould. He has a passion, a passion much stronger than his grief or his thirst for revenge, to seek for this form in himself and in others and to note its presence or absence. He compares and contrasts himself incessantly, with his father, with Claudius, with Horatio, with Laertes, with Fortinbras, with Polonius, with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with the player-king, with the gravediggers, and with dead Yorick. But wherever Hamlet gives way to this passion, his overactive mind introduces a subjective distortion. In Fortinbras, Hamlet admires the man who "greatly" finds "quarrel in a straw, / When honour's at the stake"—yet Fortinbras's particular quarrel is not even an argument of honor, but merely an expedition to Poland, arranged to take the place of that against Denmark. Fortinbras's bellicose energy hardly demonstrates by contrast Hamlet's lack of divine ambition.

Hamlet similarly misjudges Laertes. He takes a properly cautious attitude toward him as a fencer, but he throws discretion to the winds when he calls him a "noble youth" and never suspects him of being capable of using a poisoned sword. When Hamlet does see a parallel between himself and Laertes, the occasion and the subject are odd. At Ophelia's grave, he cannot stand Laertes's passionate protest of grief, but must outrant him to assume the role of next-of-kin himself: "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane!" In spite of the emphatic self-identification, Hamlet assumes here a role that does not fit. His protest that the love of forty thousand brothers cannot make up the sum of his love contrasts oddly with his earlier cruelty toward Ophelia. And his later explanation to Laertes that it was not Hamlet but Hamlet's madness that cried out at Ophelia's grave appears to be another instance of inappropriate role-playing.
Yet role-playing as such was a recommended procedure in acquiring self-knowledge. In *De Officiis* (I.113), Cicero said that each man, like an actor, should choose the part in life most suitable to himself. This, as we noted earlier, is the doctrine of individual *decorum*, on which the humanists founded their ideas of human individuality. Hamlet, a greater individualist than they, violates this doctrine; rather than choosing the role that suits him best, he tries, as Cicero said one should not do, whether other men’s roles fit him.

Hamlet is by avocation an amateur actor who frequently mistakes the world for the stage. He feels compelled to vie with the actors; he begins to recite the speech about “rugged Pyrrhus” from the play that was “caviary to the general.” One is somewhat puzzled as to why he admires this elaborately wrought speech. It has the vexing quality of making one scan it for parallels to Hamlet’s predicament. Is the hellish Pyrrhus perhaps to evoke the murderous Claudius? Or is he Hamlet’s wishful image of the avenger he himself would like to be? Neither identification seems quite appropriate. The cruel Pyrrhus, the “painted tyrant,” gored with the blood of fathers, mothers, and sons, is wholly unlike the subtle and smooth Claudius. Pyrrhus, it is true, is like Hamlet an avenger for a father killed; but unlike Hamlet, Pyrrhus is the destroyer of hostile Troy, not the would-be reformer of his own state. And Hamlet’s cruelty to Gertrude, unlike that of Pyrrhus to Hecuba, is not meant to go beyond speaking daggers. The actor’s recital of the murder and bloodshed at the fall of Troy—a subject famous as an example of tragic *ēdóς* in the Renaissance—ought to strike a listener with horror and pity rather than, as it does Hamlet, with self-reproach for delay in revenge. And Hamlet’s subsequent soliloquy, which in its nervous and introspective complexities contrasts effectively with the balanced Renaissance turgidity of the actor’s speech, begins, as noted, with Hamlet setting himself into quite a false relationship to the actor. Hamlet’s comparison of the actor’s passionate recital to his own situation is quite irrelevant. Hamlet’s problem is not that he can say nothing. He knows the words and gestures of passion very well. Hamlet’s self-comparisons generally lead to self-laceration and self-humiliation. His keen, restless mind fails to strike the balance, and prevents him from becoming the impartial judge of his own and others’ merits and defects that Cicero said the man of self-knowledge should be. But at least he does not overassess himself as Polonius does. It is ironic that the emphatic demand for proper self-identifica-
tion—that is, in Renaissance terms, for "individual decorum"—should come from this humorous-pathetic conformer to court customs: "To thine own self be true." Hamlet's situation belies the assumption that the man who is true to himself cannot be false to any man. Hamlet must play the role of the avenger in order to be true to himself, and therefore he must hide and dissimulate, be false to almost everybody.

For Hamlet, role-playing does not provide the reassuring acquisition of decorum Cicero demanded it should have. And his failure cannot be merely blamed on improper methods. He tries to be true to himself; but he finds it hard to reconcile this attempt with the more important injunction to preserve general decorum, which, according to humanistic ideas, directed and limited individuality. The man who wishes to be true to himself—so general decorum decreed—must regulate his behavior not by his own nature only; he must also act in his proper character as a man, that is, as a moral being. He must live in awareness of his fundamental difference from the animals. But, for Hamlet, this easy and comforting back-reference to general decorum is problematic. No Shakespearean character tries harder to act according to the precepts of moral philosophy than Hamlet; none seeks so much reference and support in the general condition of a humanity ideally conceived. His admiration for Horatio as a man of balance and virtue conforms to this tendency. And so does his making Fortinbras's Polish expedition a reminder of the duties imposed on man by his privileged place in the universe: "What is a man, / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed?" (IV.iv.33 ff.) This question and Hamlet's answer, that man has a "capability and godlike reason" that must not "fust . . . un-us'd," paraphrase a significant passage from the beginning of Cicero's De Officiis (I.12; see Appendix A). Whether Shakespeare had it from Cicero or elsewhere, the fact remains that he gave Hamlet an authoritative humanistic statement of the doctrine of general decorum, of the demand that man's actions must come from his consciousness of being man. Yet this reference to the general duty of man proves irrelevant as Hamlet questions whether the violation of this duty is really the reason for his inaction: "Now, whether it be / Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple / Of thinking too precisely on th' event. . . ." He also questions this second alternative: "I do not know / Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do.'" Hamlet is enough of a skeptic to realize that the roots of actions or inactions lie
often too deep for thoughts. The traditional picture of man, at any rate, does not reveal them. Whenever Hamlet tries to draw on philosophical wisdom about man and on moral commonplaces of consolation in order to reconcile himself to this world and the world to come, he fails.

His most conspicuous effort and failure is his "to be or not to be" soliloquy. It is a variation in a different key of Montaigne's rhetorical question "Should I have died less merrily before I read the Tusculans?" and of his assertion that "I had rather understand myself well in myself than in Cicero." The dramatic situation suggests that Hamlet in this scene enters book in hand—in Quarto 1, the king actually says: "See where he comes, reading upon a book." The particular book from which Hamlet takes the theme of his soliloquy, as Professor Baldwin has plausibly argued, is Cicero's Tusculan Disputations, or, in its customary Elizabethan title, Tusculan Questions; Hamlet ponders the first of these questions, that of death and immortality. But even if Hamlet's book should have been not Cicero's Tusculans but Cardanus's Comfort or Montaigne's Essays, or if there was no book at all, the fact remains that he seeks consolation in a standard passage of moral philosophy. Like Socrates in Plato's Apology, he ponders his and man's fate in relation to death and the afterlife; but for him there can be no calm acceptance of his destiny: the question of mortality versus immortality becomes hopelessly entangled with the questions of action versus inaction, of death in struggle or death by suicide, of the sufferings of life on earth compared with the risks of the unknown, of the desirability of a dreamless sleep as against the horrible vision of tortures in the hereafter. Hamlet's soul-searching only heightens his feeling of self-loss, and he proceeds to agonize Ophelia as much as he agonized himself.

Hamlet's probing into the existential situation, as searching as it is, ends in dissonance, incongruity, irrelevance, and absurdity. Hamlet is not satisfied merely to assume a contemptus mundi pose as does Richard II. He deeply "considers" man's corruptible body, but, as Horatio says, he considers too curiously. In metaphysical clownery he makes the dead Polonius into an object lesson on the dietary habit of worms—the method is the same as that by which Montaigne deflated the claim of man to constancy: "Touching strength, there is no creature in this world open to so many wrongs and injuries as man. . . . The heart and life of a mighty and triumphant emperor is but
the breakfast of a silly little worm.” In the churchyard, as he “reads” the skulls, Hamlet takes again this ironic view of metamorphosis; he pierces the absurdity of the human existence that transforms an Alexander into dust, earth, loam, and finally into the plug of a beer-barrel. Hamlet turns the graveyard into an excavation ground and a debating hall, and, in a final twist, into a wrestling arena where he grapples with Laertes over the cere-clothed body of Ophelia. It is a bizarre dance macabre in the style of mannerist painters like Tintoretto and El Greco.

Besides comparing himself to the general image of man, Hamlet also follows the nosce teipsum writers’ recommendation to examine his proper place in the universe. And again, the theories Hamlet tests are orthodox even if he examines them under strange circumstances. One occasion is that in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern attempt to extract from him the reason for his strange behavior (II.ii.221 ff.). He evades them by philosophical arguments on the prison that is Denmark and the world, on the reward that is an active imagination, on the curse that comes from bad dreams, and on the shadow that is ambition. Then, with one stab, the prince, who can be as brutally direct as frustratingly indirect, elicits from the courtiers the reason for their coming: they were sent for by the king. Whereupon Hamlet diverts them with another philosophic disquisition, this time on his present unhappiness about the ideal picture of the world and of man.

His appraisal is concocted by the best Renaissance recipes on how to write a commonplace on homo and mundus, and it is framed in the proper rhetorical balance. And yet, Hamlet dissociates himself from it. The picture has lost its attraction for him although, he says, with a touch that is surely not intended merely to confuse Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he does not know why: “I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory.” After thus disclaiming any joy in the ideal macrocosm, Hamlet assesses the microcosm: “What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a God! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!” Hamlet finds this paragon as little to his liking as the frame that surrounds him: “And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?”
One need not go so far as a German scholar who sees in Hamlet's speech a renunciation of the Renaissance to find this a disturbing picture. By itself, as we have noted, the speech is quite traditional in subject and structure, and, in Shakespeare's theater, it had an appropriate setting; but it becomes disturbing—its very orthodoxy contributes to that—by the acutely felt tension between the ideal and the actual. The picture is beautiful; but it has lost its relevance. Hamlet's agitated mind, swaying from earth to heaven, from heaven to earth, from soul to body, and from body to soul, finds no assurance and resting place. Everything is a shifting semblance, a diffused world.

Hamlet's restless spirit is guided and incited by a glorious but heated imagination. In general humanistic thought, the imagination was an ambiguous gift, both a divine force and a danger to man's happiness. For the skeptics, it was primarily the latter; its straying turbulence, which sidetracks both passion and reason, served them as a major argument that man was unstable. Intelligence and reason offered no protection: the more agile the mind, the greater the danger of derailment. "From the rarest and quickest agitation of our souls," said Charron, "[come] the most desperate resolutions and disorderly frenzies." And so it is for Hamlet. When he first sees the ghost beckoning to him, he turns "desperate with imagination" (I.iv.87). He ceaselessly conjures up his task, his inadequacies for it, his father's greatness, his uncle's villainy, and his mother's sexuality. Yet he also knows the potential rewards of the imagination. He could, he says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, be bounded in a nutshell and count himself king of infinite space were it not that he has bad dreams (II.ii.255). He is acutely conscious of what the imagination does to him, awake and asleep, and how it both conjures up an ideal existence and prevents him from reaching it as he becomes oppressed with the sordid realities of his demanding task and uncertain life.

It is perhaps the most astonishing turn of the play that from his knowledge of the working of the imagination, observed on himself, Hamlet forges his most purposeful action of the play, that of catching the conscience of the king. Hamlet's self-awareness becomes, as it were, the design of his revenge. This is a most ingenious device, based on ancient theories about the imagination, specifically concerning the transfer of the power of the imagination from the poet through the actor to the audience. It seems to have been Shakespeare's own idea to have Hamlet use this stratagem; in the Ur-Hamlet, if it was Kyd's, the function of the play-within-the-play is
not likely to have been different from *The Spanish Tragedy*, where it served the avenger to kill the criminal without exciting suspicion.\(^{31}\) Hamlet's way of staging the play is characteristic of the way he conceives revenge as an intellectual and artistic problem.

The stratagem is so Hamletian as to make one forget that it is based on theories that enjoyed philosophical and rhetorical respectability. They go back to Plato's *Ion* (334–36), where Socrates asks the professional reciter of poetry whether he is in his senses or in ecstatic empathy with the events when he narrates incidents from Homer's epics, such as Odysseus's unmasking himself to Penelope's suitors or Achilles's attacks on Hector or one of the pitiful passages about Andromache, Hecuba, or Priam. Ion admits that in reciting tales of pity and horror his eyes are filled with tears, his hair stands on end with fear, and his heart leaps. Socrates elicits from him the explanation that he is divinely inspired; a spirit has entered the poet, and then, through the reciter or "actor," is conveyed to the audience. The poet is the "inner ring," the actor the "middle ring," and the audience "the outer ring"; the deity draws the spirit of men from the center toward the outside. Quintilian (VI.ii.34 ff.) and Cicero in *De Oratore* (II.xiv.189) applied the theory to the orator, comparing his task to that of the actor, who, as Quintilian said, leaves the theater still drowned in tears after the performance of a moving role.\(^{32}\)

From Quintilian and Cicero, directly or indirectly, Shakespeare provided Hamlet with the theory for his plan. It is characteristic that the idea occurs to Hamlet at a moment when he observes the effect of the imagination and is himself most strongly oppressed by it. He has just noted how the "passionate speech" he requested puts its speaker, the actor, into the appropriate mood observable by outward signs. Just as Quintilian said, the actor grows pale, has tears in his eyes, speaks with a broken voice and suits his whole function "with forms to his conceit" (II.ii.50). Hamlet gives his own peculiar twist to this tradition when, by an act of the imagination, he puts the actor in the actual role of an avenger by asking what the actor would do if he had Hamlet's motive and cue for passion.

In reproaching himself for his lack of passion, Hamlet uses arguments that parallel Cicero's statement on the superiority of true to feigned grief.\(^{33}\) Hamlet's particular application of the idea of emotional transfer to the unmasking of the king also has precedents. Notably, on this occasion Hamlet remembers having heard that "guilty persons at a play" were driven to confess their crimes. Mon-
Hamlet: Probing a Restless Self

taigne, among others, reported just such an incident, an anecdote from Plutarch according to which Alexander, tyrant of Pheres, had to give up seeing tragedies for fear his subjects might see him sob at the misfortunes of Hecuba and Andromache. Although Hecuba's tears did not stop Pyrrhus, they were effective enough to touch some hard hearts from the time of the ancients to the Renaissance!

The theory on which Hamlet bases catching the conscience of the king is founded on good authorities, and it works. We should note, however, that it arises from an act of self-analysis that is quite problematic and that the success of the device does not change Hamlet's attitude toward his task. In the soliloquy in which he concocts his stratagem, Hamlet applies a rhetorical argument to a psychological and moral situation with which it is not commensurate. When Hamlet asks himself what the actor would do if he had the motive and the cue for passion he himself has, he puts the problem of revenge in the wrong perspective. It is not that Hamlet lacks articulateness of word and gesture, "pronunciation" in Renaissance terms. It is rather that he has too much, and the unmasking of the king makes it no more possible for him to suit his actions to his words than it was before he sprang the mouse trap.

Hamlet's identification with his role as avenger is closest during and immediately after his stratagem. His imagination and his passion appear now synchronized with his spirit: here is finally an action that will directly promote his revenge. He succeeds temporarily in recovering the excitement with which he pledged himself to the execution of his task immediately after the appearance of the ghost. He anticipates with sarcastic elation the demasking of Claudius, and when the latter rises in horror, Hamlet triumphs and sings satirical verses to Horatio. With wild words he harries Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who come to invite him to attend his mother; he pulls Polonius's leg, and, left alone, feels that he could drink blood.

Hamlet then proceeds to what he considers his first bitter business of the day: to convert his mother to virtue and abstinence. That, on his way, he should come across Claudius attempting to pray and fail to execute his major business is a supreme irony in which fate and Hamlet's character interact. It is not a failure due to passion; Hamlet rapidly scans the situation—no scene better demonstrates how rapidly he can look at a situation from several angles. He decides not to take the easy revenge that offers itself to him now because it would not be perfect retribution. He will fulfill the revenge code to the last letter and dispatch Claudius when he is engaged in some
odious occupation. But ironically, Hamlet has thought too curiously; the king finds it impossible to pray and rises after Hamlet leaves. Hamlet's probing, circling thoughts have missed their target as much as Hamlet's hand, just at the moment when he is most in sympathy with his role.

The closet scene has the same air of futility. Although Hamlet is now at his most passionate in his role of reformer of Denmark—a role he cannot separate from his role as avenger—he is also at his most ineffective. For the first time he holds up the glass of self-recognition to somebody else, that is, to his mother, but his zeal makes it into a magnifying glass. His feverish imagination evokes such details as Claudius's and Gertrude's "rank sweat of an en-seamed bed" and their "honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty" (III.iv.92–94). But while he is much concerned with "the black and grained spots" on his mother's soul, he forgets that the ghost warned him not to taint his own mind by conceiving aught against his mother. He is carried away by passion, an excessive passion for truth and moral reform, and he comes close to killing her; both Polonius and the ghost fear for her safety. Ironically, it is Hamlet's excited reaction to the appearance of the latter that convinces Gertrude of Hamlet's insanity. If Hamlet's stab at his mother's conscience fails, that which he directs at the man whom he mistakes for Claudius succeeds. And from now on the king is in ascendance, and Hamlet's moves are countermoves.

According to one school of interpretation, the Hamlet who returns from England is a new man who has learned to master his problems. He certainly does accept providence and fate as he describes his action in sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their doom:

Rashly,
And prais'd be rashness for it—let us know,
Our indiscretion sometime serves us well,
When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.

(V.ii.6–11)

But as a guideline to action the principle Hamlet proclaims does not serve him well. The same "indiscretion" in which he will kill Laertes and the king did not serve Hamlet so well when he killed Polonius, and his success at sea owed something to an admixture of
deliberation. Hamlet's acceptance of providence does, however, advance the tragic solution. In this spirit, he accepts the invitation to the fencing match that proves both a trap and a deliverance. But the exact nature of this spirit of acceptance is something of a puzzle. One finds it hard to call it Christian fortitude, or Stoic resignation, or a pragmatic acceptance of the skeptics' world in which all things are relative and uncertain. The special providence that is in "the fall of a sparrow" is biblical, the "readiness" that is all is stoical, and the concluding sentence is skeptic, at least in the preferable Quarto 2 version: "Since no man of ought he leaves knows, what is it to leave betimes?" (V.ii.216).

This is a particularly interesting sentence because it is fashioned on the losing-finding antithesis, which since Love's Labor's Lost and The Comedy of Errors was for Shakespeare associated with the search for identity. But in the early plays, there was the promise that the search would be rewarded, that self-discipline would bring felicity and that brother would embrace brother in the end. Now the humanistic certainty is gone. Hamlet's search is vain; his mellowing in the end consists only in taking a somewhat calmer attitude toward what remains, in the final analysis, inscrutable. The best one can say is that Hamlet learns to adapt somewhat more easily to the restless behavior prescribed by his mind. He realizes that his situation is not quite as unique as it appeared to him, and he accepts—fideistic fashion—a providence that transcends rational explanations of his behavior and of human actions in general. But it is hard to think of this realization as self-discovery because it does not bring any particularly illuminating insight.

And it cannot be different. In the diffuse and corrupt world in which Hamlet lives, it is impossible for him to find his identity. In such a world, nobody knows what he leaves behind. And there may even be doubt about what he finds hereafter. It is anybody's guess whether, his task accomplished in the random action in which "indiscretion" serves him well, Hamlet sinks into silence or ascends to heaven. Shakespeare has left us even wondering whether Hamlet's silence is Stoic or Christian. Ironically, it is Horatio, the professed rationalist, and not Hamlet, the self-acknowledged fideist, who hopes for the chorus of angels to sweeten it.

The situation of the survivors appears no less problematic. To say that in the end all is well with the world and with Denmark is to substitute the conclusions of Richard III or Henry IV for that of Hamlet. What we actually witness in the end is not the supplanting
of a tyrant by a man who has legitimized himself before God and the nation, as in Richard III, or the succession of a son who has overcome his fathers' handicaps, as in Henry IV. In Hamlet, it turns out quite unexpectedly that Fortinbras, only so far known as the foreign leader of a "list of lawless [F: 'landless'] resolutes" (I.i.98), will sit on the throne of Denmark. Somebody, one assumes, has to take over. One finds it hard to believe that Hamlet's last wish to clear his wounded name and to have his story told to the unsatisfied will provide Denmark with a legend through which it can become sane and healthy. Horatio's outline of Hamlet's story, at any rate, does not promise a very illuminating tale: it speaks of "carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts; / Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters; / Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause; / And, in this upshot, purposes mistook / Fall'n on th' inventors' heads" (V.ii.373-77). The subsequent history of Hamlet criticism proves that Hamlet's story cannot be told so easily.

Hamlet is Shakespeare's most problematic hero, and it is impossible ever to pluck out his last mystery. But the mystery does not come from lack of self-explanation. Hamlet is aware, or overaware, of himself; but ironically, for this very reason he does not attain even the kind of self-knowledge that, on the level of evil, Claudius has, who is properly conscious of his villainy. Hamlet is profoundly disturbed by the discrepancies between what he is and what he would like to be, between what he purposes and what he accomplishes. His is the tragedy of a problematic self, a tragedy the more harrowing because it lacks a reassurance that is capable of any solution. It is not a tragedy of lack of self-knowledge so much as a tragedy of the problematic nature of the quest for self-knowledge.

The theme as such was not new to Shakespeare, who stated it in comic terms in Love's Labor's Lost and at least adumbrated its tragic possibilities in Julius Caesar. The fascination of its treatment in Hamlet arises in part from its use in the apparently incongruous setting of a revenge tragedy but even more from the fact that the hero in search of himself is a man of quick and wide sensibilities and of a keen and probing intellect. His restless spirit cannot separate the duty of being himself, which necessitates being an avenger as well as a human being, from the passionate desire of knowing himself. Although he finally fulfills his task of revenge, his search for himself leads nowhere.