FIGURATIVE DESIGN IN HAMLET
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DUMB SHOW

LEE SHERIDAN COX
FIGURATIVE DESIGN IN HAMLET

The Significance of the Dumb Show

By Lee Sheridan Cox

Critics have long debated the significance of the dumb show in *Hamlet*. There is a wide divergence of opinion on the matter of its importance: to one critic, it is "only a mechanical necessity"; to another, "the keystone to the arch of the drama." In modern performances of *Hamlet*, it is frequently omitted, a decision vigorously protested by some critics as detrimental to the play scene.

But the presence of the dumb show in the play scene has given rise to questions that evoke little unanimity of response even among its proponents. Why does the mime directly anticipate the subject matter of *The Murder of Gonzago*? Does Shakespeare preview *Gonzago* to provide necessary information? If not, is the dumb show then superfluous? And if superfluous, was the device forced on Shakespeare, or was it merely a politic catering to popular taste? Is the show foisted on Hamlet by the visiting players? If not, how does it serve his larger plan and purpose? What is its effect on the stage audience? Does Claudius see the pantomimic prefiguring of *Gonzago*? What does his silence during and immediately after the show signify?

The search for answers to such questions is usually confined to the play scene. But Professor Cox maintains that the true nature and function of the show can be ap-
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