CHAPTER FOUR
I

The immediate literal effect of the hebenon is, like the method and the means of the crime, importantly recalled in subsequent image clusters. In vivid detail, the Ghost describes the physical consequence when the "leperous distilment" coursed through the body's "natural gates": "A most instant tetter bark'd about, / Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust, / All my smooth body" (I.v.71–73). Generally, critical comment on the influence of the Ghost's story on the overall figurative design focuses on the leitmotif of poison and its extension in an imagery of disease; on the workings of the actual poison in the blood of the sleeping king and the similar operation of the abstract poison in the body of Denmark;¹ on the process of literal infection resulting from Claudius's murderous act and the descriptions of country and court, subject to Claudius, in an imagery of corruption and rot; on the reappearance of the import of words like "leperous," "lazar-like," "tetter," "crust," "posset," and "curd" in images of festering sores—for example, in "ulcer," "blister," "kibe," "imposthume," "pocky" bodies—and in other expressions that suggest animal or plant decay or both: "canker," "gall," "blast," "blight," "mildew," and so on. But another figurative pattern growing out of the immediate particular effect of the poison has been
neglected: *crust* also informs an imagery of confinement, which develops the theme that an encrustment, an imprisonment, inevitably attends on evil.

Let us first simply list some of the confinement images. Forms of the word *prison* recur, always in connection with an implicit or an explicit account of wrongdoing. The King who dies with "all [his] imperfections on [his] head" (I.v.79) is "deom'd for a certain term" because of "foul crimes" and "confined" during the day to a "prison-house" (10-14). Hamlet cries, "Denmark's a prison" (II.ii.249) after Claudius abuses "the whole ear of Denmark" and the words of the Ghost have entered Hamlet's ears; and he also calls the world a prison with "many confines, wards and dungeons, Denmark being one o' the worst." We have seen a striking instance of Shakespeare's preoccupation with a connection between evil and noise in the passages where "a hideous crash / Takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear" (498-99), and here again imprisonment is consequent on evil. Aboard the ship bearing Claudius's mandate to England, Hamlet thinks that he lies "worse than the mutines in the bilboes" (V.ii.6). Images of confinement are used to describe both victim and victimizer: not only is the poisoned King "bark'd about"; the poisoner possesses, after the act, a "limed soul" (III.iii.68). The encrusting effect of something damnable is stressed in Hamlet's description of the heart "brass'd" by "damned custom" (III.iv.35-37). The list could be greatly extended: such phrases as "passion's slave" (III.ii.77), putting "fetters" on "fear" (III.iii.25), and the "strict . . . arrest" of the "fell sergeant, death" (V.ii.347-48) develop the motif, as does a cluster of trap images. But if, at present, we can conclude that "prison-house" and "bilboes" and the figurative identification of Denmark, the world, custom, noise, and lime with confinement, establish the presence and variety of the pattern, we have a base for exploring its significance; the comment it affords on the nature and mission of the Ghost; and its relevance to Hamlet's tragedy.

First of all, quite obviously, the "vile crust" is not the result of sin on the part of the one encrusted. And, similarly, any person may be, through no fault of his own, bound by a movement of evil or a whole people caught in a flood set in
motion by an individual act of wrongdoing. The idea is an evident theme of the play: one may be the victim of events in which he plays no part, born in a "time [that] is out of joint." And there are lines that stress the limitations put on will and choice by both an individual lot and a general fate: Laertes says of Hamlet, "His will is not his own; / For he himself is subject to his birth" (I.iii.17-18); and we have noted Hamlet's words about "some vicious mole of nature in [men], / As, in their birth—wherein they are not guilty, / Since nature cannot choose his origin." Thus, external circumstances and intrinsic forces may constrain a man: he may be subject to inherited rank or to "particular fault" in a blood common to father, uncle, and nephew. Moreover, Shakespeare repeatedly places his view of beleaguered man in a larger context that reminds the reader of the flawed nature of man as a result of original sin: we are reminded that Adam was the first "grave-maker," the first "that ever bore arms" (V.i.35, 38); by such reminders, Shakespeare suggests that the act in the first garden reverberates in a world described as "an unweeded garden,/That grows to seed" (I.ii.135-36). But when we read of Claudius as a "serpent" that stings a father in a garden (I.v.39) and of Cain on whom "the primal eldest curse" (III.iii.37) was laid, we are reminded not only that man, like his father Adam, is subject to external attack and that as a result of his father's sin he contains a "vicious mole of nature" but also that in an ultimate sense he can be free, proof against all inner and outer restrictions.

And though Shakespeare points to conditions in existence that affect a man, to an imperfect nature and an imperfect world, a "goodly" prison (II.ii.251), his confinement imagery also presents the theme, common in Renaissance literature, that by a willing sin against rule and order, a man invites his own loss of liberty. The "imprisonment" of Pyrrhus, ruled by a desire to revenge the death of his father Achilles, is the result of his striking at a king and father. The spiritual entrapment that Claudius laments is the result of his own rejection of order—in subjecting reason to passion, in usurping the place of a king, in killing a brother. The reference to the heart brassed by damned custom appears in a scene where Hamlet
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not only discourses on the power of "that monster, custom," but also urges on Gertrude the assumption of a new "habit" and therefore indirectly indicates the role of the individual will in regard to custom and habit (III.iv.159–70). In the context of the situation in which each appears, such images as the imprisoned ear, the limed soul, and the brassed heart reflect the traditional view of the dangers inherent in improper choice and improper rule: all show the inevitable consequence of failing to adopt what Hamlet calls "the use of actions fair and good" (163).

So though the confinement images are all linked with evil, they appear to suggest a similar outcome for two dissimilar actions: that is, a kind of imprisonment may come to a man through no choice or sin of his own (the "loathsome crust") or through a willful choice of evil (the "limed soul"). But a subtle comment in the gravediggers' scene distinguishes between these two alternatives. And before determining to what degree each idea applies to all the figures assigning an imprisoned state to the Ghost or to Hamlet, let us stop to consider the choplogic of the First Clown when he says, "If the man go to this water, and drown himself, it is, will be, nill he, he goes,—mark you that; but if the water come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself: argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life" (V.i.17–22). Whatever the appearance of pompous nonsense in these words, one must remember that Shakespeare has had Hamlet insist on the large significance of clown scenes and criticize actors who obscure the playwright's art by setting "barren spectators to laugh . . . though, in the mean time, some necessary question of the play be then to be considered" (III.ii.46–48).

The Clown, of course, is pontificating on the circumstances of Ophelia's death and burial, and on a judgment of her guilt or innocence—whether her drowning can be called accident or suicide. But what he says is not applicable only to Ophelia: elsewhere in the play "going to the water" is connected with temptation and choice (see, for example, I.iv.69) and the oncoming of violence with images of flood (IV.v.99–102); and elsewhere characters debate on suicide and the vicissitudes of chance and fate. Thus, underlying the Clown's words, how-
ever limited the context in which he uses them, is a consideration of questions of the play. Characteristically, Shakespeare uses a Clown as a mouthpiece for serious comment: behind the Clown’s self-importance is an insistence on individual responsibility for wrong-doing and on the difference between willingly (or even unwillingly) choosing evil and having evil come to one, a difference that lies in eventual outcome and ultimate judgment, however much it may appear that one drowns either way. According to this “absolute” fellow, physical death is not the issue, but rather whether or not a man makes the wrong choice: if he does, “will he, nill he,” he must bear an inevitable consequence; if he does not, he does not “shorten . . . his own life,” a life that denotes spiritual, as well as physical, being. Thus, suicide takes on meanings that extend beyond the literal definition. For all his pretentious twaddle, the Clown is a medium for ideas that, as we shall see, appear in various forms throughout the play; in speech and action, he reveals that for him life is not something that ends in the grave. And rot is not something that starts in the grave: a man may, the Clown says, be “rotten before he die” (V.i.181). So, in a large sense, an individual’s health or sickness, his life or death, depends on his own choice—certainly in this play “a necessary question . . . to be considered.”

The Clown’s words are relevant to the references to encrustment and confinement applied to Hamlet Senior. The “prison-house” is the result of his action, of “foul crimes” that must be purged from one “cut off even in the blossoms of [his] sin” (I.v.12–13,76). But the ultimate effect of having poison poured into his ears, of the evil that comes to him, is not the scab he describes to Hamlet: the Ghost is not “bark’d about, most lazar-like.” It is rather the armor, which—unlike the leprous crust—is an effect of his own choice. In the context of a potential for evil in custom (a constant concern of the playwright), the danger of being “brass’d” by “damned custom,” certain emphases in the references to the armor are most suggestive. That the Ghost is armed is a detail repeated eight times. Of course, a martial appearance befits his mission; but that it is a natural elaboration of plot and tone for a revengeful spirit to appear in arms hardly accounts for
Shakespeare's repeatedly pointing to the extent of the covering: the Ghost is encased "in complete steel" (I.iv.52); he is "armed at point exactly, cap-a-pe" (I.ii.200); he is "arm’d . . . From top to toe . . . from head to foot" (227–28). Moreover, the armor is, most significantly, given a history: Shakespeare identifies it as the "very armour" worn by King Hamlet in a duel thirty years before with King Fortinbras and thus links the present action with an earlier action that also elicited from the former King a response to ambition and "most emulate pride" (I.i.60–61,83); that resulted in the death of a king and father and—in the sense in which Hamlet later employs the word to Laertes (V.ii.255)—the death of a "brother." Perhaps we are intended to agree with Hamlet that his father's death is "particular" (I.i.75) and to concur with him in all his later manifestations of this attitude—for example, when he, though seeing his father's violent death as abominable, sees the violent deaths of other men as, relatively, negligible matters. But I suspect that Shakespeare does not include such information in order to encourage us to make Hamlet our moral interpreter and that the identification of men who have been killed as kings, fathers, or brothers is not purposed to establish the "particularity" of one and the insignificance of another, whatever the variation in circumstances. In short, since confinement images are expressly the effect of Claudius's and Pyrrhus's killing of kings and fathers, in their case an undeniable evil, one is led to question the action of King Hamlet and to wonder whether the armour of the Ghost—given the odd reiterated emphasis on the extent of the covering—intimates a figurative, as well as a literal, encasement.

Of course, there is great difference between King Fortinbras's challenge and Claudius's murder of a sleeping man and between the reactions that these deeds elicit in King Hamlet and the Ghost. (Yet, though there is also difference between King Hamlet's and King Priam's murders, their killers are, in various ways, associated.) What I am pointing to is the interlacing of ideas inherent in figure and fact: that, elsewhere, confinement follows on wrong choice; that the Ghost is not encrusted by a tetter, the effect of another man's evil, but by "complete steel," the effect of his own choice; that "the
very armour” links this choice to an earlier one; that Shake­
speare makes the present choice suspect by casting doubt on
the earlier decision. Given all the differences between the two
events, still Shakepeare stresses similarities: in describing the
first, he insists on Norway’s ambition, on King Hamlet’s val­
liancy, and on the ratification of the duel by “law and heraldry”
(I.i.61,83–87;ii.24–25). And however dissimilar the circum­
stances, the decision to bear arms against Claudius is also a
reaction to ambition, a question of honor, and a response sanc­
tioned by a knightly code. By directly connecting the two
actions in the phrase “the very armour” and indirectly con­
necting them by way of other details that apply to both, Shake­
speare can question the tenets of a particular custom and
legality in the second action by questioning them in the first.
And there is no doubt he gives us information that opens to
debate both the practical wisdom in, and the moral justifica­
tion for, trying to settle differences by violent means. For it
is most significant that the first action did not end with the
slaying of Norway. King Hamlet’s earlier resort to this same
“complete steel” produced the present danger of conflict: he
“was and is the question of these wars” that threaten Den­
mark (I.i.111). Thus, the chain-reacting effect of the first re­
sponse to aggression and its initial result—the death of a king,
father, “brother”—suggest error, even though this method of
handling an affair of honor had social and legal approval and
no wrong was intended: “If the man go to this water, . . . it
is, will he, nill he, he goes,—mark you that.” The Ghost says
that he is “confined” in consequence of “crimes,” presumably
sins against order and higher rule; and the emphasis on his
“complete” encasement, joined to information that calls in
question an earlier decision to don this same armor, supports
the argument that a limitation of understanding and choice is
still apparent in the unpurged and armed spirit whose custom­
ary response to aggression is violence and who does not in­
vitably subscribe to the philosophy that vengeance should
be left to Heaven.
If we apply the comment in the confinement imagery to
Hamlet’s finding Denmark a prison, the world a prison, and
his thinking that he “lay / Worse than the mutines in the bil-
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boes,” we could say that the figurative language merely stresses the effect of Claudius’s evil on those around him. On the other hand, if the “imprisoned ear” of Pyrrhus, the “limed soul” of Claudius, and the “prison-house” of the Ghost reflect the idea that being “cabin’d, cribb’d, confined” follows on one’s own wrongdoing, the constraint of which Hamlet complains could express the same thought. And if the emphasis on the Ghost’s encasement in steel implies a limitation attending wrong choice, a heart “brass’d” by “damned custom,” then “prison” or “bilboes” could—if Hamlet submits to the rule of the Ghost—indicate the effect of that rule. But before considering whether either or both of these alternatives apply to Hamlet, let us confront more directly the question of the rightness or wrongness of the Ghost’s mission, since Hamlet’s failure to carry out the Ghost’s charge immediately is so often considered a flaw and since such a view assumes either that the injunction is, in this play, proper ruling or that Hamlet, without any doubt, considers it so.

II

Just the fact that Hamlet Senior is a victim of “foul murder” would have been, in itself, enough to put us in his camp and to establish the starting point in an ordinary revenge play. But Shakespeare gives us details that deepen our pity for the Ghost and, at the same time, information that makes us dubious of his nature and mission. The truth in his story, the circumstances of his death, his suffering, his plea to be remembered, his expressions of concern for Gertrude and Hamlet, his call on “nature,” his appeal to filial love and loyalty, his majesty, his nobility—all enlist our sympathy. But an important theme in the play, a theme expounded just before the Ghost’s appearance to Hamlet, is that the noble substance may be corrupted by habit, by fortune, by intrinsic flaw. And the Ghost may have justice on his side, exhibit noble qualities, arouse our sympathies, and still be wrong.

We have noted certain details that Shakespeare inserts about King Hamlet (his martial exploits; his killing a king and father; his “sin” and “crimes”) and about the Ghost (his
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foulness not yet purged by the flames of his prison-house; his insistence that Horatio and Marcellus swear by the sword, rather than by their faith). We have noted Shakespeare's placement of the scene in which the Ghost enjoins Hamlet to revenge (just after Polonius's questionable charges to Laertes and Ophelia and just before his cynical instruction to Reynaldo) and his placement of the Ghost's materializations (to Horatio on the heels of a speech about disaster and sickness; to Hamlet on words about a dram of evil; in Gertrude's closet, at the phrase "a king of shreds and patches"). We have seen that the ear/speech imagery, the noise symbolism, and the confinement figures suggest that his tale and call for revenge may be a poison and their effect a confinement; and we have noted a considerable number of figurative recurrences that associate him with corruption, disease, decay: his being called "old mole" after a speech about a corrupting "mole of nature"; his being linked with "blastments" and therefore with contagion; his being described as "blast[ed]" by a "mildew'd ear" and therefore himself a transmitter of mildew. Moreover, when he compares himself with Claudius (I.v.47–52), he displays vanity, and his analogy indirectly identifying himself with "a radiant angel" plays fast and loose with the facts of "prison-house" and "flames." It might also be tentatively noted that if the stage direction in the Second Quarto on the time of cockcrow is placed as Shakespeare intended, the exhortation of Horatio that moves the Ghost to speak (he "was about to speak, when the cock crew") is "If thou hast uphoarded in thy life / Exorted treasure in the womb of earth, / For which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death, / Speak" (I.i.147,136–39): a reply to this particular if is in line with the information that the former King took land from King Fortinbras and that the Ghost is "doom'd . . . to walk the night" (I.v.10).

The cumulative force of all this makes it difficult to see the Ghost as a typical spirit of the revenge drama whose mission is to be accepted without question. And there is a telling identification of the Ghost's nature in other references to cockcrow. When Shakespeare stresses the effect of the latter on the Ghost by having the same information given by three characters (I.i.147–49,157;ii.218–20); when he has Horatio
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say that “at the sound” the Ghost “started like a guilty thing” and that he has heard that “at [the cock’s] warning . . . The extravagant and erring spirit hies / To his confine” (I.i.148, 152-55); when he has Marcellus add emphatically that the Ghost “faded on the crowing of the cock” (157), and later has the Ghost say that he is “confined” during the day (I.v. 11)—then only the most willful defenders of the Ghost can discount the logical conclusion that he is, however noble, also an “extravagant and erring spirit.” Both fact and figure tell us that he is flawed, blasted, in need of purging. The corruption that he took in life from “nature’s livery” and “fortune’s star,” the customs that he espoused, his “habit as he lived,” the crimes and sins that brought him to the flames of the prison-house—all are still operating in the unpurged spirit. Even to those he would not have “tainted” he is a threat: for like a man with plague who does not intentionally transmit the disease, he endangers the health of all he comes near.

Finally, an assumption that the Ghost exhibits order, rather than extravagance and error, and that his ruling is proper does not take into account the fact that the aristocratic code of honor and justice is not the only, or the noblest, standard of conduct set forth in the play. When Hamlet tells Polonius to “let [the players] be well used” and Polonius answers, “I will use them according to their desert,” Hamlet says, “God’s bodykins, man, much better: use every man after his desert, and who should ‘scape whipping? Use them after your own honour and dignity: the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty. Take them in” (II.ii.547-58). However sympathetically Shakespeare may present certain primitive ideals of justice and duty, however much he may have his protagonist berate himself for not acting in accord with them, we cannot assume in this play—as we might in a drama where summary violent retribution for evil is the only acceptable action and where the hero conceives of nothing nobler—that a failure to take prompt revenge is a flaw. The Ghost enjoins Hamlet to treat Claudius according to his desert; but if Shakespeare shows us a Hamlet who believes (whatever else he believes) that treating a man so is not tantamount to treating him according to honor and dignity, then the matter of
proper action is complicated. At the very least, we are not justified in concluding that Shakespeare presents, and that Hamlet esteems, only one standard of conduct.

A. C. Bradley says that Hamlet "habitually assumes . . . that he ought to avenge his father" and that "we are meant . . . to assume" the same. This makes the question "Why does Hamlet hesitate?" the whole dramatic problem, not just one aspect of a larger problem; and it must inevitably produce only subjective opinions about the nature of the protagonist. Too many critics have revealed an unwillingness to take into account all of Hamlet's words and actions (or his words in relation to his deeds, or his words about other characters in relation to their deeds); thus (since in the end they must deal with Shakespeare's play and not their own attenuated version) simplifying the course of Hamlet, they have created their own blind alleys. In saying that we are meant to assume that Hamlet ought to avenge his father, Bradley has to disregard the fact that Hamlet voices to Polonius a philosophy of conduct that runs directly counter to that of revenge. And surely Shakespeare does not purposelessly point to a rule morally superior to that which Bradley says we are to assume is the proper standard.

The fact is that we are given a protagonist who expresses views that are polar opposites (one should/should not treat a man according to his deserts) and whose actions are as contradictory as his words. Obviously, we cannot say that Hamlet's failure to carry out the Ghost's charge immediately proves that he does not esteem a code of revenge; nor can we say that his justification of the killing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on the score of their receiving their just due proves that he does not esteem the rule of charity he expresses to Polonius. We can say that in the light of one code to which he subscribes he "assumes that he ought to avenge his father." Yet he questions more than just the truth in the Ghost's story; as late as the fifth act, when he no longer has any doubt of Claudius's guilt, he is still mingling observations about killing the King with allusions to conscience and damnation and putting them in question form (V.ii.67–70). He may put conscience on the scale with the Ghost and damnation on
the side of inaction, and he may iterate the question to propel himself to action; but a harping on defenses for killing is not characteristic of one who "assumes" that no defense is needed. We can say that he does not explicitly apply to the Ghost's injunction the philosophy that he himself enjoins on Polonius; but this should not lead the critic to conclude that his words to Polonius are irrelevant to the whole matter. Actually, the fact that he makes no connection between principle and practice is, like his speaking disparagingly of dumb shows and then sponsoring one, most significant: Shakespeare does not repeatedly show Hamlet's words at odds with his action to no purpose. Hamlet voices a noble philosophy to Polonius. And the standard of action that he urges on the worldly old man is but one instance of a recurrent comment on an ideal rule far more difficult to put into practice than that which the Ghost urges on him.

In coming to conclusions about what Hamlet does or does not "assume," we cannot discount his expressed double-mindedness on the matter of treatment and desert: it may have some bearing on his difficulty in dispatching a single-minded action. And as to what we should or should not suppose, when Shakespeare presents a philosophy that admonishes, even indirectly, against revenge, when he shows us that even Claudius's appeal to Norway succeeds in thwarting war between Denmark and a vengeful Fortinbras, then we are not "meant to assume" that revenge is the better choice or violence the only option. The very presence in the play of an expression of a philosophy morally superior to that of revenge, along with all of the other details that cast doubt on the nature and mission of the Ghost, reinforces the argument that the rule of the Ghost is wrong and that if Hamlet accepts it, "will he, nill he," he makes the wrong choice.

Shakespeare repeatedly evokes questions of rule. We see Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras, who all suffer the deaths of fathers, reacting differently to explicit overtures of rule. Hamlet replies to the plea, "Be ruled" (when Horatio warns him against listening to the Ghost), with "I'll make a ghost of him that lets me!" (I.v.81,85), and thus with a violent threat to create more ghosts, refuses to be ruled. Laertes replies to
Claudius’s “Will you be ruled by me?” (when revenge for a father’s death is the question) with “Ay, my lord; / So you will not o’errule me to a peace” (IV.vii.60–61). But Fortinbras, who has “shark’d up a list of lawless resolutes,” accepts the ruling of his uncle Norway and vows not to “give the assay of arms” against Denmark (I.i.98;II.ii.71). And in this tragedy framed by two duels, it is the man who accepts a ruling for peace and who allows himself to be “o’erruled” to that end, who becomes ruler—at least, the one on whom election will presumably light (V.ii.366–67), though this outcome has its own built-in ironies.

But does Hamlet, who refuses to be guided by Marcellus and Horatio, accept the rule of the Ghost? Since Horatio fears that the Ghost may “tempt [Hamlet] toward the flood,” the question may be restated in the words of the First Clown: does he go to the water? A case may be made for the alternative, that the water comes to him to drown him: quite aside from the recurrent allusions to the constraint in “nature’s livery [and] fortune’s star,” in birth and blood, in “the whips . . . of time [and] The oppressor’s wrong,” Shakespeare significantly places three events in one day—the birth of Hamlet, the slaying of King Fortinbras, and the First Clown’s coming to the profession of grave-digger (V.i.154–62). Such a juxtaposition suggests the importance of fate in Hamlet’s tragedy. And in a most crucial particular, Hamlet is obviously not ruled by the Ghost: the killing of Claudius is finally occasioned by the death of the Queen, Hamlet’s discovery that he has been poisoned, the evidence before him of the truth in Laertes’, not the Ghost’s, accusation—in short, by the present and manifest treachery of Claudius.

But if one can say that he only casually accomplishes the bidding of the Ghost, one cannot say that he observes the admirable rules of conduct that he himself lays down for others. And in determining whether, by the confinement figures describing his state, Shakespeare suggests the effect of wrong choice and improper rule, one must consider the discrepancy between Hamlet’s own preaching and his practice. “Suit the action to the word,” he tells the First Player (III. ii.19–20); and the advice has ironic extensions as he is re-
peatedly seen in actions not suited to his own words. His put-
ting on an “antic disposition” gives his counsel to the players
and his criticism of them angles of reflection and reverberation
that Shakespeare brilliantly exploits to stress the difference
between what Hamlet says and what he does, between his wis-
dom and his perception of a practical application of that
wisdom. He says of the child players, “Will they not say
afterward, if they should grow themselves to common players
... their writers do them wrong, to make them exclaim
against their own succession?” (II.ii.363–68). Yet after his
Ghost writer writes his part, he is preoccupied with exclaiming
against his own succession, whether as prince or human being.

Over and over, Hamlet gives good counsel and “recks not
his own rede” (I.iii.51). Considering his usual treatment of
Polonius, it is peculiarly ironic that he should address Polonius
as “man” (the only time he does so in the play) when urging
on him noble behavior to all men, though considering the
devious old counselor’s own penchant for lecturing and adopt-
ing moral stances, it is fitting that he should be so instructed
by one who usually treats him with contempt; and it is doubly
ironic, in view of Polonius’s dubious conception of honor, that
he should be told to treat every man according to his “own
honour and dignity.” However, Hamlet intends no irony; for
once, he addresses Polonius without scorn or ridicule (and
it is significant that his unwonted decency of tone to the old
man follows on Polonius’s expression of concern for the First
Player: “Look, whether he has not turned his colour and has
tears in ’s eyes. Pray you, no more”). But sincere as Hamlet’s
counsel may be, one does not see him “take [men] in,” at
least not in the sense of the “bounty” he advocates to Polonius.
In another striking manifestation of inconsistency, he tells
the Players not to mock Polonius (II.ii.570–71). That he, the
only person in the court who habitually subjects Polonius to
derision, should give such a direction attests to his self-contra-
diction; but Shakespeare underscores the point by placing
this command to the Players shortly after a passage where
mockery precisely describes Hamlet’s own treatment of Polo-
nius: the latter says, “My lord, I have news to tell you,” and
Hamlet mimics him, “My lord, I have news to tell you,” and so
on, with a jeering "Buz, buz!" when Polonius tells him that the actors have arrived (407–12). Moreover, he says wise words to Horatio about the potential corruption in "habit" and repeats them to Gertrude; yet he puts on the habit of madness and does not apply to himself his recommendation to Gertrude of "the use of actions fair and good." Again, he expounds on the danger in "that monster, custom, who all sense doth eat" (III.iv.161); but he commends the custom of revenge for an injury done a kinsman and justifies his plot against the lives of his former schoolfellows on an approximation of the old custom of an eye for an eye.

Besides contradicting his own preachments, he repeatedly goes counter to his expressed convictions, sentiments, and predilections; and again and again he criticizes others for faults that he exhibits. Often he gives lip service to a conduct that he, at that very moment (or shortly after or before) denies in action. Expressing scorn for dumb shows and then sponsoring a play that contains one, declaring trust in Horatio and then refusing to accept a vow that Horatio swears by his faith—such behavior is typical of Hamlet. He often denounces seeming: early in the play he says, "I know not 'seems' " (I.ii. 76); yet he puts on seeming with the antic disposition and not only practices deception as busily as anyone else in the court but even displays some pride in his talent at it (see, for example, III.ii.286–89; V.ii.35–36). Similarly, he criticizes Ophelia and women for their misrepresentation of truth: "God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another" (III.i.149–50); yet he has made himself another face and put on the mask of madness. He censures Ophelia and women for "nicknam[ing] God's creatures" (151); but he himself is peculiarly given to this fault, and it is not shown to be characteristic of either Ophelia or Gertrude. On several occasions, he declares a dislike for rant (see III.ii.8–16; V.i.306–7, ii.79–80); yet in the passage where, in his opinion, Laertes rants, he himself indulges in twice as many lines of rant as Laertes. While it is atypical that he should, in this same passage, express an awareness of doing what he censures, it is characteristic that he extenuates his ranting as appropriate response to Laertes, as if it were not a chronic reaction of his
own. Again, he finds the fact that his father was sent to his death "unhousel'd" a matter of especial horror and wickedness, an opinion he shares with the Ghost (cf.I.v.76-80 and III. iii.80-82); yet he wants Claudius's punishment to exceed measure-for-measure (III.iii.88-95), and he specifies that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern be slain without "shriving-time allow'd" (V.ii.47).

We shall have occasion to point to other instances of the contradiction between Hamlet's words and actions or between his words at one time and at another. Since too many critics see only the failure that Hamlet talks about—"Why yet [he] live[s] to say 'This thing's to do;'/Sith [he has] cause and will and strength and means /To do't" (IV.iv.44-46)—his failure to act on a rule that he prescribes for other men or that he intimates as proper by way of his criticism of those around him cannot be too strongly insisted on. Some critics have actually wondered at Shakespeare's inconsistency in having Hamlet conjecture on "the dread of something after death" (III.i.78) when he has talked with the Ghost. But it is not Shakespeare who is inconsistent. Hamlet is invariably portrayed as a man who sees all things that relate to him as "particular"; and his increasingly strange distinction between reality for himself and reality for others manifests itself in a variety of ways. If it accommodates his purpose to see himself as sharing in a common human nature, he will evoke that condition, but for an extenuation of his own fault or, paradoxically, to establish his difference from other men. When he criticizes himself, it is, characteristically, in the largest terms: "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in," he tells Ophelia; but he adds, "We are arrant knaves, all" (126-30,132). Even in sin he is exceptional; yet, after all, his sins reflect the human condition: his sins are the sins of mankind. But when he criticizes the shortcomings of those around him, their sins are not his: there is no indication that he sees in himself the fault, for example, of nicknaming God's creatures, ranting, or making himself another face—at least, not without the qualification that such actions are "particular" with him, not to be identified with the common failings of other men. One never
gets the idea that Hamlet does not sincerely believe in the admirable conduct that he, in words if not in deeds, presents to others. It is quite clear that he recoils from evil; but it is also clear that he does not apply to his own action a knowledge and a conception of higher rule that he is capable of applying to the character and action of other people. In time, this failure becomes a fatal one. It is one thing to fail, either wittingly or unwittingly, to live up to one's own definition of proper rule. But it is quite another to insist explicitly on two definitions of proper rule, one for other men and another for one's self, the latter to be determined by what one wills to do. To say that Hamlet moves to this interpretation of reality may be an oversimplification of the facts, but it is not an over-statement of them. In time, his own action, even when it is similar to that which he rejects in other men, becomes in his mind a basis for defining the rule of Heaven, rather than the other way around.

In part, Hamlet's sense of reality is corrupted by the practice of show; and one of Shakespeare's basic tenets in Hamlet is the self-destructive nature of false-seeming. It has been said that Hamlet does not act, simply because he does not immediately kill Claudius—in short, because he says he does not act. And it might be inferred from this that he does not accept the rule of the Ghost. But he chooses the role of actor and, putting on the mask and action of madness, "acts" until he no longer draws a line between reality and unreality. He may not "sweep to [the] revenge" the Ghost wants, but he becomes the busiest gravemaker in Elsinore, a consequence implying that his "noble substance" has been poisoned by what he interprets as an injunction to kill. And the mask itself, which follows immediately on the Ghost's charge, demonstrates the contaminating effect of an unreality that Shakespeare finds in words and acts that enjoin to violence. Hamlet eventually disclaims to Laertes "a purposed evil" (V.ii.252); but in the scene where a "necessary question of the play [is] . . . considered," Shakespeare has the First Clown insist on the irrevocable nature of the act, whether intentional or not: "If the man go to this water, . . . will he, nill he, he goes." Moreover, however unpurposed the wrong done Laertes, Ham-
let willfully contrives deaths "not near [his] conscience" (58), although he also contrives in connection with them circumstances that he himself has declared particularly evil.

In the deterioration of Hamlet's sense of proportion and reality, one sees the spreading of evil from the little dram, the vial of poison. He is, in part, a victim, encrusted by a poisonous element that enters his ears: so he finds Denmark a prison and the world a prison just after he is told of his father's murder and given the accompanying charge. But whether he considers its relevance to his own problem or not, he is also aware of a course of action contrary to that advocated by the Ghost. The almost insurmountable difficulties of putting an ideal of charity into practice, given the circumstances, or the form it could take in a practical world of ugly realities—these are not, at present, our concern. Considering merely the logic of the confinement imagery, we are faced with certain uncompromising facts: Hamlet voices a philosophy that runs directly counter to the philosophy of treating a man according to his deserts; it is a rule morally superior to that espoused by the Ghost; and Hamlet does not choose to be ruled by it. Thus, his feeling of confinement to "bilboes" immediately before he plots the death of his former friends is in line with the figurative comment elsewhere in the play on the imprisoning effect of wrong rule and suggests the circumscription of understanding and choice manifested as he puts into action the Ghost's philosophy of revenge. A strict study of the confinement imagery leads to two conclusions: one, he is confined by a "vile and loathsome crust" that comes from evil circumstance and evil times; the other, the confinement that matters, is a consequence of his own act, as he willfully rejects the rule he exhorts Polonius to follow: "Use [men] after your own honour and dignity: the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty. Take them in."

By now some of my readers, in defense of Hamlet, may be damning this argument out of hand before they hear the end of it; and others who second D. H. Lawrence's "And Hamlet, how boring, how boring to live with, / So mean and self-conscious, blowing and snoring / His wonderful speeches, full of other folk's whoring!" may be giving it an approval they

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will eventually revoke. But whatever opinions one may finally have of Hamlet's character and whatever conclusions one may reach about what happens in Hamlet, one must come to them without ignoring or whitewashing his faults and without slighting his nobility. Robert Ornstein says, "Our moral impression of Hamlet's character derives primarily from what he says rather than what he does," an observation that sums up one common critical reaction and explains the rationale of many critics who identify with Hamlet despite his "brutality towards Ophelia, his reaction to Polonius' death, . . . his Machiavellian delight in disposing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern." But, as Lawrence's lines prove, even what Hamlet says does not give all readers the same moral impression. And although Professor Ornstein is much more objective than many commentators who take Hamlet for their moral interpretater, he discounts the impression that Hamlet's actions obviously make on him when he argues that Shakespeare leads us to judge Hamlet primarily by his words. But Shakespeare does not take great pains to establish a contradiction between Hamlet's words and actions to lead us to attend to only one method of revealing character; he does not characterize Hamlet only by his words, or only by his actions, or only by some of his words, some of his actions. If brainwashed by Hamlet's eloquence, his greatness of mind, his suffering, we view him like "barren spectators," using only his eyes, we may do him an injustice and, paradoxically, not see to the depths of his recoil from Claudius's evil, the killing of a king and kinsman. But if we equivocate, ignore his violation of his own high standards of conduct and the confinement figures relevant to a breach of proper rule, pick and choose among his words and deeds, and excuse his violence and savagery because he has had great provocation and speaks so well, we do Hamlet an injustice.

Taking the stand that one must find a moral justification for anything that Hamlet or the Ghost does may lead to the kind of argument set forth by one critic who says that since God permits the Ghost to revisit the earth, "the Ghost's demand . . . is . . . the transmission of a divine command." The idea that what God allows, he commands, puts Claudius's murder of King Hamlet in a startling perspective and offers
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a sweeping resolution of the whole problem of good and evil. But if it were true, one would have to believe that because such criticism is permitted, it is therefore divinely ordained. And one must draw a line somewhere.