CHAPTER FIVE
A beast/trap imagery extends the figurative comment on confinement. The repeated resort of the principal characters to the setting of traps; the reiterated metaphorical allusion to trap, springe, toil, basket, and angle; the recurrent beast-figures describing, not only the quarry, but also those who hunt and fish for others of their breed—all provide further comment on the nature, operation, and effect of evil and point to a wholesale moral failure in the society of Elsinore. An objective consideration of the beast and the trap imagery enables the reader to avoid partial conclusions about the drama: for example, at one end of the critical spectrum, the view that Claudius is the complete villain of the piece, the source of all evil in Denmark, and Hamlet representative of divine forces; at the other end, the view that Claudius is “a good and gentle king, enmeshed by the chain of causality” and Hamlet a “poison” in the “healthy bustle” of the court.¹

Except for Fortinbras and others who appear briefly in the action, every character in the play is, at one time or another, described in a beast-image. The most frequently employed figure is that of a winged thing, usually a bird; and it is applied almost always to the young people in the play. Significantly, the exception is Claudius: when he describes his soul
as limed, one is reminded of a trap for birds; and he is called a bat, a pajock, perhaps indirectly a hawk. However, aside from these (and bat is, as we shall see, allied to another image cluster) and perhaps the figure of the "buzzers" who "infect [Laertes'] ear," the winged-creature image is not evoked for the old, though it is directly or indirectly applied to every member of the younger generation. Whether the likenesses are suggested by metaphor or simile, whether they are explicit or implicit labels, the following similarities are drawn: Ophelia and Laertes are called woodcocks (I.iii.115; V.ii.317); Laertes a pelican (IV.v.146); Horatio a bird (I.v.115); Hamlet, who questions whether he is pigeon-livered, a female dove (II.ii.605; V.i.309); Osric a waterfly, a chough, and a lapwing (V.ii.84, 89, 194). Even the child players described by Rosen­crantz are called an aerie of little eyases (II.ii.355). When Hamlet, at the end of his first talk with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, says, "I know a hawk from a handsaw" (397), it might be argued that he indirectly applies a hawk-image to his former schoolfellows. But if the line does comment on their nature, it is more likely that he identifies them with "handsaws" (and hernshaws): seeing his old friends as Clau­dius's tools, he declares that he (unlike Rosencrantz, who calls the tools of the writers little hawks) does not confuse a predator like Claudius with a Rosencrantz or a Guildenstern.

However that may be, the winged-creature figures do put the young people in the play in a category with Claudius. And though the traits thus ascribed to them (for example, the stupidity of the woodcock, the timidity of the pigeon, the triviality of the waterfly, the chattering of the chough, the silly activity of the lapwing, even the latent predaciousness of the little eyases) may not suggest the full-blown evil in the bat or pajock figures describing Claudius, still this figura­tive category is employed, for the most part, to diminish the human character rather than to aggrandize it. Furthermore, the same figure is used elsewhere only in descriptions of passion, undesirable circumstance, or questionable action: of hot love (II.ii.132), melancholy and danger (III.i.173-75), and secrecy (II.ii.305-6); in a description of the immature and untried: "new-hatch'd, unfledged comrade" (I.iii.65); and in
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a slant description of players, rather disparagingly characterized in the phrase “a forest of feathers” (III.ii.286). Even those figures that, in the immediate context, are inoffensively or favorably intended (see, for example, I.v.115; IV.v.146; V.i.309) do not dispel the force of the whole pattern suggesting that a character identified as a creature inferior to man errs against order and, capable of flight, debases a nature potentially “in action . . . like an angel.”

Another group of beast-images is used only in description of the older generation: Gertrude is called a mouse (III.iv.183); Polonius a rat (23) in an epithet intended for Claudius; and Claudius a bat, a mouse-like creature (190). According to a beast lore still familiar in Shakespeare’s day, the mole is sometimes described as a mouse; whether or not such lore invests the “old mole” with traits evoked in descriptions of Gertrude, Polonius, and Claudius, we shall find that there are connections between the Ghost and the mouse-figure. And in a play where a dramatic performance is a trap, intended—so the trapper says—to “catch the conscience of the king,” and where that drama is called “The Mouse-trap,” the mouse-image is important, a point we shall consider when we turn from a categorizing of beast-figures to the question of their significance.

The purpose of the character who applies an image to another character may not add up to the purpose of the playwright who gives him the words. Still, it is instructive simply to note what characters are linked by the same figurative label. The word beast is used in descriptions of Claudius and Pyrrhus (I.v.42; II.ii.472), whose descents from a proper human nature are defined in similar actions. But beast also becomes an alternative name for Osric (ostensibly a far cry from “hellish” killers) and for a general citizenry: “Let a beast be lord of beasts, and his crib shall stand at the king’s mess” (V.ii.87-89). The serpent-image is used only to identify Claudius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (I.v.39; III.iv.203); the ape-image only for Claudius and Gertrude (III.iv.194; IV.ii.19). It will be recalled that Hamlet links forgotten men (and he has been speaking of his father) with the hobbyhorse character in the Morris Dance. Shortly thereafter, in “Let the galled
jade wince, our withers are unwrung” (III.ii.252–53), he summons up the horse-figure, most pointedly for Claudius, but also for himself; still later, he again suggests this image for himself in the phrase “While the grass grows,” the unspoken conclusion of the proverb being, “the silly horse starves” (358–59). So all three representatives of the Danish royal house are, in some sense, linked with the horse-figure. There are other suggestive equivalences. The Danish rabble who cry, “Laertes shall be king” are labeled false dogs (IV.v.110); soon after this, Laertes, who leads this “riotous head,” is implicitly called dog (and cat) when Hamlet, after asking why Laertes should rant against him, says contemptuously, “Let Hercules himself do what he may, / The cat will mew and dog will have his day” (V.i.314–15;).7 Circumstance and the pattern of the references to Hercules suggest that dog and cat may also here be slant descriptions of Claudius, king of the “false Danish dogs,” a king whose guilt must be “unkennel[ed]” (III.ii.86) and who is also elsewhere called gib (III.iv.190). A calf-image is used for Polonius (III.ii.111); and men who seek safety in parchments are called calves and sheep (V.i.125). An ass-image is employed by Hamlet to describe himself (II.ii.611), by Hamlet for the First Clown (V.i.87), and indirectly by the First Clown for the Second Clown (64). Other beast-images characterize only one person: Hamlet calls Claudius a paddock (III.iv.190); he likens himself to a lion (I.iv.83) and a fox (IV.ii.32) and, indirectly, to a chameleon (III.ii.98). A number of the images of winged things noted above (pelican, water-fly, chough, lapwing, pajock, bird) appear only once.8

For the most part, the limited meaning of this imagery—that is, the intent of the speaker—is obvious: sometimes an adjective points to the trait the figure echoes—the lion is “hardy,” the dog “false,” the dove “patient.” Generally, intrinsic qualities of the animal inform the image: for example, the venomous nature of the adder; the predacity of the hawk; the wiliness of the fox; the stupidity of calf or ass. If one considers only a few of the labels that Hamlet applies to Claudius, context and connotation leave no doubt as to his meaning: the King is invested with the falsehood of serpent and dog; the vanity and lust of pajock and gib; the loathsomeness
of the paddock. Although the immediate significance of most of the epithets requires no belaboring, their meaning is often enriched if one takes into account a ready-made symbolism in the beast lore. Shakespeare shows his familiarity with this literature when Hamlet says that he “eat[s] the air” like the chameleon and when Laertes likens himself to the “life-rendering pelican.” The lore that apes are given to “deceits, impositions and flatteries” and that mice are “infidious . . . deceitful” and “in general most libidinous,” the female “more venereal than the male,” appropriately informs all uses of these particular images. Similarly, “old mole” is a suggestive name for the Ghost in the light of a traditional teaching: to wit, moles are “all blinde . . . and therefore came the proverb . . . to signifie a man without all judgement, wit or foresight”; it should “never enter into the heart of a reasonable man, that such beasts can love Religion.” Certainly, the belief that cats “in the time of Pestilence are not only apt to bring home venemous infection, but to poison a man with very looking upon him” lends a peculiar suitability to such a name for Laertes and Claudius.

Such lore may accommodate the speaker’s meaning, as when Hamlet links Claudius with the ape; or it may charge the epithet with meanings not intended by the speaker, as when Hamlet employs the term “old mole” for the Ghost. The three names he assigns to himself—lion, when he declares his hardiness; ass, when he laments his neglect of the dictates of an aristocratic concept of honor; fox, when he plays the elusive trickster—recall “that pretty fable of Esope” telling how these three beasts entered into “league.” But when the Lion commanded the Ass to make division of a certain booty, “the silly Asse regarding nothing but societie . . . and not honor and dignity, parted the same into three equall shares,” whereat the Lion “toar him to pieces” and then gave the job to the Fox. That wily beast satisfied the Lion’s view of honor and dignity by assigning him almost all of the booty. “Honour and dignity” are the qualities Hamlet specifies as the basis for determining one’s treatment of one’s fellows (II.ii.556—57), though (as we have noted) the “bounty” that he urges on Polonius is hardly in line with the conduct that reflects honor.
and dignity in the eyes of the Ghost. If this familiar lore does inform the choice of beast-figures for Hamlet, Shakespeare is manipulating the ironies inherent in the fable: though Hamlet, unlike both Lion and Ass, does implicitly link “honour and dignity” with society in his little lecture, he is also as capable as the beasts in the fable of finding them incompatible; and the eventual machinations of the fox Hamlet echo the progress of the old tale.

The beast imagery provides comment on the describer, as well as the person described. Since of the forty-odd instances listed above where a man is called a beast, three-fourths of them appear in Hamlet’s speech, they spotlight the character of the man who censures other men for “nick-nam[ing] God’s creatures.” Second, since he does not restrict his name-calling to Claudius but manages to fasten a beast-image on every principal character in the play and, on at least one occasion, to designate a whole group of human beings as beasts, we are repeatedly given his opinion of his own kind, and also perhaps a qualification, to some degree, of his opinion of Claudius, since he includes so many others in the same category. Third, and most important, Hamlet’s use of these figures reveals a progressive change in his character. Not once before his encounter with the Ghost does he describe a fellow man as a beast. Polonius and the Ghost do; but in the first act Hamlet expresses a distaste for such epithets. As we have seen, he tells Horatio that men of other nations “with swinish phrase / Soil [the Danes’] addition”; disapproving the custom that produces the label, he apparently disapproves of the labeling as well. At least, “swinish phrase” accommodates a twofold meaning—that the Danes are called swine and that such name-calling is swinish. His own first employment of a “swinish phrase” follows on his first meeting with the Ghost. Between that time and the death of Polonius, though the habit of applying abusive names to other men grows on him, he does not often directly and explicitly “soil [their] addition” by calling them beasts; and he applies such language to himself as often as to others. But with the presentation of the court entertainment, his use of such a comparison begins to increase; and after the killing of Polonius, the practice be-
comes habitual. Of the twenty-four epithets listed above that occur between the time Hamlet stabs at the arras and the end of the play, seventeen are employed by him; only one of these refers to himself, and all of the others are abusive.

Perhaps in another way the beast images provide comment on the describer. The only characters who identify others in exactly the same words are Laertes and Polonius (woodcock), Hamlet and the Ghost (beast), Hamlet and Gertrude (dog), and Hamlet and the First Clown (ass). Certain similarities between Laertes and his father and between Hamlet and his parents can hardly be denied. Whether Shakespeare intends to reinforce such likenesses by assigning to parent and son the same language is a moot question; nevertheless, the repetition, if fortuitous, effects a comparison. Similarly, when Hamlet laments that he is an ass, then (in lines taking for granted his unlikeness to the one described) applies the same name to a Clown who has just applied it to another Clown, the repetition—if chance—is still happily and ironically illustrative of a repeated thematic comment that a man may see the mote in the other fellow’s eye, but not in his own—at least, not see that it is the same mote.

The imagery often affords Shakespeare ironic comment on the action. That Polonius warns Laertes against the “new-hatch’d, unfledged comrade”; that Laertes later declares himself ready to imitate the bird who repasts her new-hatched brood with her blood; and that eventually Laertes has, as go-between for a duel to result in his death, a lapwing who “runs away with the shell on his head” (V.ii.193-94)—all this, if again chance, is the luckiest of figurative interplay. Similarly, Polonius’s describing himself as a player who was “killed i’ the Capitol” in the role of Julius Caesar and Hamlet’s immediately calling him a calf foreshadows the event where Polonius’s foolish plotting leads to the calf’s being sacrificed again, this time in the capitol of Denmark in a different kind of play role when he is mistakenly assigned the part of tyrant by the killer. Again, Hamlet’s describing himself as “hardy as the Nemean lion” in the face of any potential danger in an encounter with the Ghost has ironic overtones in its echo of one of his own earlier speeches: he has declared that Claudius is
no more like King Hamlet than he [Hamlet] is like Hercules (I.ii.152–53). Such an analogy implies not only difference between the two brothers and between Hamlet and Hercules but also a similarity between King Hamlet and Hercules; thus, when Hamlet draws a likeness between himself and the lion killed by Hercules (I.iv.82–83), he unwittingly stresses the danger to him in the situation, rather than his strength to withstand harm.12

In the scene where Osric delivers Laertes’ challenge and is himself baited, Hamlet’s characterization of the messenger twice hinges on a characterization of the age (see V.ii.87–89; 196–97); and Osric’s conduct serves, in turn, to define the nature of those with whom he is figuratively identified. He is, Hamlet says, “of the same breed that . . . the drossy age dotes on” (V.ii.196–97). If we are to judge by Hamlet’s descriptions of him, it is a beastly breed. If we are to judge by Osric’s own words and actions, it is a breed marked by an extravagant and insubstantial speech, a taste for show, an indiscriminate regard for form and custom, a pretense to excellence, a lack of understanding. Aspects of his verbal exchange with Hamlet provide peculiar (if limited) warrant for Hamlet’s extending his judgment of Osric to a judgment of the court; for whether consciously or not, Hamlet establishes points of similarity between the foolish young courtier and a foolish old one to whom he also has repeatedly affixed beast labels and whose “crib” also stood “at the king’s mess.” In his wordiness, Osric is not unlike Polonius; and Hamlet, employing exactly the technique he used in baiting the prolix chamberlain, leads Osric into exactly the same compliant self-contradiction (cf. III.ii.393–99; V.ii.97–104). Also, as Hamlet mimicked Polonius (see II.ii.408–9), he apes Osric, if not in the same fashion; and Osric’s ears are assailed by a parody of his own extravagance, as earlier the equivocator Polonius was treated to equivocation or as the old “buzzer” and infector of ears had the sound of gossip returned to him in Hamlet’s “Buz, buz!” Such mimicry vividly (albeit ambiguously) illustrates the recoil of speech or action on its source, a significant motif in this play. And by echoing Osric’s nonsense to his con-
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fusion, Hamlet contemptuously makes him bear witness to the lack of understanding and rule behind his facade of words. In important part because of the figurative equations that Hamlet belabors, his exposé of Osric’s lack of substance provides a perspective on his own nature; and the inanity, compliance, and ignorance that he holds up to scorn invite comparisons that he cannot intend. One remembers that “some necessary question of the play” may be considered by way of a Clown when one sees that certain scales do not tip when the lightweight Osric is balanced against men of more force. Osric’s penchant for “golden words” (V.ii.136) may take a different form from the moral maxims of Polonius, the sensible argument that Claudius is capable of voicing, the high wisdom of Hamlet; still, his silly talk is no less empty than admirable speech denied in action. Osric may be trifling, but he is of the “same breed” as Polonius, similarly given to art without matter (II.ii.95); as Claudius, with whom he is identified by the word beast; even as the bird Hamlet, who recognizes no point of relationship between himself and this “chough” whose chatter falls so far short of his own wit. Posturing, false-seeming, the utterance of sound without substance are characteristics insistently connected with the beast, and the beastliness of the court is reflected in the counterfeit speech and action of this frivolous courtier who, in turn, invests beastliness with smallness. Thus, Osric serves to caricature the shortcomings of men more highly endowed in mind and character than he. At the same time, as a tool of men whose purposes he does not know, he demonstrates the predicament of the uninformed who elsewhere in the play serve the ends of evil. Like other young people with whom the bird images identify him, Osric is a pawn in a game that he does not even know is in progress; and his ignorance of the stakes is ironically underscored as he officiously details the wager and the arrangements of the “knightly” affair proposed by Claudius. Even Shakespeare’s recurrent implication that there is something redeemable in every man is found in Osric’s portrait and is perhaps thrown into sharper relief by Hamlet’s contempt for this waterfly, chough, lapwing, beast: as umpire of the duel, he calls the touches fairly; he shows concern for Gertrude;
and no one, in Shakespeare’s day, at least, would be likely to consider a regard for manner, custom, authority—to all of which Osric intends respect—as, in itself, undesirable.

Although Osric is absurd and Hamlet’s remarks about him are sometimes rather more humorous than sardonic, irony keynotes the whole scene. Again, we see Hamlet contradict in action the spirit of the avowal that one should treat other men according to one’s own dignity and honor, and thus put in question either his honesty or the dignity and honor that connives at such contempt. Again, we see him sitting in judgment on a fellow with no awareness that he censures himself. His scorn of Osric’s business with hat and message recalls his determination to model his own action on Fortinbras’s foray against the Poles, also a business he initially saw as vain and futile. The irony is compounded when (just after Osric leaves) Hamlet, deciding to duel with Laertes despite a sense of misgiving, says, “There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (V.ii.230–31). He thus declares the place of all living creatures in a divine plan and, presumably, their consequence—an admirable philosophy. But characteristically, the biblical echo is employed when he thinks of himself and his own fate. He has been handing out bird labels to point to another man’s inconsequence, ridiculing another man’s high-flown speech and self-contradiction. Now he makes a noble speech about—of all things—God’s concern in what happens to a bird. There is, of course, no necessary incompatibility in all this: but the easy and self-serving switch from pejorative bird-images to a declaration about the importance of a bird in the scheme of things smacks of his habitual inconsistency, his habitual resort to a noble speech directly at odds with his actions.

When Hamlet, in describing Osric as a “breed” the age dotes on and characterizing him in beast-figures, implies that the age dotes on the beast, he is criticizing the drossiness of the age and of the men it esteems. He is ridiculing not so much a regard for form, custom, and show, as the shape it takes. Yet, earlier, the Norman Lamond—who is held in the highest respect by society, who represents what Hamlet himself admires, and who is, ostensibly, the very opposite to the modish
Osric in his adherence to custom—is also subtly identified with a beast. Claudius praises the Norman:

... he grew unto his seat;
And to such wondrous doing brought his horse,
As had he been incorpsed and demi-natured
With the brave beast: so far he topp'd my thought,
That I, in forgery of shapes and tricks,
Come short of what he did.

(IV.vii.86-91)

According to Claudius, Lamond's report of Laertes' skill with the rapier makes Hamlet wish to test himself against Laertes; thus, the reference to Lamond provides a history and an explanation for wager and challenge. But the passage goes beyond what plot requires. The account of Lamond's horsemanship and of Laertes' swordplay stresses the great esteem in which prowess in these knightly activities is held: Lamond is called "the brooch indeed / And gem of all the nation" (94-95); and his report of Laertes' art, which the "scrimers" of France could not match, "envenom[s]" Hamlet with envy—if we can believe Claudius. Proficiency in these skills—particularly in horsemanship, for which Claudius expresses a higher regard than for fencing and which he specifically assigns to the battlefield (84-85)—is useful in a "warlike state"; as skills, they are admirable in themselves. But Lamond, in whom a knightly art has reached a peak of excellence, appears therefore "demi-natured"; and whatever Claudius's intent, the description of Lamond has, in view of the overall pattern of beast imagery, implications reaching beyond the immediate context.

In a play where beast-figures repeatedly imply a departure from proper human nature, here is a man highly regarded because he seems half man, half horse. In a play where society exalts "antiquity [and] custom . . . / The ratifiers and props of every word" (IV.v.104-5) and ratifies and props a definition of honor by ancient custom, the "gem" of such a society has grown unto his seat and appears "incorpsed" with an animal. Despite Claudius's intention to invest Lamond with the bravery of the horse and thus enlarge a human excellence,
figurative patterns throughout the play charge his words with pejorative meanings. The trapping imagery, to which we shall soon turn our attention, posits a relationship between entrapment in the form of a beast and a fall from human nature, a premise that accommodates the connotations of corruption in “incorpsed.” Earlier, the “hellish” Pyrrhus is described as “couchèd in the ominous horse” (II.ii.485, 476). The literal circumstance recalled in this allusion to the most famous of traps serves a pervasive figurative comment on the condition of the trapper, as well as the nature of trapping. And (in this play) horse is, if not ominous, charged by its connection with a show of some sort, with false appearance, or with inner disorder—whether Trojan horse, the “gift” that hides a murderous intent; hobbyhorse, the entertainer who, in accord with ancient custom, puts on the semblance of a beast; or jade galled by hidden guilt.

Thus, latent in the description of Lamond, extolled for a performance that the King says his “forgery” comes short of duly presenting, is the intimation that the Norman’s “shapes and tricks” are defined by the forger. What is illustrated by Claudius’s admiration is articulated by Hamlet in his disparagement of Osric: Claudius’s praise links knightly custom and martial criteria with a man who is “demi-natured,” and Hamlet’s disparaise links false social values with admiration for a beastly man. When we hear a man who “grew unto” a beast lauded as the jewel of a nation and shortly thereafter that the “age dotes on” a beastly breed, we are struck less by the difference between two admired breeds than by the uniformity of the society that esteems them both; and we are led to question prevalent standards, whether embodied by Lamond and prefigured in his equestrian show or typified by Osric and imaged in his counterfeit courtliness. And when the epitome of knightly skills is said to be “incorpsed” and the exponent of current fashion is shown to be an ignorant medium for murder hidden in the guise of a knightly duel, we must infer that in “that monster, custom, who all sense doth eat,” in blind adherence to form and inadequate ideal, may lie trap and death.

Less than a hundred lines after the description of the Nor-
man as “incorpsed and demi-natured / With the . . . beast” comes a description of Ophelia as “mermaid-like” in the water, “like a creature native and indued / Unto that element” (IV. vii.177,180–81). Again, it may be argued that such lines are mere picturesque embellishment. But, repeatedly, we have found water and flood equated with evil, and beast imagery defining the consequence of improper rule. The result of “go[ing] to this water” and of having it “come to [the man] and drown him,” the role of wrong choice and of mischance—both are aptly illustrated in the fate of Ophelia and in the description of her as like a creature half maid, half fish. She has chosen to mistrust Hamlet, later to allow Claudius and the “fishmonger” Polonius to “loose” her so that they can bait him; but she has been misled by a sense of duty, and she is a victim of circumstance, as well as will. Such history is recalled in the account of her fall into the water and her drowning: we hear of a foolish “clambering” on a “pendant bough”; an accidental breaking of a “sliver”; an ambivalent effect from garments that first “bore her up” but eventually “pull’d [her] to muddy death” (167–84). And, appropriately, though the image of the mermaid, along with those of the centaur and the beastly breed of man, may hit hard, here near the end of the play, at the result of an assent to misrule, “mermaid-like” tips the scale toward a human rather than a beastly nature. So, just prior to this, has Ophelia’s speech in madness: it, too, has reflected a demi-natured creature; but in her lewdness one is led to find another demonstration of the pestilential nature of evil, in such talk only the effect of her father’s “contagious blastments.” That she is not a “creature . . . indued / Unto that element” and that Claudius is not wholly right when he says that she is “divided from herself and her fair judgement, / Without the which we are . . . mere beasts” is revealed by the prevailing truth and goodness in her speech even when she is “distract.”

In short, not only the transforming power of evil but the degree of the individual assent to it, earlier projected in her speech in madness, is imaged in “mermaid-like,” as Shakespeare interweaves the strands of various figurative patterns with the literal details of the death he assigns her. And whereas
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the portraits of the demi-natured Lamond and Osric stress the immediate effect of either a lack of discrimination between values or a perversion of values, the description of the drowning Ophelia—while reiterating that beastliness and death may be, in part, the work of fortune and ignorance—also suggests that such consequences, given such causes, are not ultimate. The complex figurative interplay reinforces the general impression of Ophelia's character and leads us to doubt that Heaven's judgment accords with the judgment of a society that dotes on two young men it has victimized and denies the "mermaid-like" Ophelia burial in hallowed ground. Such conclusions are upheld by the comment in the trapping imagery, which we shall now consider, and from which grows a crucial general statement on a conduct common to all the principals of the play. Set over against it, in a counterpoint employing the same figurative referents, is an equally significant comment on another kind of conduct, one rarely found in Hamlet.

II

Frequently, those identified as beasts are also described as trapped or subject to trap. The "limed soul" of Claudius evokes a trap for birds; Polonius calls Hamlet's vows to Ophelia, "springes to catch woodcocks" (I.iii.115); Laertes, wounded by the sword he has anointed with a venom for Hamlet, says, "[I am] as a woodcock to mine own springe" (V.ii.317); Hamlet, who later identifies himself to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a fox, asks them, "Why do you go about to recover the wind of me, as if you would drive me into a toil?" (III.ii.361-62); likening Gertrude to a beast who foolishly enters a trap, Hamlet says to her, "In despite of sense and secrecy, / Unpeg the basket on the house's top, / Let the birds fly, and, like the famous ape, / To try conclusions, in the basket creep" (III.iv.192-95). The characters describe themselves or others as hunters or fishers: Polonius "hunts . . . the trail of policy" (II.ii.47); Hamlet sees Claudius as a fisher who has "thrown out his angle for [Hamlet's] proper life" (V.ii.66); suggestively, even an invitation to a dramatic performance is expressed in terms of an indiscriminate hawking when Hamlet
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says, "We'll e'en to 't like French falconers, fly at any thing we see" (II.ii.449-50). The recurrent references to trap for the mouse, basket for ape and bird, springe and toil and angle for bird, animal, and fish, as well as to a predacious nature in the characters, forces the reader to reckon with the possibility of imminent trap for anyone identified in beast imagery. Thus, Hamlet's being greeted by the falconer's call to the hawk, "Hillo, ho, ho," just after he has talked with the Ghost, takes on an especial significance.

In short, the imagery suggests that in their treatment of their own kind, the various characters of the play have the beast in view and that those who partake of a beast nature are vulnerable to trap. Since both the trappers and the trapped men are described in beast images, beast eats beast in this "unweeded garden," and the closely interwoven pattern of image and event presents a twofold motif: the trapper trapped and, conversely, the prey as predator. At the opening of the play, Francisco says in answer to whether he has had "quiet guard" (the appearance of the Ghost denotes unquiet guard), "Not a mouse stirring" (I.i.10). Then the mouse-Ghost appears and tells the story that, reenacted in the dumb show, "imports the argument" of "The Mouse-trap." The quarry of "The Mouse-trap" is the erstwhile mouser Claudius, who has also trapped the "mouse" Gertrude; and in reproducing Claudius's actions, Hamlet plays with him in cat-and-mouse fashion: the King watches a silent facsimile of his own trapping, not knowing whether it is trap or not, and is lured by seeming avenues of escape in Hamlet's observations on the play (III.ii.250-53). Not until Hamlet, imitating the poisoner, pours into the King's ears the argument of the play is Claudius sure of Hamlet's intent. And just as Claudius's own acts recoil upon him, so "The Mouse-trap" recoils upon Hamlet, whose death becomes the object of the King.

Trap-setting in Hamlet usually produces the same result; even if the outcome is not revealed, the character of the trapping, in its likeness to other inventions "fall'n on the inventors' heads," implies an inevitable rebound of the trap on the trapper. Polonius's method for enticing the "Danskers" in Paris into revealing the "truth" about Laertes is not unlike the
method Hamlet employs in the dumb show and the play: Reynaldo is to present "forgeries" that, so Polonius argues, will elicit truths. And of Laertes, his father tells Reynaldo, "Observe his inclination" (II.i.71), as Hamlet tells Horatio, "Observe mine uncle" (III.ii.85). We do not learn the consequence of Polonius's scheme; but quite aside from its dishonorable nature, that such a practice could redound on Polonius in discrediting his son is obvious. Perhaps the teaching of a father who can justify the use of falsehood in the pursuit of honor is implicit in the means Laertes later employs to vindicate his honor: if so, when the "contagion" on the sword point "gall[s]" him (IV.vii.148), the infection in Polonius's speech returns on his own house. In a variation on the insistent figurative suggestion of the danger in speech, when Polonius places himself "in the ear / Of all [the] conference" between Hamlet and Gertrude (III.i.192-93), he finds the "ear" a vulnerable spot when Hamlet "speak[s] daggers" (III.ii.414). Polonius, like his son, may be killed by a weapon in Hamlet's hand; but he, too, invites his own destruction when he sets a mousetrap and is taken for a "rat."

Whether the pattern of recoil is illuminated by an imagery that identifies the victimizing speaker with the victim hearer or the beastly trapper with the trapped beast, the return of a destructive practice on the practitioner in a fitting measure is a leitmotif of the action: as the sword poisoned by Laertes kills him, so the drink poisoned by Claudius kills him and the wife whose welfare he cherishes. The pattern explicates the fate of Hamlet: aping madness to peg a basket for an ape, he is caught in his own springe, eventually unable to differentiate clearly between seeming and reality. And, similarly, since the Ghost does not want Gertrude "contriv[ed] against" or Hamlet's mind "taint[ed]," his vengefulness backfires. Even the lot of those who, desiring no man's death, still initiate or implement indirection contains variations, if in a minor key, on the theme that the punishment reflects the fault: Polonius, the exponent of the hidden and the roundabout procedure, finds the arras that obscures his true identity fatal; Rosen­crantz and Guildenstern, trappers by proxy, become victims by proxy; Gertrude, won to a union with her husband's brother
and accepting as "lawful" his and Polonius's use of Ophelia to spy on Hamlet (III.i.32), finds what lawlessness may accompany a "union" and a false practice when she drinks of the cup prepared for Hamlet; Ophelia, taught to mistrust, is mistrusted and, accessory to her father's first use of the arras, shares in the result of the second.

Thus, the motif of fitting recoil applies to all the victims. This statement, of course, requires considerable qualification, as does Hamlet's declaration about the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "Their defeat / Does by their own insinuation grow" (V.ii.58–59). Nevertheless, the fate of all of the principals may be, to some extent, clarified by the figurative and structural relationship between trapping and being trapped, between being mined and mining; by the workings of a pattern where a Ghost, in armor and prison-house, seeking a revenge that surely proves a bitter one, initiates a process wherein men, already limed by evil or brassed by "damned custom," are caught in traps they set for others. And this movement is precisely echoed in a mining imagery: the charge of the "old mole," a "worthy pioner" (I.v.163), starts the process where "the enginer [is] / Hoist with his own petar" (III.iv.206–7); and as the "worthy pioner" is himself already "blasted," so there is a recurrent implication that those who try to "blow [others] at the moon" are already infected by "corruption, mining all within" (209,148).

The error of all of the victims—if the beast-figures describing them are accurate—is generally defined in the passages where explicit distinctions are drawn between man and the beast. Claudius, as well as Hamlet, repeatedly expounds on this subject. Very early in the play, he calls Hamlet's excessive grief "unmanly": it shows improper rule, "a will most incorrect to heaven," and it is "to reason most absurd" (I.ii.94–95,103). Shortly thereafter, Hamlet invokes the same distinctions in implying that Gertrude's lack of grief falls short, not only of a human nature, but even of a beast nature: "a beast, that wants discourse of reason, / Would have mourn'd longer" (150–51). Later, in speeches that are again juxtaposed, Hamlet says:
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What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.
Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unused.

(IV.iv.33–39);

and Claudius says, “Without ['fair judgement'] we are . . . mere beasts” (85–86).

God-like reason, proper rule, fair judgment: these distinguish a human from a beastly nature. Claudius’s recognition of what raises man above the beast underscores the willfulness of his exercise of unreason when, for example, after lamenting his “heavy burthen” and declaring that his “wretched state” is the effect of sin (III.i.54;iii.66–67), he chooses to sin again. Laertes willfully rejects rule when he declares, “Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!” (IV.v.132). Whether sleeping and feeding were “the chief good and market” of King Hamlet’s time, the words occur in descriptions of him, ironically by his greatest admirers: he is trapped sleeping, his “custom always of the afternoon” (I.v.59–60), and “full of bread” (III.iii.80), a phrase that recalls a biblical description of Sodom: “pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness.”

Gertrude, too, is described in a feeding imagery: “Why, she would hang on [King Hamlet], / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on,” Hamlet says of her, and later to her, “Could you on this fair mountain [King Hamlet] leave to feed, / And batten on this moor [Claudius]?” (I.ii.143–45; III.iv.66–67). Such details support the traditional connotations in the mouse and mole figures and imply a fall from judgment and rule, although both of Hamlet’s parents are equipped with such qualities (see, for example, I.v.27 and II.ii.95). And however much some of Hamlet’s admirers may boggle at the suggestion that he can be beastly, by his own definition he can be so labeled. When, for example, he muses on Fortinbras’s march against the Poles and cites “discourse” and reason as human attributes denied the beast, he is shown
in one of his most startling displays of unreason. His reason tells him that the Poles will never defend a worthless "little patch of ground"; that lives and wealth are vainly expended on a trifling matter; that the whole action is "the imposthume of much wealth and peace, / That inward breaks, and shows no cause without/Why the man dies" (IV.iv.23,25–29). But after thus criticizing Fortinbras's action, he turns about and, as if it were a touchstone to excellence, declares, "How all occasions do inform against me"; after saying that God does not give men "reason / To fust in [them] unused," he takes the stand that Fortinbras's action, which he has found unreasonable, must be his model. First, he says that men must be led by "god-like reason"; then, by "examples gross as earth." Ironically, Shakespeare shows him philosophizing on the advantages of the human gifts of discourse and reason, then discoursing and reasoning that the praiseworthy way to settle differences is physical combat—what any beast is capable of. The stirring sound of Hamlet's words should not mislead the reader: he is unreasonable in the very speech that extols reason; changing color like the chameleon he earlier likens himself to, he glorifies what he has just labeled an "imposthume."

Here Shakespeare gives us a pointed illustration of the error that Hamlet has just warned Gertrude against: reason pandering will (III.iv.88). And this is a fault common to characters in other ways dissimilar. "Reason pandars will" in the Ghost's slant description of himself (I.v.55), despite the realities of his state; and in Polonius's telling Reynaldo to accuse Laertes of gaming, drinking, swearing, quarreling, drabbing, but not to say anything that will dishonor him, rather to "breathe his faults so quaintly" that they may seem "the taints of liberty" (II.i.24–32). And though Claudius, who sees good clearly and chooses evil deliberately, does not casuistically call evil good, he does call it his good when he names the death of Hamlet his "cure" (IV.iii.67–69). Since he elsewhere admits that one murder has brought him sickness, the declaration that another will bring him health shows reason pandering will, as when Milton's Satan, despite his admission that to be
greatest in evil is to be most miserable, cries, "Evil be thou my good."

If a departure from reason, rule, and judgment defines a fall from proper human nature, it is not difficult to establish the appropriateness of the beast labels for all the principals. But though it may be second nature to Polonius to pervert reason to serve the ends of self, rather than himself serving the ends of reason; though Gertrude's hasty remarriage may reflect a lack of rule and judgment and the feeding imagery describing her recall the "chief good and market" of the beast; though it might be argued that Ophelia is ill-judging to put her faith in her father's words, instead of Hamlet's, and even that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern too thoughtlessly assume that authority is not to be questioned, still such error is qualified by an absence of ill will and a lack of knowledge. Polonius wants no man's death; Gertrude, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are like the little eyases: they are not the authors of destructive plots against their fellows. But Hamlet foresees the recoil of the action of the little eyases on themselves when they are adult performers; and if, as the figurative pattern imports, the consequence suggests a voluntary wrongdoing, then even those who are unwitting tools of men with murderous intents may be, if trapped, identified in some sense as trappers. For essentially, the idea behind the peculiar demonstrations in Hamlet of a man's being "hoist with his own petar" seems to be as uncompromising as "The wages of sin is death," a prediction that does not differentiate between sins.

A purpose and a fault that those who do not want any man's death share with those who do are a search for truth and a willingness to deal in untruth. Shakespeare takes pains to point to the inaccurate reporting of fact in the court, not just to the difference in the eyes of the beholders by which he suggests the difficulty of arriving at truth, but to the willful misrepresentation and the almost mechanical deceit that by its very needlessness reveals the pernicious climate of a country wherein there is a fallout of falsehood. Polonius, who counsels, "To thine own self be true, / And it must follow, as the night the day / Thou canst not then be false to any man" (I.iii.78-80), exemplifies the prevalent discipleship to self. The incon-
sequence of his misleading account to Claudius and Gertrude of his reason for telling Ophelia to avoid Hamlet's company attests to the self-corruption that attends a relative standard of conduct. And his daughter, on one occasion at least, proves native to the element of equivocation, which is as natural as water in Denmark: her words to Hamlet when she "re-delivers" his gifts—"to the noble mind / Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind" (III.i.100–101)—unfairly load the scales in her own favor. A claim to the "noble mind," while unjustly putting all the blame for her action on the unkindness of Hamlet, directs us to sympathize with his reaction, "Ha, ha! are you honest?" Gertrude, after agreeing not to inform the King that Hamlet "essentially [is] not in madness" (III.iv.187), goes a long step further and says that he is mad (IV.i.7); and just after she hears Hamlet remark on Polonius's dead body with "I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room" (III.iv.212), she reports that he weeps over Polonius's death. If so, her interpretation of the weeping (IV.i.25–27) misrepresents what she and we have seen and heard. Even in a play where the danger in false-seeming is insistently emphasized, one might be led to make allowance for a mother's protective instincts; but what strikes one about Gertrude's untruths is that they are essentially needless. As for Rosen­crantz and Guildenstern, latest come to court and least tainted by the prevailing climate, they are led, by the nature of their employment, to an equivocation that, though transient, contains the seed of their destruction. "What's the news?" says Hamlet at their arrival in Elsinore; and Rosencrantz answers, "None, my lord, but that the world's grown honest" (II.ii.240–42). Being the stuff of inconsequential talk, perhaps this remark should not be "set in a note-book . . . To cast into [the speaker's] teeth" when he later tells of the use made of the child players in a "nation [that] holds it no sin to tarre [people] to controversy" (370). But a characteristically Shakespearean irony marks an assertion that "the world's grown honest" by a speaker who is dodging the import of a question. When Hamlet replies that the "news is not true" and, questioning "more in particular," asks why they are come to court, both of his friends avoid answering; again he
asks, and again Rosencrantz equivocates, "To visit you, my lord; no other occasion" (279); four times more he repeats the question in various forms, and they continue to hedge. It is not until he says, "If you love me, hold not off" that Guildenstern answers directly, "My lord, we were sent for" (301–3). The awkwardness of their evasions suggests that neither is an experienced dissembler and that when Hamlet says that they have "a kind of confession in [their] looks which [their] modesties have not craft enough to colour" (288–90), he describes them more truly than later when he implies that they are liars (III.ii.372) and invests them with the craft of "adders" (III.iv.203). And though Rosencrantz's report to the King that Hamlet has been "niggard of question; but, of our demands, / Most free in his reply" (III.i.13–14) is not precisely in line with Guildenstern's "Nor do we find him forward to be sounded, / But, with a crafty madness, keeps aloof, / When we would bring him on to some confession / Of his true state" (7–10), the reading that recommends itself for all of the speeches of both men, after their initial essay at a dissembling unnatural to them, is that they say what they believe. But the fact that they are not, at first, straightforward with Hamlet evokes his mistrust; and such reaction (like his mistrust of Ophelia), if growing out of all proportion, serves to illustrate the boomerang of the equivocating speech or act.

If one asks what springs the trap for the fox Hamlet, the bat Claudius, the rat Polonius, the mouse Gertrude, the woodcocks Ophelia and Laertes, even the "hernshaws" Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, one does not ask only what baits them, but also what bait they use, since according to the pattern of recoil, all are, to some extent, self-destroyed. Polonius says, "Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth" (II.i.63); but obviously the "carp" that the "buzzer" and "fishmonger" brings to market is not truth. Yet all of the trappers (and their tools) hold to Polonius's philosophy: all try "by indirects [to] find directions out" (66). When the King and Polonius put into effect the latter's plan to "loose [his] daughter" to Hamlet (II.ii.162) so that they may determine the nature of Hamlet's "madness," Ophelia is an accomplice in the matter and, at her father's bidding, adopts a "show" to
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"colour [her] loneliness" (III.i.45–46). Gertrude, also privy to this trapping, without protest accepts the method of the King and Polonius; later, not objecting to the "craft" that Hamlet admits to practicing on Claudius (III.iv.188), she again becomes accessory to whatever false-seeming may lead to. Laertes, under the King's tutelage, sets the "bait of falsehood" in inviting Hamlet to what purports to be a contest of skill. And Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, though knowing nothing of the King's plot to have Hamlet killed in England, are (like Ophelia) caught by a manifestation of a method they earlier countenance. What springs the trap for all is their own acceptance of untruth: setting the "bait of falsehood," they are trapped by "indirections." If such an argument (that entrapment in Hamlet posits a willful connivance at trapping and that the fate of all elaborates on the self-destruction in the use of false-seeming) appears untenable, since the consequence may be out of proportion to the offense or does not properly discriminate between the small offender and the great, one is forgetting the significance of such lines as "Above . . . the action lies / In his true nature" (III.iii.60–62) and incorrectly inferring from the argument that only physical destruction defines and punishes error.

The comment we have been tracing in the beast-trap imagery on the nature and effect of sin, joined to an invocation to proper action, the antithesis to setting the "bait of falsehood," appears in words spoken by the mad Ophelia: "They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be. God be at your table!" (IV. v.41–43). The old legend illustrates again the sinner's beastliness and entrapment: the baker's daughter, who refuses to give bread to Christ, is changed into an owl; her lack of humanity makes her subject to trap, and her nature is crystallized when she is "incorpsed" in the form of a beast. And the figurative likeness between her and the victims in Hamlet identifies their failing with hers and points to the alternative action they, too, neglected: to give bread to Christ, to have God at their table. "Conceit upon her father," explains Claudius when he hears Ophelia say the latter words; and indeed it is, but not upon the chamberlain Polonius, whom the King has
in mind. Shakespeare's conceit is subtly operating in Clau­dius's explanation, as Ophelia's later words suggest: "It is the false steward, that stole his master's daughter" (172-73). In a drama that concerns the duty and honor owed to earthly fathers, we are reminded at various times and in various ways —this is one of them—that a prior duty and honor is owed to a heavenly father and that an offense against him (against Truth, Reason, Order) is incompatible with a proper discharge of one's duties to or as an earthly father. Such allu­sions as those to the baker's daughter who refused to give bread to Christ and to the false steward who stole his master's daughter evoke the theological commonplace that man's health and freedom are ultimately dependent on the Food and the Word.

By its very nature, an exposition of a complex figurative pattern may invest the most subtle play of image and idea with its own heavyhandedness; but though such language as the Food and the Word may not seem appropriate to Shake­speare, the concept in the words is essentially what his fancy is manipulating. We are reminded by these allusions, not only that the chamberlain's daughter, who refuses to trust in Ham­let's "holy vows," eventually becomes mad and like one "demi­natured" and that the chamberlain, serving the "bait of falsehood," turns "God's creature" into bait, but also that bait and falsehood, rather than bread and truth, are the prevalent forms of exchange in Denmark. A beastly feeding is the "mar­ket of [the] time," whether the beast feeds on the mountain or battens on the moor, or in other ways gobbles up his own kind. Hamlet's comment on the worm that eats of a king, the fish that eats of the worm, the beggar that eats of the fish, so that "a king [goes] a progress through the guts of a beggar" (IV.iii.28-33) is the process in this world where beast eats beast, where "fat king and ... lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table" (24-25). In a court where men do not have God at their table, they feed on one another in a cannibalistic free-for-all and "fat [themselves] for maggots."

Though the trappers in Hamlet think that falsehood can catch truth, Polonius's description of truth as "this carp" con-
notes that the nature of the catch is appropriate to the method: those who "angle" catch something that, in this play, moves in an element of evil. And the figurative implications are borne out in the dramatic action as the trappers and fishers, rejecting the Word for falsehood and the Food for bait, failing to give bread to Christ and to have God at their table, invite self-destruction: metaphorical design and literal event insistently echo and reecho the predications that the man who sets in motion the sound of evil is bound to bear its reverberations and that the man who baits others baits himself.

III

Sidney Warhaft says, "When we think of King Hamlet's 'foul crimes' done in his 'days of nature' we are confronted with . . . fantastic possibilities. Had things perhaps begun to decline to their confounding contraries before Claudius dispatched his brother?"21 According to the figurative comment, the condition envisioned in this question is more than possibility and less than fantastic. Indeed, behind the immediate circumstances and also behind events taking place in the lifetime of King Hamlet is a garden where the father of falsehood, incorpored in the form of a beast, poisons the ears of Eve and baits her with an apple. The poison-ear imagery, the confinement and beast-trap imagery, the process of self-destruction as the victims are tempted and defeated by the "bait of falsehood," recall a start for "confounding contraries" long before Claudius reenacts the role of the serpent in the garden and the others imitate Satan insofar as they put on the nature of the beast. Hamlet is played out against a backdrop of the Fall. If one shies a bit at Kitto's declaration that in this play "the Tragic Hero, ultimately, is humanity itself," one must concede that the figurative comment supports the rest of his sentence, "and what humanity is suffering from . . . is not a specific evil, but Evil itself."22

This is not to deny the obvious: evil takes on specific forms in Hamlet, and its prime early manifestation is the murder of King Hamlet, a catalyst that looses a flood of evil on Den-
mark. But the large perspective afforded by the metaphorical design must qualify our opinion of Hamlet's view that all of the corruption in Denmark emanates from Claudius, as our knowledge of all that Shakespeare says, not just what he says by way of Hamlet, must qualify an adoption of Hamlet's opinions. Those critics who take Hamlet for their moral interpreter must also accept a "moral interpretation" by any character echoing Hamlet's convictions, no matter how questionable Shakespeare's manipulation of incident reveals it to be. "The king, the king's to blame," cries Laertes (V.i.331) when he and Hamlet are wounded by the poisoned sword, the baiting of which is not the King's idea but Laertes' own elaboration of the plot. And critics who show no charity when Laertes is the object of their criticism take up the refrain when they focus on Claudius. Yet Laertes—willing to "dare damnation" before the King proposes the duel, admitting to Osric that he is caught in his own springe and to Hamlet that the "foul practice" has "turn'd itself" on him—sums up the whole matter on a familiar note that sounds ironically throughout the play: "The king's to blame." There is, of course, truth in Laertes' words, but such abridgment is neither consistent nor accurate, surely a significant fact here at the end of the play and one reinforcing an ambivalence in the accusation not intended by the accuser. The technique is one that Shakespeare employs repeatedly: the report not quite in line with what we have seen; the words contradicted by the speaker's actions or by other words of his; the description contrary to what we see and hear. "Most generous and free from all contriving" is Claudius's description of Hamlet (IV.vii.136) after the presentation of "The Mouse-trap" has convinced him that Hamlet is dangerous and shortly before we hear Hamlet's account of his cruel contrivance against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. "A very noble youth" is Hamlet's description of Laertes (V.i.247) not long after we see Laertes plotting treachery and murder and just before Hamlet's contemptuous use of dog and cat images to describe him.

Shakespeare does not employ this technique to encourage us to accept any one character's description or opinion of another; and certainly the import of the figurative pattern, as
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well as a process described in it, pointedly warns us against
heeding only the persuasive rhetoric that Hamlet pours into
our ears. Nevertheless, critical judgments of all the charac-
ters sometimes rely only on Hamlet’s words or some of his
words. It has been said that Claudius “had a small nature,” an
estimate that picks up Hamlet’s contempt for his uncle,
but not his description, “mighty opposite,” and that discounts
the evidence of Claudius’s courage, strength, intelligence, ad-
ministrative wisdom and diplomacy, dignity, and charm. To
grant Claudius admirable qualities is not to sentimentalize
over him any more than over Satan when one accepts a seven-
teenth-century estimate of him as the Adversary “in courage
most hardie, in strength most mightie, in policies most subtle,
in diligence unweariable.” The corruption of the “noble sub-
stance,” which engages Hamlet’s attention in his brief defini-
tion of tragedy, is a basic subject of the play. And in Claudius,
as in Milton’s Satan, the glimpses of ruined virtue measure the
destructiveness of sin and the extent of corruption. To argue
that Claudius is “small” in nature is not only to disregard the
workings of a fundamental theme but to minimize Hamlet’s
problem and to cheapen the whole tragic effect. On the other
hand, whatever one may say of Claudius’s flashes of honesty,
his pangs of conscience, the surface order of his rule, his cour-
tesy or tact or concern for his subjects, to declare that he
represents health and normality and Hamlet sickness and
abnormality (on the basis of any level for argument) is to turn
the play topsy-turvy and to ignore the theme that an evil
deed unrepented brings on a continual ruining from good.
Claudius may have noble attributes, and so long as he is top
dog, his own will not opposed, he may display the better side
of his nature; but he is also a “bloody . . . treacherous . . .
kindless villain” (II.ii.608–9). And if one claims that his evil
does not excuse Hamlet’s, one certainly cannot say that Ham-
let’s action relieves Claudius of blame. G. Wilson Knight says,
“We can say . . . that [Hamlet’s] faults . . . are forced on
him by a bad society . . . and therefore [are] not properly
faults. Yet from that standpoint we can say as much for many
wrongdoers. . . . we must surely see guilt in Hamlet’s be-

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original crime which cannot now be altered, Claudius can hardly be blamed for his later actions. They are forced on him." Quite aside from whether Shakespeare would flirt with such an idea before rejecting it or whether he would espouse it, Professor Knight does both; and self-contradiction is almost inevitable if one takes a short view of this play. Shakespeare directs our gaze far back in time: the error in drawing an arbitrary line and finding a start for "confounding contraries" in Claudius's crime may be glimpsed in the more obvious error of starting with Hamlet's reaction to that crime.

If a view afforded by a figurative pattern that sets the action of all the victims in relief against the largest of backgrounds and projects in all a common failing leads us to qualify Hamlet's opinion of Claudius, it does not invalidate the truth in that opinion. But the narrowness of his view of other characters is a crucial matter, for it diminishes him in a way that his view of Claudius does not. The fate of all the victims may reflect the theme, "If the man go to this water, and drown himself, it is, will he, nill he, he goes"; but some of these "drownings" may also illustrate the accompanying theme, "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." Only the first of these applies to Claudius: the reprisal that comes to him is inherent in his own act; he "shortens . . . his own life" when he kills his brother; he exemplifies the figurative truth in the Clown's claim that "your water is a sore decayer of your whoreson dead body" (V.i.189–90) and, drowned, is "rotten before he die[s]" (180). But both themes apply to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: they voluntarily practice equivocation, but they are also victim to Hamlet's disproportionate falsehood. Perhaps more than any other characters they serve as sounding boards for the change in Hamlet. His estimates of them—from the time when he says that they lack "craft" to the time when he applies to them the snake-image, which the Ghost uses for Claudius—reflect his narrowing perception of reality.

His first greeting of the "good lads," as he calls them (II.ii.229), leads us to believe that Rosencrantz's later remark, "My lord, you once did love me" (III.ii.348) is true. They do not
understand his altering manner toward them, but surely we are meant to realize that their allegiance to Claudius and their early lack of candor to Hamlet (like Ophelia’s seeming fickleness) occur at a time when such conduct assumes for Hamlet an importance out of all measure to its weight. Unlike Hamlet, we hear the explanation they are given for their employment—that the King wants to “remedy” whatever “afflicts” Hamlet; Guildenstern’s response, “Heavens make our presence and our practices / Pleasant and helpful to him!” (II.ii.17-18,38-39); and their later innocuous report to the King. We know that they, unlike Horatio after Hamlet’s departure for England, are in attendance on a ruler whose authority they have no reason to question. We know that, aside from Ophelia, they alone among the victims apply no abusive epithets to anyone in Elsinore. We see Guildenstern, unlike Osric and Polonius, rebuke Hamlet with dignity for his rudeness: “This courtesy is not of the right breed. If it shall please you to make me a wholesome answer, I will do your mother’s commandment: if not, your pardon and my return shall be the end of my business” (III.ii.326-30, italics mine). We are surely meant to notice the incongruity of Hamlet’s picking Guildenstern for the object of his pipe-playing analogy; he accuses Guildenstern of trying to “play upon” him, of trying to “sound [him] from [his] lowest note to the top of [his] compass” (380-83) when his former schoolfellow says only that the King is angry and that the Queen has sent him to Hamlet with a message. It is Rosencrantz who questions Hamlet; and, after his early clumsy attempt at indirection, he is direct: “Good my lord, what is your cause of distemper?” (350), a question that, from his point of view, is hardly an attempt to “drive [Hamlet] into a toil” (362). What we see of the actions of the two men recommends Hamlet’s first words about them—good lads, lacking in craft—rather than his later varying ones—adders, sponges, fools—or the names some critics give them—toadies, yes-men, time-servers. The details of their murder place them in the class of the wronged victim King Hamlet, and their murderer in the category of Claudius. Like the former King, they are connived against while sleeping; but the “market of [the beast’s] time” that informs the King’s “custom”
of sleeping "always of the afternoon" does not apply to them, although the circumstance is suggestive of their nature and of their unknowing, unwary sojourn in a land that is not "grown honest." Like the former King, they are sent to their death "unhousel’d"; but again there is a difference. The King dies "full of bread," and the biblical echoes distinguish this "bread" from the "food" that he is denied by his killer. But nothing in what we are told of Hamlet’s victims suggests that their lack of the Eucharist could be reflected in such a reaction as that of the Ghost; that their physical death is not the end of their trial and payment for error; that they will be "doom’d for a certain term to walk the night"; or that, if Hamlet had lived, their ghosts would return for revenge. The implications in the beast-trap imagery that the ultimate consequence of their error is far different from that to which Claudius’s evil-doing brings him point to the moral blindness in the man who kills them all. Hamlet’s dispatching of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern measures his own departure from reality, a matter to be dealt with in the following discussion of the show symbolism.