CHAPTER SIX
We have seen that insofar as the traditional nature of the dumb show helps to inform a complex figurative pattern, Shakespeare is using the stage as a touchstone, as well as a means, to a comment on the nature of evil, of false-seeming. But we have not canvassed the variety of a method that "hold[s] . . . the mirror up to nature" by setting up a glass to the stage. We have not, for example, traced in any detail the instances where the Danes are characterized by way of explicit references to their correspondence to stage figures whose reality or unreality is a matter of explicit question. So before considering the large import of the show and the play symbolism, I should like to document certain comparisons supporting the proposition that Shakespeare uses the stage as a reagent to measure the substance of being.

Repeatedly, the characters in *Hamlet* identify themselves or their fellows with characters in a drama; and obviously comparisons between two arenas of dramatic action may serve a purpose that the speaker cannot envisage. We know that Hamlet associates the principals in the dumb show (the Player King, the Player Queen, and the Poisoner) and in the following playlet (Gonzago, Baptista, and Lucianus) with King Hamlet, Gertrude, and Claudius; that he uses drama to jolt
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Claudius into revealing a recognition of his own likeness to the Poisoner/Lucianus. We cannot know that when he describes Lucianus as “nephew to the king,” he deliberately employs the word *king* instead of *duke* in a veiled threat to Claudius and, intimating a Lucianus/Hamlet likeness, consciously shifts the analogy. The logic of the play-scene and the character of Gonzago make it unlikely that Hamlet sees himself in Gonzago’s killer. Yet if we judge by Hamlet’s importunate speech to Lucianus (III.ii.262–65), the latter is (like Hamlet) portrayed as one who puts on “faces” and puts off homicide, and who is urged, in the name of revenge, to act.

Again, we can reasonably infer that Hamlet sees in the principals in the Player’s Speech (Priam, Hecuba, and Pyrrhus) his father, mother, and uncle; that the performance he requests may serve a need to project his own grief and horror at his father’s death, his desire to see his mother react to that death with a “burst of clamour” (II.ii.538), his hate for Claudius—perhaps a need to strengthen his resolution by a vivid account of the slaying of a king and father. But it is unlikely that, in calling for this particular speech, he has in mind a detail omitted in the speech—that Pyrrhus is a son with a dear father slain—or that he recalls, from his previous knowledge of the speech, similarities between himself and an avenger who is clothed in black; whose sword “seem[s] i’ the air to stick”; and who, purposing vengeance, “like a neutral to his will and matter, [does] nothing” (501–4). The fact that Pyrrhus is the villain of the piece; the descriptions of him as “beast” and “tyrant,” words used elsewhere to describe Claudius; Hamlet’s subsequent view of his own “cue for passion” in the light of the Player’s cue (which is certainly not the justice of Pyrrhus’s cause)—all this gainsays a conclusion that Hamlet consciously sees himself in Priam’s killer.

If Hamlet is not aware of likenesses that we are led to recognize, then Shakespeare is employing the dramatic insets for purposes that include, but also extend beyond, Hamlet’s own purposes. Even if we concede Hamlet the most remarkable ambivalence of feeling and perception in his awareness of analogies afforded by the inner-stage description or action, he cannot take into account all of the ironies available to us in a
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court performance that projects similarities between Lucianus and both Claudius and Hamlet, or in a speech that accommodates comparisons between Pyrrhus and both Claudius and Hamlet. Hamlet’s vantage point is not that of the Hamlet audience, which is privy to words and actions in Denmark of which Hamlet knows nothing. Moreover, Shakespeare’s use of correspondences between what is, to Hamlet, actuality and what is, to him, representation—“a fiction... a dream”—must range beyond Hamlet’s awareness and use of those correspondences, since Hamlet himself is a character in a drama.

The very frequency of instances where Hamlet characters identify themselves or others with figures on a stage suggests that the associations serve a larger purpose than that intended by the speaker or found in the immediate context of the speech. For example, Ophelia likens Hamlet to “a chorus” (III.ii.255); he identifies the “dallying” of her and her lover with that of “puppets” in a play (256-57); he compares the forgetting of a “great man” in his real world of Denmark with the forgetting of a character in certain Whitsun entertainments, the outmoded hobbyhorse who, concealing his human legs in trappings, gives an imitation of a beast (139-45); he calls the spectators in the last scene “mutes” (V.ii.346). And the action of the Danes is repeatedly described in a terminology of theater: the mute appearance of the Ghost and the speech of the mad Ophelia, who deals in “winks, and nods, and gestures,” are (like the uninformative jingle preceding “The Mouse-trap”) linked with “prologue” (I.i.123;IV.v.11,18); theatrical prologue is conjured up when Gertrude says, “What act, / That roars so loud, and thunders in the index?” (III. iv.51-52), and explicitly recalled when Hamlet, telling Horatio of his forgery of Claudius’s letter to England, says, “Ere I could make a prologue to my brains, / They had begun the play” (V.ii.30-31); Hamlet implies a likeness between Ophelia’s “show” and the action of the players in the dumb show (III.ii.154-55), and shortly before he makes this comparison, the word “show” is used to describe Ophelia’s action as staged by Polonius and Claudius (III.i.45); after the latter are hidden audience to this “show,” Polonius uses the word “audience” to describe his “vantage” in the Queen’s closet (III.
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iii.31); and the spectators of the scene of general violence at the close of the play are called "audience to [an] act" (V.ii.345). Of course, such words may carry a general meaning; nevertheless, they also keep one in mind of theater. The list of such instances could be greatly extended (and I shall shortly have occasion to add to it); but these examples demonstrate that the identification of the Danes with stage characters, performers, or audience is not limited to connections afforded by the dramatic insets. So although Hamlet may use similarities between events in Denmark and Vienna to expedite his plot, Shakespeare has more than mere plot in mind when the action of characters on whose lifeliness he expends great art is echoed by bloodless figures on an inner stage.

One product, often noted by critics, of the use of two stages is a perspective on two kinds of theater. The Hamlet characters have a life of their own; those in the dumb show and Gonzago are puppets, stagy representatives of nature once removed. Language and action in the dramatic inset—the stiffness, the formality, the ceremony, the whole effect of superficial show—contrast with the framing matter. Thus, by a difference between two kinds of seeming—the stage world of Vienna and the stage world of Denmark—Shakespeare draws distinctions between dramatic unreality and dramatic reality. A by-product, one not noted by critics, of the presence of two audiences is that we are invited to view the Hamlet characters by way of their view of stage characters. "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, / That he should weep for her?" says Hamlet of the First Player (II.ii.585-86). From our vantage point, we might say, "What's Hamlet to us, or we to Hamlet, / That we should weep for him?" Thus, by a line between the world of the play and the world of the audience—the "unreal" Carthage and the "real" Denmark—Shakespeare gives the definitions of unreality and reality another dimension. And Hamlet's distinctions between his real and his representational worlds parallel our reality as audience and his unreality as stage figure. Yet, any definition effected by the line between the worlds of the Danish audience and their stage is modified by the fact that the Danish audience un-
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_knowingly_ occupy a stage, a matter that has implications for the audience of _Hamlet_.

Moreover, distinctions between domains of stage and audience are further complicated by the peculiar nature of a dramatic rendering of "Aeneas' tale to Dido," which explicitly establishes an audience, albeit unseen, within the dramatic frame. The result is that Shakespeare's audience in, say, London watches an audience in Elsinore watching a dramatic portrayal of Aeneas telling an audience in Carthage what happened in Troy and what the spectator of such a sight must have felt. Whereas in the dumb show we only see what later in _Gonzago_ we both "hear and see" (III.i.23), the First Player's Speech projects an audience we neither see nor hear; yet as we supplement unheard speech in the dumb show, we imagine the unseen hearer of Aeneas's tale. The Player enacts what happens in Carthage, and though the words direct our gaze to Troy, it is impossible to divorce the speech from the histories of the speaker Aeneas and the hearer Dido. Resultant associations between various times and places and between the deaths of various kings, fathers, and husbands, reinforce the implication we have noted elsewhere that we are to view the happenings in Denmark against a long historical perspective. But the most noteworthy aspect of a dramaturgic tour de force that entails a mute, unseen presence is the shifting estate of the real and the representational: to Dido, Aeneas's tale presents facts that have a counterpart in facts in her own life; to Hamlet, that same tale is fiction resembling facts in his life; to Shakespeare's audience, fiction echoes fiction.

Just what literary recollections Shakespeare intends to elicit in his version of a part of Aeneas's tale to Dido is, of course, debatable. But we can reasonably suppose that a seventeenth-century audience could hardly avoid supplementing it with some details from the lives of both speaker and hearer: Aeneas, who bewails the killing of a king and father, is noted for his patriotism and filial devotion; Dido, who is told of the grief of a bereaved wife, has suffered a husband's murder and is to commit suicide at the loss of Aeneas. If the horror of the speaker Aeneas at a lack of pity for a "reverend sire"
is duplicated in Denmark, so is the inconsistency of that speaker who can later kill a prince, despite the latter’s plea for pity in the name of a father’s grief. And if the previous experience of the hearer Dido with such acts and feelings as those described in the tale (as well as with a ghost’s return to tell of a secret murder) finds counterparts in Denmark, so does the later tragedy of that hearer who is to invite her own death.

In short, behind events in Elsinore the Player’s Speech hangs a backdrop of Carthage, Tyre, and Latium, as well as Troy. And the speech accommodates a variety of comparisons: parallels between Hecuba, Dido, and Gertrude; similarities between their husbands Priam, Sychaeus, and Hamlet Senior, and between their husbands’ killers, the tyrants Pyrrhus, Pygmalion, and Claudius; ironic and complex correspondences between Pyrrhus, Aeneas, Dido, and Hamlet, all revenge-seekers; subtle equivalences between Hamlet and both the speaker Aeneas and the hearer Dido. This is not to say that the Hamlet audience could be expected to perceive and sort out all of these connections as he hears the Player’s Speech: I present no brief for the need to do so; nor do I insist that any comparison I suggest here is unexceptionable. Manifest in the matter and context of the speech itself are certain iterations in attitude or experience between characters on the outer stage, on the inner stage, and in the tale; manifest is the repetitiveness of history, “whose common theme” is violence and grief. But a comparative study of the Player’s Speech, its counterpart in the Aeneid, and other events in the lives of Aeneas and Dido does suggest a reason for Shakespeare’s selection of this particular account of a king’s murder: that an evocation of analogy is here especially purposeful and significant. What is reality in Carthage to Dido is seeming to Hamlet in Elsinore; and what is reality to Hamlet is seeming to us: the definition of the real and the representational, of fact and fiction, depends on the eye of the beholder. Yet the analogies between characters in different times and places underscore the relativity, the inadequacy, of such a definition.

Immediately after the Player’s Speech, Hamlet comments
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indirectly on reality and unreality; his referent is the dramatic performance he has just witnessed, and the imprecision of the observations that Shakespeare gives him is surely calculated to arouse our attention. When he says of the Player, "What's Hecuba to him . . . ?" he evokes the factual dissociation between the Player and Hecuba. Insofar as the Player fails to project the dramatic reality (and his hearers appear to be uncomfortably aware of him, rather than Aeneas), insofar as he loses control and, weeping in his own person, is a player in Denmark, rather than Aeneas in Carthage, Hamlet's focus on him is understandable. Nevertheless, properly speaking, Aeneas weeps, and Hecuba is something to Aeneas. Hamlet disregards the distinction between the Player and the play role; and his narrow insistence on the Player's removal in time and place from the tragedy he laments, fails to take into account the purpose of playing. On a slightly different score, we take issue with the assumption in the question. Whether or not the Player succeeds in making Aeneas's grief real to his audience, all indications are that it is real to him. There is a reality that transcends the apprehensions of the senses, a reality Hamlet neglects in his differentiation between a "fiction" and present fact, between the world of the stage and the world of the audience.

Moreover, he compounds his disregard for the nature and the purpose of playing when he goes on to say of the Player, "What would he do, / Had he the motive and the cue for passion / That I have? He would drown the stage with tears" (II.ii.586–88). It might be argued that Hamlet intends to contrast his cause for grief with that of Aeneas, to say that if the Player were projecting Hamlet's "cue for passion" instead of Aeneas's, he would have a subject of greater and more immediate tragic import to work with. But the logic (or illogic) of the whole passage makes such an inference debatable. Since he has been focusing on the Player's (not Aeneas's) grief over the murder of a father, we must suppose that he is still separating the Player from any play role: if the Player could weep so for someone he never knew, he would, given a personal motive, "drown the stage with tears." And the tenor of the passage suggests that the greater "mo-
tive . . . for passion” that Hamlet envisions for the Player is the murder of the Player’s father.

We may concede that insofar as Hamlet and the Player occupy the same arena of action—that is, Denmark, not the Danish stage—the long-past murder of a stranger does not afford a “cue for passion” so great as the present murder of a father. But an actor’s motive cannot be equated with that of a person not on the stage; obviously, even if an actor were to present an autobiographical matter on the stage, his motive would not be the one that had operated in an organic and unfinished offstage action. And when Hamlet appears to move from defining the action of the stage as “fiction” to suggesting that the action of one’s own life could be removed to the stage without undergoing any alteration in motive, we question his conception of reality, dramatic or otherwise. Quite aside from the turn given his remarks by the fact that we hear them through the medium of an actor, we wonder at even the slightest intimation that a bereaved son would choose to express his reaction to injury and loss on a stage; at the implication that such action would add up to an emotion in stage fare not found in “dream” lament for Hecuba; at the insistence on physical phenomena as a basis for labeling a stage performance “fiction” and then an apparent disregard for the disjunction in time and place that must mark even stage autobiography; at the hint of a strange blending of offstage and onstage motives when, after saying that the lament for Hecuba is “all for nothing,” he apparently envisions “something” in, or as a result of, a stage lament for personal loss; and (since at the moment when one appraises the theatrical effectiveness of one’s emotion, that feeling must undergo an alteration) at the implicit claim to the genuine nature of his grief, as opposed to the synthetic nature of grief for Hecuba. It is worth noting that Hamlet’s illogical and passionate speech here follows on a passionate declamation on a matter of passion and that his view of the stage here is, characteristically, at odds with much that he later says in his advice to the Player. But perhaps the most important effect of this passage is that we are led to think about differences between various
kinds of reality and unreality and to do so by way of references to a dramatic performance.

Other connections between the *Hamlet* characters and stage figures are made in conjunction with an express blending of stage and offstage reality. When Polonius says, “I did enact Julius Caesar: I was killed i' the Capitol; Brutus killed me,” Hamlet's answer picks up and emphasizes what he treats as a foolish factual identification of the player with the play role: commenting rather on Polonius than on Caesar, he puns sardonically, “It was a brute part of [Brutus] to kill so capital a calf there” (III.ii.108–11). Yet Hamlet's gibe at Polonius's imprecision follows on a passage where his own insistence on the factual distinction between the Player and Aeneas and the subsequent intimation that there is none between playing oneself and being oneself reveal a questionable estimate of both stage and offstage reality. And when later, in fact, he takes Polonius for a ruler and (in “brute part”?) kills him in the Capitol, the peculiar correspondences between Polonius's play death on some distant inner stage and his “real” death in Denmark provide ironic comment on the words of both Polonius and Hamlet. Hamlet's sword gives the lie to Polonius's earlier claim to having been killed in the Capitol when it gives the claim a dimension of the reality that Hamlet had insisted on. But if the difference between Polonius's play death as Caesar and his real death as Claudius (albeit unintentional the role) illustrates the distinction that Hamlet stresses between “a fiction” and fact, it must also therefore illustrate, for us, the element of reality in what Hamlet calls a “dream,” since the death that, comparatively speaking, we label *real* is a matter of seeming. Thus, again, using analogies between Danes and stage figures, Shakespeare manipulates correspondences between dramatic productions to suggest varying distinctions between reality and seeming.

Although the dramatic inset proper appears only in the Player's Speech and the court entertainment, certain stage directions indicate that Shakespeare wants them and a resultant stage business to implement an impression of action-within-action-within-action. We are onlookers as Hamlet and Horatio speak of the impending entertainment; they are on-
lookers with us as (to the sound of trumpets) the court party enters; we and they are all onlookers as (to the sound of trumpets) the dumb show enters.\(^5\) The flourish to herald the entrance of the King and the Queen of Denmark, just before the same sound for the same purpose marks the appearance of the Player King and the Player Queen, extends the effect of show-within-show. Again, drama is a referent as an implicit analogy between the Danish rulers and imitation rulers invests the former with the unreality of the latter.

Hamlet employs forms of seeming—the “antic disposition,” the dumb show, and Gonzago—to discover “what our seemers be.”\(^6\) He says as much when he tells Horatio that after the play, during which the two of them will watch the show that Claudius presents, they will “both [their] judgements join / In censure of [Claudius’s] seeming” (III.ii.91–92). But Shakespeare’s use of seeming to unmask seeming ranges far beyond Hamlet’s. And when Hamlet says to Horatio as the court party enters, “They are coming to the play; I must be idle” (95), the words hold a significance that Shakespeare does not share with the speaker. For in Hamlet’s “idleness” Shakespeare shows us a kind of play-within-play in progress even before the advent of the professional players. And as the association of the King and the Queen of Denmark with an imitation King and Queen who make a similar ceremonious entrance leads us to question the moral substance of the former, so we assess, in the same context, the nature of Hamlet’s play-acting. For when Shakespeare informs us, in a scene immediately preceding a dumb show, that consciously or unconsciously the audience is itself already putting on a “show,” we find the same convoluted relationships between the real and the representational worlds, the same illumination of the one by the other, that we find in the complex and artful management of the Player’s Speech.

When a play contains a dumb show and an interrupted play, a speech taken from a play, criticism of the drama from which the excerpt comes and of drama in general, remarks on a player’s performance, a catalogue of drama, reference to roles in amateur theatricals, advice to actors, observations on the nature of drama and the purpose of playing, discussion
of the state of the theater in the world of the play and of playwrights and players in that theater, it is not likely that drama, as a subject for consideration, is irrelevant to the playwright's large purpose or to the action of the play. When, in addition, connections are repeatedly drawn between the action of the Danes and "play" action, when events in Elsinore are duplicated in inner-stage drama and former events on an inner stage echoed in Elsinore, then one must suspect that Shakespeare intends the nature of dramatic art to be an index to action in Denmark—perhaps also vice versa. And when a comment served by such connections is iterated in a figurative design wherein the components of a dumb show are informing ingredients and "dumb show" an extended metaphor, then one must conclude that the nature and the intent of drama is the axis on which the meaning of the play turns.

Maynard Mack says that "'show' seems to be [the] unifying image in 'Hamlet'" and that "the most pervasive of Shakespeare's image patterns . . . is the pattern evolved around the three words, show, act, play."

In preceding chapters of this study, we have seen that different denotations in one word may fit it for use in various image patterns: blast, for example, appears in an imagery drawn from disease, wind and cold, noise, and mining. Similarly, we have seen that show is a word charged with a number of meanings at once and that the "show" imagery is informed by subjects other than dramatic art. If "show" is the unifying image in Hamlet, so is "counterfeit presentment," a phrase used to describe a portrait (III.iv.54). And such words as picture, portrait, painting, and their derivatives are—like words peculiar to the stage—used in references to hypocrisy, madness, heartlessness, tyranny, vengefulness, unnaturalness, and in accounts of false and inconstant men who prize the imitation. Hamlet uses "the counterfeit presentment of two brothers" to distinguish between the genuine and the fraudulent. If his insistence elsewhere on the insubstantiality of appearance (and on the bad judgment of some picture-prizers) invests this act with an irony he does not intend, his reliance on a portrait is doubly ironic in view of Shakespeare's frequent figurative use of the graphic arts to characterize false-seeming. The
phrase “counterfeit presentment” illustrates the way in which different figurative patterns blend: it is a peculiarly apt label for the dumb show; in a less particular sense, it is descriptive of any dramatic production. Moreover, Claudius’s “forged process” of King Hamlet’s death could aptly be termed a “counterfeit presentment,” as could the “forgeries” in speech that Polonius recommends (II.i.20); the praise of Lamond called, in unintentional double entendre, a “forgery” (IV.vii.90); and the forged letter, on the “fair” writing of which Hamlet commends himself (V.ii.32–36). Thus, the phrase demonstrates, in little, Shakespeare’s ability to charge one figurative pattern with the meaning of another. When a pantomime is a “counterfeit presentment” of a murder, then a censure of forged processes may be pertinent to dramatic productions; when “most painted word” and “forged process” say the same thing of Claudius’s speech, then a censure of false-seeming in images drawn from painting and portrait may apply to forgeries in speech or action; and when a description of a process of murder suggests both mute tableau and picture, as Pyrrhus stands in momentarily aborted action like a “painted tyrant,” then comment in a “world of figures” drawn from dramatic art may interchange with that in an imagery drawn from the graphic arts. Nevertheless, though the figurative definition of “show” is implemented by various referents, “the most pervasive of Shakespeare’s image patterns” is the one turning on allusions to drama. And it is in the show and the play symbolism, which contains the key to distinctions between seeming and being, that we find the most fascinating and significant comment in the play.

II

Very early in the play Hamlet distinguishes between being and seeming, and he does so in a language of theater. “Seems, madam!” he exclaims to the Queen when she asks why his father’s death “seems . . . so particular with [him],”

nay, it is; I know not “seems.”

’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor the dejected 'haviour of the visage, 
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief, 
That can denote me truly: these indeed seem, 
For they are actions that a man might play: 
But I have that within which passeth show. 

(I.ii.75-85)

Thus, Hamlet identifies appearance and action on the universal stage with that on the theatrical stage, and uses the word "show" to describe both. By his emphasis on "is," his declaration "I know not 'seems,'" and his reference to "that within" which passes show, he equates being with truth and reality, seeming with unreality, with something that "a man might play." But, on the other hand, the qualification "alone" implies that "show" can reflect reality: if clothes, tears, forms, moods, and shapes of grief cannot "alone" denote one truly, still the implication is that truth can be thus denoted. And Hamlet is later to give instruction on the kind of playing that "hold[s] . . . the mirror up to nature," a criticism that posits that seeming "can denote [man] truly." These two views, not necessarily incompatible, are early clues to what Shakespeare is going to say about proper action on the world stage and to the means he is going to use to say it. For the present, our concern is with the first view: when Hamlet identifies being with truth, he gives it a spiritual, rather than a physical, dimension: men may put on the outward signs of grief, but such an action does not add up to "It is."

However, later, in the soliloquy beginning with the words, "To be, or not to be: that is the question" (III.i.56), he departs from his earlier denial that being or reality can be circumscribed by the physical and visible. His narrowing of the question he poses is reflected in his limited view of possible courses of action: a man "in the mind [can] suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" or he can "take arms against a sea of troubles." And he implies that "bear[ing] . . . ills," one may live; opposing them, one may end them—that is, die. Thus, his conception here of the alternative choices—to be, or not to be—is defined by actions that he
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sees as alternatives and that he posits as options for life or death in the physical sense. His subsequent musings on “non-being,” the death that may follow on taking arms (whether against someone else or oneself), are ironic in the light of his own earlier insistence on a “non-being” that may mark the material and external. The man who earlier, declaring his “particularity,” says, “I know not ‘seems,’ ” now defines “non-being” in a sense that would allow any man who breathes to say, “I know not ‘seems.’ ” And the figurative pattern that links both taking arms and suffering silently to the action of “dumb show” compounds the intimation that Hamlet is now confusing seeming with being. For Shakespeare makes it quite clear that the two actions Hamlet contemplates are not the only choices, that they are not the proper ones, and that—in an ultimate sense—they are not even alternatives.

Let us review these three points. First, that they are not the only possible choices is obvious in a play where even Claudius’s appeal to Norway results in good. Claudius chooses neither “to take arms” nor “in the mind to suffer . . . fortune” in the person of Fortinbras. Instead, he resorts to reason and an appeal to proper rule, and war is averted. One may say that Claudius’s problem of a threatened evil and Hamlet’s problem of an entrenched evil are so different that choice, in the two circumstances, is not comparable. But the King’s response to the aggressiveness of Fortinbras is just one detail in Shakespeare’s persistent questioning of the wisdom in either a resort to violence or a passive acceptance of misfortune. We have seen that both event and image suggest that “tak[ing] arms” is a dubious choice: King Hamlet’s decision to fight with King Fortinbras is still causing trouble thirty years later; the First Clown’s pun about Adam as “the first that ever bore arms” in a context of his being the first “grave-maker” (V.i.35–38) and in a play that repeatedly reminds us of the effect of Adam’s sin, calls in question the bearing of arms; the very phrase, “to take arms against a sea of troubles,” brilliantly connects the decision for violence with “go[ing] to [the] water,” in Hamlet wrong choice, whether willing or unwilling; and the use of weapons of war is insistently linked with noise and show.
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As for the advisability of "suffer[ing] / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," Shakespeare certainly questions the nature of, and profit in, this choice—at least, as Hamlet understands it. If Horatio represents Hamlet's view of stoic and patient fortitude—and Hamlet praises him as "one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing" (III.ii.71)—then Shakespeare furnishes no defense for this alternative to bearing arms. Three times Horatio tries to influence Hamlet, each time not to act: not to follow the Ghost (after Marcellus initiates the warning); not to rant over Ophelia's grave; and not to duel with Laertes. But he never suggests a positive course of action for Hamlet to follow. And even in his negative advice, particularly in the last two instances, he proves rather unresisting than not. An acquiescence to Hamlet's words and deeds generally marks Horatio; in his exchanges with Hamlet, he is increasingly given to taciturn and ambiguous agreement and exclamation, a development that puts Hamlet's comment on him into ironic perspective. If Horatio is one who "suffer[s] all," the prime example we are given of such a practice on his part is his suffering of Hamlet's decisions and actions. And if this adds up to Horatio's "suffer[ing] nothing," it certainly brings no good to anybody else.

Even Polonius takes it for granted that giving one's "heart a winking, mute and dumb," that "play[ing] the desk or table-book," is irresponsible (II.ii.136—37), though when Polonius goes "round to work," he takes the wrong action. But just as Horatio passively attends Hamlet, he remains in court, Hamlet gone, in passive attendance on Claudius; and although Shakespeare could have easily justified that stay and attendance with a request from Hamlet, instead he uses it to accentuate the nature of Horatio's acceptance of "fortune" and to make the point that even when Horatio counsels action, his advice is inadequate, no more affirmative than his advice to Hamlet not to act. Of the "distract" Ophelia, Horatio advises Gertrude, "'Twere good she were spoken with: for she may strew/Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds" (IV.v.14—15). Even if one considers it not impracticable to try to talk a mad girl into being reasonable, such
advice strikes a note of too little, too late. One wonders at Horatio's belated and enigmatic concern, if not for a King whose right to rule he has reason to doubt, for a general welfare he has not evoked on more timely occasions. His ineffectualness is further implied by the intimation that he is the one appointed to “follow [Ophelia] close” and “give her good watch” (75). If he is, as Hamlet says, not a man whom fortune can affect (and this, like all of Hamlet’s other assessments of character, proves questionable), neither is he a man who makes a forceful and appropriate effort to affect fortune. And at the end of the play, either the error in Hamlet’s judgment of him as one who “in suffering all . . . suffers nothing” or the inadequacy of Horatio’s philosophy when put to the test is revealed: this man, described as one who takes “fortune’s buffets” with “thanks” (III.ii.72–73), decides to take them with poison. Thus, his conception of the options open to man and of the nature of those options proves not unlike that expressed by Hamlet, for Horatio’s alternative to suffering “in the mind” is “to take arms against a sea of troubles” and to become one of a group of people who are all, in a sense, suicides.

None of this is to deny Horatio high-mindedness, nobility of utterance, and regard for Hamlet. Nevertheless, however removed from purposed wrong, he is never shown as a constructive force for good. Although his good intentions are not to be doubted on the only three occasions when he counsels action, the peculiar similarities and differences in these three pieces of advice reveal the Horatio-of-inaction in the Horatio-of-action. Like his counsel that the mad Ophelia be “spoken with,” his other two recommendations involve speaking to someone: at the beginning of the play, the “dreaded sight” of “fear and wonder” (which he describes as “prologue to the omen coming on”) leads to his “advice” to Marcellus that they let Hamlet know what they have seen; at the end of the play, the “dismal sight” of “woe or wonder” (which he would remove to a “stage” while he provides an epilogue) leads to his advice to Fortinbras that he, Horatio, tell the “yet unknowing world / How these things came about” (I.i.25,44,123, 168–70;V.ii.378,374,389–91). The reason he gives to Fortin-
bras (to avoid “more mischance” from “wild minds”) recalls a latent irony in the reason he gives to Marcellus (“As needful in our loves, fitting our duty”) and in the reason he gives to Gertrude for speaking with the deranged Ophelia (to avoid danger from “ill-breeding minds”). One does not question Horatio’s honesty when, at the end of the play, he expresses to Fortinbras, as earlier to Gertrude, a concern for the general welfare. Nevertheless, such a reason for addressing the “world” does follow incongruously on his own aborted suicide and does depart from the motive for storytelling that Hamlet has given him. Perhaps both of these points are to his credit. But (despite any case one may make in his favor, despite the plausibility of his express reason and the fact that “more mischance” is always possible) his belated solicitude for avoiding “plots and errors” (V.ii.406) and the ineptitude of the phrase “more mischance” reinforces the general impression of Horatio’s detachment from reality and the consequent inadequacy of his attempts to cope with it, however well-meaning his intentions or civic-minded his advice. Perhaps Shakespeare shows us, by way of Horatio, the effect of habitual aloofness or patient submission on the ability to act meaningfully and constructively. However that may be, there is reason to conclude that insofar as Horatio exemplifies Hamlet’s conception of the suffering of fortune, one alternative contemplated in the “to be, or not to be” soliloquy is defined by Horatio’s futile, tardy, or inconsequential responses to circumstance.

The figurative relationships between “tak[ing] arms” and “noise” and between a mute suffering and “dumbness” are obvious. Thus, my third point—that in an ultimate sense the two courses of action are not alternatives—is a burden of the pattern we have traced. Hamlet names a choice of noise or a choice of dumbness as his two options, but Shakespeare, who makes the two interchangeable, defines both as a choice for seeming and “dumb show.”

Nevertheless, Hamlet is expressing in this soliloquy a thesis of Shakespeare’s figurative comment: “To be, or not to be” is the question. But the choice of being presupposes a comprehension of the nature of reality. If we can say that early in the play Hamlet makes a distinction between being and
seeming that is in accord with Shakespeare's show symbolism and that later when he defines being as physical existence and a dumb suffering as a means to such being, he departs from his own earlier definition, still the matter is complicated by the fact that in his earlier speech he also implies that seeming may contain truth. And if a form of theater becomes Shakespeare's symbol for unreality, the very fact that the argument is presented in dramatic form argues that another form of theater may be a symbol for reality. Let us turn to Hamlet's dramatic criticism, for in his observations about reality and unreality in the theater lies a key to Shakespeare's essential comment on proper choice, proper action, and the nature of being.

Hamlet censures actors who "split . . . ears," "tear a passion to tatters," o'er-do Termagant, out-herod Herod, strut and bellow (III.ii.10,11,15,37). Such criticism is directed against lack of judgment, reason, and rule, a failure that (as the phrases above demonstrate) he connects with noise. The fault he most deplores is an excess that destroys the illusion of reality, for even on the stage fundamental and universal rule must operate: anything "overdone" is "from the purpose of playing" (22) and the actor who would "hold . . . the mirror up to nature" (24) is bound by nature's rules. The various examples he gives of intemperance on the stage, of departure from rule and therefore from reality, are not mutually exclusive; but we may say that besides criticizing the actor who does not observe the limits of his role, he names the actor who "come[s] tardy off" (27) or misrepresents the nature of the role: who does not "suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (19–20); who, playing Christian, pagan, or man, does not employ "the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man" (35–36); who, though it is his job to hold "the mirror up to nature," "imitate[s] humanity . . . abominably" (39–40). And he finds fault with the actor who is not faithful to the purpose of the role, the playwright, or playing: who "speak[s] . . . more than is set down for [him]," laughs, and adds a superfluous clowning (44–46), all of which (though it may set "barren spectators" to laughing) is "villanous," Hamlet says, "and shows a most
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pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it” (49-50); for besides obscuring the intentions of the playwright, the Clown who indulges in, or invites, an irrelevant laughter defeats his own purposes. In effect, Hamlet says that a player who lacks control, art, or understanding is unable to image actuality; if he exhibits a self-interest, he cannot properly serve the ends of playing.

Hamlet’s dramatic criticism is interesting in itself. But, more importantly, it provides Shakespeare with a means to a great variety of indirect comment. First, such criteria are obviously applicable to the dramatic performances within the play: one is led to wonder whether the First Player’s Speech (which is followed by Hamlet’s most passionate soliloquy) “beget[s] a temperance”; whether the court performance, in its repetitiveness, is “overdone” and thus “from the purpose of playing.” Second, since almost all of the principals of Hamlet at some time dissemble in a kind of play-action and are repeatedly identified with actors, since Hamlet himself puts on an “antic disposition,” one is led to look at their conduct in the light of Hamlet’s advice. Third, one is struck by the ironic appositeness between the dramatic action that Hamlet says cannot reflect mankind and the action that he, as a man, adopts.

This is not to say that his dramatic criticism is contradicted by Shakespeare’s dramatic practice. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, let me reiterate a point touched on above. When Hamlet censures, for example, “bellowing,” he is decrying excess in the player. He does not deny that men in real life may bellow or that an actor may have to play a bellower; he does not say that Herods and Termagants should not be presented on the stage: he simply does not address himself to such particulars, although he does explicitly allow for a dramatic projection of excess, “a whirlwind of . . . passion” (III.ii.7). His sights are aimed at the player’s artistry, rather than any specific subject matter. And without falsifying what he says, one could add that if a player plays a Herod-like character, he must not “out-herod Herod”; if the role calls for “out-herod[ing] Herod,” such action is in order. Certainly, to argue that the illusion of reality is destroyed
when a player "overdoes" is not to argue that "overdoing" cannot be realistically dramatized. Nor is there any essential contradiction in his declaring of the world of Denmark that "things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely" (I.ii. 136–37) and then insisting that a true dramatic mirroring of the world depends on an observance of the "modesty of nature." For it does not follow that the artist who depicts an unruly man can ignore rule. The fact that Hamlet splits ears and tears a passion to tatters, that he fails to suit action to word, points to his departure (not Shakespeare's) from a universal and natural rule that, according to his argument, is the touchstone to offstage, as well as onstage, action. The very medium in which Hamlet's criticism appears must attest to its validity: if, for example, the actor portraying Hamlet betrays a self-preoccupation, he does not project the reality of the character, however self-preoccupied the latter is.

However, undertones in Hamlet's dramatic criticism suggest that his dramatic application of the rule he espouses would differ from Shakespeare's. Conceding that he explicitly allows for a "torrent, tempest, and . . . whirlwind of . . . passion" on the stage and that an admonition against a method that oversteps does not exclude the representation of a man who oversteps or reject anything in nature as a matter for dramatic portrayal, still one can hardly ignore the difference in his emphasis when he contemplates "nature" in his world of Denmark and when, to the players, he evokes the rules of "nature" that implement a stage reflection of that world. Although he frequently describes men as beasts and although the actor would therefore have to imitate the beast in holding the mirror up to such a man, Hamlet criticizes players who imitate humanity abominably as if they had only men, not beasts, to imitate. He may be talking about technique in acting; but he does so by way of an assumption that denies the validity of the thing portrayed. Yet, by evidence of his own comment elsewhere, there are men whom one might think made by "nature's journeymen" (III.ii.38). One wonders whether he wants a particular nature reflected on the stage, whatever his general claims. And when he so sweepingly scorns "inexplicable dumb-shows and noise," one won-
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ders whether he is attacking the wrong use of form and means or whether he implies that a certain device per se and noisy men and events serve no useful purposes in a dramatic imaging of existence.

If we look back to his remarks on the Player’s Speech, we find the same ambiguities, the same possibility that he would censor certain aspects of nature on the stage. He calls the play from which the Player’s Speech is taken “an excellent play . . . set down with as much modesty as cunning” and says that it has been praised for having “no matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affectation” and “no sallets in the lines to make the matter savoury” (II.ii.459–64). Here again the quality of “modesty” is his touchstone; but again it is debatable just what he thinks the playwright’s exercise of “modesty” involves. One can argue that he is emphasizing the need for judgment, taste, and discrimination in the handling of any subject matter, not excluding any matter in itself. But always while he professes to be commenting on “honest method” in writing and acting, there is a hint in his criticism that certain aspects of nature are not amenable to “method,” that they are somehow so inherently “immodest” or “affected” that they are not subject to rule or art. One may find in this a reasonable warning (perhaps even a pertinent one for our own time); but the question is the extent to which Hamlet carries it. The language in the Player’s Speech, which he admires, is rather extravagant than not; but we note that though the matter concerns a “hellish” man, that man is presented in description and declamation, rather than in action. So long as Hamlet is espousing a technique that has recourse to universal rule, one can believe that he expresses Shakespeare’s own convictions. But if he implies that certain ugly aspects of actuality would be better excluded from the stage (or consigned to narration and rhetoric), if he implies that matter itself is “affected” or that beastly men should not be enacted or that “noise” and “sallets” cannot serve any proper dramatic purpose, then he has less faith in the art of the playwright and actor than Shakespeare has, and a more limited view of theater.

But though Hamlet disdains “dumb-shows and noise” as
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if the stage should eliminate or soft-pedal a certain matter, as well as a certain means, he characteristically employs them. We see again his habitual inconsistency in his sponsorship of a device he belittles and of a drama essentially at odds with the spirit of the precepts he urges on the players. Even more significant than the comment afforded on Hamlet’s character is the demonstration of the nature and purpose of two kinds of theater, the difference between his dramatic practice and Shakespeare's, though both employ dumb shows. Hamlet, bent on mirroring a woman’s inconstancy and a man’s treachery to an admirable ruler and kinsman, does not desire the players to “beget a temperance”; nor does he suit his own action to his words to the players, for he chooses and provides words for a play that must be artificial, whatever methods the actors use: Gonzago is all-moralizer, all-wise, all-erred against; Baptista is all excessive protest of fidelity; Lucianus all-villain; and the action itself is presented in extravagant repetition. The nature of the court entertainment does not so much contradict as support the intimations that what Hamlet really wants on the stage is an idealized version of nature; for although his purpose leads him to choose a play that reflects a wicked deed, a villain in action, the conception in it of good and evil is unrealistic and arbitrary. Such a play no more holds the mirror up to nature than it aims at the other general purposes of theater articulated by Hamlet. And quite aside from the particular private aims for it that Hamlet has declared (to “catch the conscience of the king” or to unkennel occulted guilt), his observations to the other onlookers reveal that he employs theater to project and implement his malice, scorn, and grief; to whet his anger; to effect the antithesis of the ends of drama as he has defined those ends. Obviously, his purpose in commissioning this performance is not the one he has laid down for the players; and he is willing to utilize a dumb show, not because he sees it as a dramatic method for reflecting reality, but because (like the “extravagant and erring spirit” that sets him on his course) he has it in him to be extravagant, to overdo, to err against his better judgment and knowledge.

But Shakespeare, in employing a dumb show, excess, and
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extravagance, holds to the proposition that the theatrical stage must reflect the universal one. And seeing the world of human nature as a “mingled web” of good and evil, Shakespeare does not draw easy distinctions between the two by way of bloodless “puppets.” The contrast between Gonzago and Hamlet contains implicit comment on the proper nature of dramatic art; similarly, the proper purpose of drama may be glimpsed in the difference between Hamlet’s use of, and reaction to, the characters in the play-within-the-play and Shakespeare’s manipulation of our response to Hamlet. The latter, who habitually enunciates admirable principles he himself does not observe, purposes to hold the inconsistency of the Player Queen up to censure and Baptista’s words to scorn because of her deed; himself erring, he sits in uncharitable judgment on erring humanity, rejecting the man with the fault in his dramatic projection of actuality as in life; and he espouses, by way of theater, the most unqualified and unbending view of the nature and the act of the sinner. But Shakespeare gives Hamlet his due for what he nobly says, despite what he ignobly does; evokes our recognition of his good while detailing his evil; and “beget[s] a temperance” in the reader toward an intemperate man. From what we see of “The Mouse-trap,” we can infer that, at most, it aims at some such static moral instruction as “Crime does not pay.” From what we see of Hamlet’s use of it, we know that though in holding up to the wrongdoer his “own image” he may say that he intends to catch the sinner’s conscience, he proposes in that event no constructive consequence. But Shakespeare does not sit in self-appointed judgment on human beings; nor is he given to the moral stance enclosed in “thou shalt nots.”

But while neither Hamlet’s contempt for, nor his use of, dumb shows and noise as dramatic matter and means may be said to mark the limits of Shakespeare’s literal viewpoint and practice, what Hamlet would exclude from the theatrical stage becomes the symbol for the unreality (the “dumb-shows and noise”) that Shakespeare would exclude from the universal stage; what Hamlet finds “from the purpose of playing” becomes Shakespeare’s criteria for what is from the purpose of being; and in Hamlet’s description of a stage action
that "hold[s] . . . the mirror up to nature," Shakespeare points to the kind of action that makes for reality, rather than unreality, on the world stage. By way of Hamlet's dramatic criticism Shakespeare details and reinforces the sometimes more general definitions of proper conduct and choice that we have noted in other passages in the play. Thus, if a man is to "pass show," if he is to say, "I know not 'seems,'" he must "acquire and beget a temperance." So observing "the modesty of nature," he reflects fair judgment, God-like reason, and proper rule; he takes his fellowmen in, using them according to his "own honour and dignity," rather than their desert; he feeds Christ and has God at his table. And so doing, he chooses the reality that passes show, and makes the decision "to be." The decision "not to be" is the choice of dullness and noise. Marked by passion, madness, and disorder, the essential character of false-seeming is found in Hamlet's description of unnatural stage action. The man who splits ears and out-herods Herod; who fails to suit deed to noble word; who, putting on the semblance of a beast, imitates humanity abominably; whose self-absorption reflects a "pitiful ambition" and leads him to forget the purpose of being and the aims of his creator—such a man makes the decision for "show."

Thus, Shakespeare uses Hamlet's distinctions between proper and improper "action" on the smaller stage to distinguish between proper and improper action on the larger one and to define ultimate reality and unreality. Such an analogy has the effect of investing the material world with the character of an illusory one: on both stages the player is faced with the choice of being or seeming, though seeming is the medium through which being is revealed, perpetuated, initiated. Although the analogy is primarily a means to comment on human conduct, it works in two ways, extending the dramatic criticism itself. That is, the "reality" on the smaller stage, in mirroring an illusory world, must reflect both good and evil; but good theater on it, as on the larger stage, is determined by the degree to which the player images what Shakespeare elsewhere calls "great creating nature." However, the primary burden of the figurative comparison is that
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"to be, or not to be" is the question facing a man at every turn of his performance on the world stage. And as Shakespeare is employing a not uncommon analogy, he is presenting, by means of it, a not uncommon view of the nature of man's essential choice: Donne, for example, expresses exactly the same uncompromising doctrine when he says, "Man lives under another manner of law [than the 'creatures'] . . . doe this, and you shall live; disobey, and you shall die. But yet, the choise is yours: Choose ye this day life, or death."

Any doubt that Shakespeare is giving to a familiar analogy unfamiliar form and to a common doctrine on the character of man's basic options uncommon development in a rich and sustained figurative comment on the difference between being and seeming may be dispelled by a study of the scene in Gertrude's closet, where the action is explicitly described in theatrical terms; the nature and the effect of both "show" and the action that "passeth show" are demonstrated; and the thesis that seeming is a medium for change (good or bad) is explicitly declared.

III

Hamlet says to his mother, "I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you" (III.iv.19–20); but unlike the player or the playwright who would hold the mirror up to nature, he is bent on reflecting only the evil in her. His words are described as "noise": "What have I done," she asks, "that thou darest wag thy tongue / In noise so rude against me?" (39–40). They are described as weapons: "These words, like daggers, enter in mine ears" (95). His anger and violence arouse in Gertrude a wrathful movement toward reprisal: "Nay, then, I'll set those to you that can speak" (17, italics mine). His noise and disorder generate confusion: "What act, / That roars so loud, and thunders in the index?" (51–52). His passion elicits despair: what he shows her in her soul is, she says, "such black and grained spots / As will not leave their tinct" (89–91, italics mine). He resorts to an extravagant use of abusive epithets: Claudius is "a mildew'd ear," a "moor," "a murderer and a villain," "a slave," "a vice
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of kings,” “a cut-purse,” “a king of shreds and patches” (64, 67, 96–102); and his excess evokes in her a futile repetition: “no more . . . no more . . . No more . . . No more!” (88, 94, 96, 101). If he proposes to “set [her] up a glass,” neither method nor effect suggests the nature and purpose of good theater. On the contrary, an assault on “ears” recalls a method of destruction; and the whole passage is obliquely reminiscent of “dumb-shows and noise.”

But when, instead of ranting and bellowing, Hamlet acquires a temperance, he begets one; when, not treating her according to what he thinks are her deserts, he suggests a positive course of action—“Confess yourself to heaven; / Repent what’s past; avoid what is to come” (149–50)—he sparks a response quite different from her earlier hopelessness: “What shall I do?” (180). Hamlet has just foisted the death of Polonius first on “fortune” (32) and then on “heaven” (173), and this transference of responsibility for his own act is to burgeon into a glorification of the means by which he “seal’d” the plot against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: “Even in that was heaven ordinant” (V.ii.48). But such insistence on Hamlet’s increasing subjection to violence and self-delusion highlights Shakespeare’s demonstration of the power for good in the corrupted understanding and the positive response that power can set in motion. After an exchange where dumbness and noise produce only dumbness and noise, the revelation that even a limited exercise of reason and temperance also operates in chain reaction accentuates the relative futility of the first action and the constructiveness of the second.

Whether Hamlet properly directs Gertrude’s willingness to submit herself to a rule that says, “Confess yourself to heaven; repent” is another matter. We may note, however, that he makes two requests to her, both negative. The first—that she “go not to [the King’s] bed” (III.iv.159)—she does not answer. But this request is accompanied by an enjoinder to a positive course of action; and if the “black and grained spots” that she laments are the lust that Hamlet accuses her of, then there is, later in the play, a hint that she does try to change “their tinct” by “assum[ing] a virtue,” as well as
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practicing an abstinence that Hamlet urges on her: Claudius is subsequently to say, “I see, in passages of proof, / Time qualifies the spark and fire of [love]” (IV.vii.113–14, italics mine). The other request—that she not reveal “this matter” to the King—she answers, “If words be made of breath, / And breath of life, I have no life to breathe / What thou hast said to me” (III.iv.197–99); and we know that she not only keeps this promise but elaborates on it in a blameworthy fashion. But whether Hamlet uses for good or evil the ascendancy that he gets over his mother, Shakespeare shows us that when he refrains from noisy recrimination and exerts some forbearance, a restraint that extends beyond a mere determination not to do what Nero did (III.ii.411–12), Gertrude reacts without her earlier anger, confusion, dumbness, despair, and vain repetition. The process seen in action is also glimpsed in his declaration, “And when you are desirous to be bless’d, / I’ll blessing beg of you” (III.iv.171–72). But though these words reinforce the dramatic revelation that a motion toward goodness is creative of other movements toward good and though they reflect Hamlet’s willingness to return good for good, they also point to a limitation in him: the difficult action—to initiate the good, to respond nobly to what he sees as evil—he never greatly achieves. However, in this scene, after first indulging in vain vituperation, he does attain some judgment, reason, and rule—enough that we are shown, in one passage, the relative effect of unreal and real action.

In this same scene, there is also a direct statement that seeming may implement reality or unreality, good or evil. Hamlet expresses a philosophy of “action”:

Assume a virtue, if you have it not.
That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat,
Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a flock or livery,
That aptly is put on. Refrain to-night,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence: the next more easy;
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And either . . . the devil, or throw him out
With wondrous potency.

(III.iv.160–70)\textsuperscript{14}

In urging Gertrude to “put on” the appearance of a virtue, Hamlet is not advocating hypocrisy, the “most painted word,” the show that hides the ugly intention or fact, but the assumption of an appearance of good with the intention of making seeming a reality. He stresses two ideas: the need to affect actions “fair and good” and the power of “habit” or “use.” The great significance in a declaration that an external practice contains the seed for internal change lies less in its bearing on what Gertrude may do than on what Hamlet does. If a habitual assumption of a virtue can almost change the essential character of the seemer, then one is led to wonder about the effect of a habitual pretense to madness.

That habit or custom may be destructive is not a late assertion in Hamlet. In the first act, when Hamlet calls the King’s rouse “a custom / More honour’d in the breach than the observance,” he goes on to declare that “the o’er-growth of some complexion” may break down “the pales and forts of reason” and to name, as one of the causes for the corruption of the noble substance, “some habit that too much o’er-leavens / The form of plausible manners,” an idea he now repeats when he tells Gertrude that “use almost can change the stamp of nature.” His language to his mother—“to the use of actions fair and good / [Custom] gives a frock or livery, / That aptly is put on”—echoes his description of his own action when he earlier determines “to put an antic disposition on” (I.v.172). And by way of Hamlet’s repeated and strong insistence on the power of habit (a theme to be reiterated in a speech by Horatio in Act V), Shakespeare throws a sharp light on Hamlet’s pretense to madness and illuminates his conduct and his open declaration of madness in the final act.

Near the end of the play, after saying that he has “done [Laertes] wrong” and asking pardon, Hamlet first ascribes the killing of Polonius to his madness; then, not content with this, he resorts to an exercise of logic to show that he did not wrong Laertes:
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What I have done,
That might your nature, honour and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet:
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it, then? His madness: if 't be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd;
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.

(V.ii.241-50)

Since, on other occasions, he supplements the "act" of madness with the word, claiming that his "wit's diseased" (III. ii.333-34), it may be argued that he is here only doing what he has done before; that he is hiding behind a mask to conceal his purpose and excuse his actions; that, moreover, deception here is thrust on him, since he dare not say he killed Polonius thinking him Claudius. Yet there is a difference between this elaboration on the lie and the laconic "My wit's diseased," a difference hardly explainable by mere circumstance. After the altercation with Laertes in the graveyard and not long before he speaks these words, he says to Horatio, "I am very sorry . . . That to Laertes I forgot myself . . . I'll court his favours" (V.ii.75-78). Now by way of showing that he is sorry he "forgot [him]self," he uses his own name seven times in seven lines and refers to himself fourteen times in ten lines. By way of courting the favors of a man who has a sister and "a noble father lost" (IV.vii.25), he says, "But pardon 't, as you are a gentleman" (V.ii.238) and, after characteristically turning the tables and putting the injured man on trial (and with an offhand phrase that might appear to Laertes to slight the importance of the matter), he goes on to angle for sympathy for "poor Hamlet." By way of reinforcing an excuse of madness, he employs a show of considerable mental agility. Certainly, he is not intentionally demonstrating the "sore distraction" he tells Laertes he is "punish'd" with (240-41). But there is, paradox-
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ically, in this exercise of logic an element of unreason and unreality that exceeds conscious equivocation.

What strikes one particularly is not just the inconsistency or irony in his intimating that "pardon" is the recourse of the "gentleman"; in his expecting Laertes to react to injury with a nobility that he, Hamlet, the self-appointed instructor of all around him, has not shown; in his arguing for a distinction between the trespass and the trespasser when the latter is himself. We have seen many instances of his inconsistency, and we have heard him use "reason [to] pandar will." It is not just the ironic perspective his earlier rebuke to Gertrude throws on his own words here: he has said,

Mother, for love of grace,
Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass, but my madness speaks:
It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
While rank corruption, mining all within,
Inflicts unseen.

(III.iv.144–49)

Now he moves beyond mere qualification of trespass to the "flattering unction" he has warned Gertrude against, and denies the trespass in arguing that it was his madness that "spoke" with daggers. Nor is it just the parallel with Claudius that strikes us here: that the man whose favors could not be courted by Claudius proposes to "court [the] favours" of the son of his victim; that he now thinks, as Claudius has done, to explain murder away with a "forged process," and thus subscribes to a course of action that he, of all people, should consider unprofitable. And it is not just the progression in his disregard for proportion and fact, the movement from a sincere advocacy of principles that he, himself, does not abide by, to the deliberate and superfluous hypocrisy here in portraying himself as victim to the man whose father he has slain. Hamlet honestly wishes to propitiate Laertes; and what shocks one most about his words is the absurdity of an argument that, intending to gain the regard of a grieving son and brother,
focuses on “poor Hamlet,” rather than on poor Ophelia or poor Polonius or poor Laertes.

If such an argument could placate Laertes, it would have to come from someone else. Hamlet’s recourse to logic must have the effect on Laertes of weakening his claim to madness; his reduction of the murder of Polonius to syllogism, a self-pitying one at that, can hardly conciliate; and a use of premise and deduction to deny that he has wronged Laertes, particularly when the premise is self-commendation and the deduction self-commiseration, is hardly a sensible way of seeking pardon. Earlier, Claudius has implied that if Laertes does not avenge his father, he is “like the painting of a sorrow” (IV.vii.109); and Hamlet has declared to Horatio that he sees the “portraiture” of Laertes’ cause by the “image” of his own (V.ii.77–78). Despite the declared parallel, one suspects that this imagery, so often used to define the counterfeit and the unreal, characterizes Hamlet’s view of Laertes’ loss in contrast to his own: that, to him, Laertes’ sorrow is insubstantial, a painted replica of the real image. Such a view would, to some degree, qualify the falsehood, inconsistency, hypocrisy, and egocentricity in his speech to Laertes. But one must still be shocked by this illogical use of logic, by the extent of his departure from reason and rule. Yet the revelation is in line with Shakespeare’s insistent thematic comment on the power of use and habit, a point reiterated in the last act when—in an instance of the irony in continual play throughout this act—Hamlet’s taste is offended by the Clown’s singing at grave-digging and Horatio says, “Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness” (V.i.75–76). Such a premise surely illuminates the involuntary “madness” of Hamlet’s words to Laertes. Though the Hamlet of the first act saw the matter of his father’s death as “particular,” he was not then the man who here employs a show of logic to make falsehood pass for truth: deception has become, through custom, a “property of easiness” and the line between “is” and “seems” fluid; the prince who once said, “I know not ‘seems,’” now knows almost nothing else; the use of madness has “almost changed the stamp of nature”; and by a habitual use of show, he is indeed “mad in craft.”
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It follows that he speaks a truth he does not apprehend when he claims that his madness wronged Laertes and that this madness is his enemy. Earlier, after he leaps into Ophelia's grave and Laertes grapples with him saying, "The devil take thy soul" (281), he directs a lengthy, violent, and contemptuous tirade at Laertes, incongruously concluding it with the question, "What is the reason that you use me thus? / I loved you ever" (312-13). If Hamlet has reason to hate Claudius, who has also declared love for the son of his victim (I.ii.110-12), then Laertes, who has also heard an injunction to "remember" (IV.v.176; cf.I.v.91), has reason to hate Hamlet. But now Hamlet, after killing Laertes' father, wonders what reason Laertes has to act as he does. It might be argued that although Hamlet's "towering passion" (V.ii.80) is spontaneous, the question he puts to Laertes and the protestation of love, followed immediately by the ugly lines, "But it is no matter; / Let Hercules himself do what he may, / The cat will mew and dog will have his day," are calculatingly mad. But the question is characteristic of a state of mind consistently revealed in Hamlet's speech in the last act. And it also affords Shakespeare two important observations: first, implicitly, a desire for revenge is not the effect of reason; second, a desire for revenge is not productive of reason. One recalls that Horatio has feared that the Ghost "might deprive [Hamlet's] sovereignty of reason / And draw [him] into madness" (I.iv.73-74). All signs point to the conclusion that it is Hamlet's madness that has wronged Laertes, but it is a madness that lies below the mask. And madness is Hamlet's enemy: the "antic disposition," the "habit" his desire for revenge takes, has changed his noble substance. His irrational question and irrelevant declaration of love, in the midst of an insulting verbal onslaught, demonstrate his fall from reason.

The challenge Hamlet issues to Laertes over the grave of Ophelia, his offer to duel on the "theme" of love (V.i.289-94), is cut from the same cloth as the challenge he subsequently receives to duel on the theme of honor. The rationale behind his challenge recalls that of the Ghost, who thinks that an act of violence will prove love and grief: "If thou didst ever
thy dear father love . . . Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.” It recalls the reasoning of Polonius, who thinks that an “act” of madness proves love and grief: “He, repelled [by Ophelia] . . . Fell . . . Into the madness wherein now he raves” (II.ii.146-50). Now Hamlet proposes that he and Laertes determine the greater lover and griever by acts of violence or madness: by fighting, tearing themselves, drinking vinegar, eating a crocodile (V.i.298-99). To say that Hamlet is merely defining figuratively the lengths to which he will go for love is not to the point: when even fasting and weeping, which one might more naturally connect with grief and love than eating a crocodile, become a basis for competition, love is not the question. Nor can one say that Hamlet is merely thus expressing his contempt for rant. We can concede that he has no way of knowing what we know: that after the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia, Laertes speaks, for the most part, with remarkable brevity and directness; that on his return to Denmark, in his first words to Claudius, he says succinctly what Hamlet, for all his talk, never says, “O thou vile king, / Give me my father!” (IV.v.115-16). Nevertheless, for Hamlet to accuse the man he has injured of whining, prating, mouthing, trying to “outface” him; to rant at length over what he calls “the bravery of [that man’s] grief” (V.ii.79); and to turn from a distress he has, in large part, brought about, with a contemptuous reference to cat and dog—all this is of a piece with his later callous dismissal of the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and his subsequent resort to self-extenuating argument on the matter of Polonius’s death. Injustice and irrationality are, Shakespeare implies, inevitable by-products of isolation, of a loss of contact with ultimate reality. Though Hamlet later says he “forgot [him] self,” the one thing he is evidently incapable of forgetting is himself: only his wrongs have weight; only his griefs are important. Imprisoned in self, he lies “worse than the mutines in the bilboes.”

Thus, Shakespeare provides graphic comment on the pitfalls in Polonius’s unqualified advice, “To thine own self be true.” As Hamlet switches and equivocates, giving first one and then another interpretation of his killings, one sees the
impossibility of his being true "to any man" (or, in the long
run, to himself) when self marks the boundaries of his world.
To Gertrude and Horatio, he ascribes his murders to Heaven,
to fortune, or to the will of his victims; to Laertes and the
court, he blames his madness and fortune. And whoever or
whatever he credits for the murders, for whatever reason, he
evades responsibility. Polonius is an "intruding fool" (III.
iv.31); similarly, the "defeat" of Rosencrantz and Guilden-
stern is the result of their "insinuation" (V.ii.59). Though he
has casually killed a father and has treacherously sent men
to death without "shriving-time allow'd" ("O, horrible! O,
horrible! most horrible!" says the Ghost of this same action),
he exhibits no sense of guilt, no awareness of the "heavy
burthen" that even Claudius laments (III.i.54). He may de-
clare to Gertrude that he "repents" the death of Polonius,
but he immediately refers the killing to the pleasure of Heaven
(why it should "please" Heaven to "scourge" the court of
Polonius, rather than Claudius, he does not say; except when
it is convenient to explicate Heaven's movings, Hamlet al-

dows Heaven to move in mysterious ways); and nothing in
his immediate reaction or his later conduct to Laertes implies
repentance or remorse. He may say that he "wrong'd" Laertes,
but he immediately contradicts the saying—and on the basis
of a lie. What is implicit in all this is explicit in his words on
the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "They are not
near my conscience" (V.ii.58). All of his equivocations have
an element of truth in them: fortune, Heaven, and his mad-
ness do play a role in the murders; what the victims them-
selves do is certainly a factor in their physical undoing. But
one cannot assign Polonius's death to chance when the hand
that strikes the blow intends murder; and one cannot say
that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come between "the fell
incensed points / Of mighty opposites" (61–62) when Ham-
let's point is directed at them. Moreover, it is one thing to
say that Heaven is ordinant in all of these deaths in the play
and another to imply that Heaven initiates those deaths; one
thing to argue that Heaven, by its immutable laws, directs
what happens, another to imply that Heaven determines what
happens. Paradoxically, Hamlet's qualification or justification
of the results of his own action in ascribing them to disparate forces beyond his control stresses his habitual rejection of forces outside the self.

By the last act not only has Hamlet's adoption of the practice of seeming been a futile revenge that "swoopstake...draw[s] both friend and foe"—four people dead who had nothing to do with the original crime; the noble Laertes willing to give "both the worlds...to negligence" (IV.v.134); "the people muddied,/Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts" (81-82); Claudius, grown larger in villainy, still on the throne—but it has also brought about his own defeat, his alienation from reason and reality. And Shakespeare allows us no doubt that this alienation follows on a willful choice of show. We have seen that Hamlet's use of theater is defined by the dumb show and violence that his production immediately reproduces. The King's conscience may be "caught" by the dramatic enactment of his crime (as by any reminder of it); but, like the offense, such "action" produces only grief. Conscience is not "moved" to an implementation of remedy. And when Hamlet's arrival at the prayer scene gives Hamlet another opportunity—fortuitous or the "assay" of angels?—to put into practice an action antithetical to show, he rejects it.

If, at this moment, he had employed the accent of a Christian or the action of a man (as he has defined that action); if he had practiced the philosophy so recently urged on Polonius; if, supplementing the King's attempt to "look up," he had said what he is soon to say to Gertrude, "Repent what's past"—perhaps he could have effected repentance in Claudius and, thus, forgiveness in the Ghost. For Hamlet is the middle man between the "man" who cannot forgive and the man who cannot repent. But although Hamlet sees that "'tis heavy with [the King]" (III.iii.84), he has used dumb show and play, not to "give [Claudius] some light," but rather to elicit a revelation of darkness. His secret intent fittingly produces a secret declaration of offense; and like Hamlet, Claudius persists in public dumbness. Moreover, the King's dumb show elicits from Hamlet a revelation of darkness. The willfulness of Hamlet's determination on a reprisal in excess...
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of Claudius’s crime, his decision to try to destroy soul as well as body,17 is underlined when he later answers Laertes’ “The devil take thy soul” with the judgment, “Thou pray’st not well” (V.i.281–82). Species of show do indeed lead “presently” to species of proclamation that reveal the “malefactor.” And again we see, in this ironic issue, the motif of “purposes . . . Fall’n on the inventors’ heads.”

IV

One suspects that Shakespeare might say, “‘Who, that’s but [a critic], fair, sober, wise,’ would find Hamlet’s shortcoming in his delay in killing Claudius?” For Shakespeare nowhere suggests that the time would have been put in “joint” if Hamlet had ascended the throne by killing the King. The corruption in Denmark, by evidence of the words of the grave-digger, begins before King Hamlet’s murder; and a contributing factor to that disorder is king-killing. Shakespeare makes no case for martial retribution or revenge in the actions of Laertes and Fortinbras, and such counterpart to Hamlet’s cause does not, however disparate the circumstances, afford a perspective that puts any desire for revenge in a favorable light. Nor, in this play, does Shakespeare proffer any brief for the use of arms: even the sport of dueling is made suspect when Hamlet uses the word violence to describe it (V.ii.309). One suspects, too, that Shakespeare would be startled at those critics who take a small step beyond finding Hamlet’s fault in his lack of bloodthirstiness, to taking him for their moral arbiter in all matters, despite his bloodthirstiness. Because Hamlet returns from his sea voyage uttering, as always, fine principles like “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends” (10), “There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (230–31), and “The readiness is all” (233), we are surely not intended to overlook their unconscious irony in the context of his deeds and find him regenerated or converted,18 despite the revealed contrast between his faith and the faith of the First Clown, that other and “absolute” gravedigger; the irrational ranting over Ophelia’s grave; the ruthless self-justification for the murder of his former schoolfellows; the callous treatment
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of Laertes; the hypocritical and superfluous elaboration on the lie about the death of Polonius. Even his apparently inconsequential words to Laertes and Claudius about his "ignorance" and weakness in dueling (266–72) are suggestive: Shakespeare does not have him thus directly contradict what he has just said to Horatio (220–22), in order to stress his courtesy, but rather to reveal how meaninglessly he pledges "by this hand" (269; cf. III.i.349), how needlessly he lies, how easy a property he now finds seeming. And if one insists that such details are unimportant, one is still left with the uncompromising fact that he eventually murders as savagely as Claudius without the subsequent sense of guilt that plagues Claudius. Such a parallel and such a contrast do not show that he is incapable of pitiless and violent action or that he is Heaven's "minister," however he may censure or glorify his own conduct.

In the face of the "havoc" at the end of the play, one must take into account the burden of the figurative design and the conceivable effect of a practice antithetical to show. An open and direct declaration of Claudius's guilt, an appeal to repentance, an attempt to administer a judgment that (not excusing or extenuating the evil) is positive, rather than negative—all may appear, given Claudius's position and nature, and only the accusation and evidence of a Ghost, eminently unrealistic. But the rub in our acceptance of such a course is not in its peril or its futility, not in the character of Claudius, but in the character of Hamlet and in ourselves. Shakespeare denies its material impracticability by reiterations about the people's regard for Hamlet and by the revelation of Claudius's weak hold on the throne when Laertes, with the help of the rabble, "o'er-bears [the King's] officers" (IV.v.101–2); he does not to no purpose change the situation found in the available sources of the story, where the courtiers connive at the uncle's treachery and tyranny. He also qualifies the quixotism in a premise that Claudius might be capable of repentance by giving him a disturbed conscience, by allowing for a goodness still resident in him, and by insisting on the constructive force of noble action. It is characteristic of Shakespeare to plead the case of faith and charity while demonstrat-
ing the obstacles to their practice, and in other plays he shows such qualities accomplishing more remarkable reversals than repentance in Claudius would be. Moreover, the difficulty of imagining a profitable response to an act does not refute the wisdom of the act itself. But though events suggest that there would be little danger for Hamlet in such a course and that it might elicit penitence in the King, Hamlet does not transmute his loftiest beliefs into literal practice. And the reader is tempted to share in Hamlet’s rejection of his own preachment that merit lies in “bounty,” that treating a man according to his desert is not equivalent to using him “after [one’s] own honour and dignity.” For quite aside from whether Hamlet, with a “dear father” slain and with engrained notions of knightly honor and justice, could actualize such an ideal as he enjoins on Polonius, the reader tends to reject it as impractical (if he considers it at all), as an inadequate, foolish, vain, soft response to great human evil and the “realities” of the human condition. Even as we see the effect of Hamlet’s rejection of his better knowledge, even as we perceive “in passages of proof” that “Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds,” Claudius’s easy and immediate decision to kill Hamlet is in such contrast to Hamlet’s agonized delay in killing Claudius that our emotional identification with Hamlet is reinforced and we feel that Claudius is a villain and Hamlet, whatever he has become, is not and that, all pretty principles aside, villainy should get its “desert.” Thus, Shakespeare challenges commitment to, and faith in, a conception of justice that man professes to revere.

But while he brings home to us the difficulty in giving the decision “to be” more than lip service, he does not evade or dilute the effect of wrong choice, the decision “not to be.” It is hard not to mislead oneself about Hamlet when other characters in the play, the circumstances of his death, and the echoes of an original greatness of mind all speak for him. But one must not be misled by the estimate that even the man who plots his death has of him as one “most generous and free from all contriving”: the ghosts of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would find such a description inexact. One must not be misled into thinking that he does not make a choice, does
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not act on the Ghost's injunction, simply because he does not immediately take a particular kind of action: if it is true that "on his choice depends / The sanity and health of this whole state" (I.iii.20–21), then the fact that Denmark is increasingly given over to insanity and sickness indicates a failure of choice. One must not be misled by the sympathy one feels for him as the victim of Claudius's and Laertes' treachery: if he can reword what he has called the "fortune" of an "intruding fool" into "I have shot mine arrow o'er the house, / And hurt my brother," then his own disregard for truth characterizes "this brother's wager" (III.iv.31–32; V.ii.254–55,264). One must not be misled by the displays of nobility that he is still capable of, any more than one is misled by Claudius's displays of honesty, pity, and concern into calling him a "good and gentle king." In the scene in the graveyard where we fittingly find Hamlet at the opening of the last act, we can hardly be less appalled by the change in the Prince who originally put on the "antic disposition" than he is by the remains of Yorick, that other "fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy" (V.i.203–4). Hamlet has gone to the water, "a sore decayer" (188).

He may later respond to Laertes' forgiveness with forgiveness and, though Laertes has been as treacherous in his use of poison as Claudius had been in killing King Hamlet, do what the Ghost has not done. But the Ghost has not been confronted with repentance; and though one should not underestimate Hamlet's reaction to Laertes' request, neither should one allow sympathy for Hamlet and the conviction that he could never have resorted to Laertes' particular brand of perfidy, to obscure Laertes' magnanimity and, in this play, its importance. Unlike Claudius, Laertes repents; unlike the Ghost, he forgives; and he does not wait to know that Hamlet is "desirous to be bless'd" before begging "blessing." In short, it is Laertes who, though he has lost both father and sister, manages the difficult action. Hamlet immediately responds with pardon, but there is still no indication in his words that he has any real awareness of his own wrongdoing. Yet, in a way, though his knowledge that Laertes has had "cause" to feel "wrong'd" may bear on his readiness to forgive, his lack
of a true sense of transgression or contrition accentuates his generosity. Thus, at the conclusion of a tragedy brought about, in part, by a failure to exercise faith in men’s good, whatever their evil, we see proof, not only of a virtue still resident in corrupted men, but also of the potency of the virtuous act. Hamlet, not conscience-stricken like Laertes (or, earlier, Claudius), retains a nobility that can be sparked by a noble action. But it is his general departure from goodness that gives point to his response.

Finally, one must not be misled by Horatio’s estimate of Hamlet. Horatio exclaims over Hamlet’s dead body, “Flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!” But though he invokes a singing, the next line that Shakespeare gives him is, significantly, “Why does the drum come hither?” (V.ii.371–72). It is a “speaking” that is put in motion for Hamlet: the “rites of war/Speak loudly for him” (410–11); the “peal of ordnance” marks his passage to his rest. Those readers who accept Horatio’s view of Hamlet are likely to assume that the story Horatio promises to tell is essentially Hamlet, the story they have heard. One critic says, “What is there to be told? No more than we . . . have just lived through in our imagination with the poet.” One must add, “Not nearly so much.” Horatio is not privy to all that Shakespeare gives us. For example, he has not heard the First Clown’s answer to the riddle about the strongest builder: “When you are asked this question next, say ‘a grave-maker:’ the houses that he makes last till doomsday” (V.i.65–67). Hamlet has made at least five such houses; and according to the Clown, the man who digs a grave for another man, digs his own (133–34). If the implications in the allusion to doomsday are not to be scanted, if there are here “necessary question[s] of the play . . . to be considered,” then Shakespeare’s view of Hamlet is not Horatio’s.

Moreover, what Horatio will “deliver” is, by evidence of his own words, only an account of “acts” that are imaged in “such a sight as this” (V.ii.397,392,412), the sight that horrifies Fortinbras and the English Ambassadors. Horatio proposes a narrative replete with a kind of “dumb show”: “high on a stage” the dead bodies will “be placed to the view” (389),
and he will play the presenter when this is "perform'd" (404), explaining this show with an account "of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts, / Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters, / Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause, / And, in this upshot, purposes mistook / Fall'n on the inventors' heads" (392–96). But, at the risk of belaboring the obvious, one must note that Horatio is no more aware of the large significance of his own language in speaking of "acts," of death "put on," of "this upshot," than he is of the figurative burden of Fortinbras's words when, in a language charged with imagery that throughout the play defines the nature of show, the Norwegian speaks of the "feast" that these trappers and shooters now shadow forth as the "quarry" that "death . . . at a shot / So bloodily hast struck" (375–78). Obvious distinctions aside, if one accepts the notion that Horatio will approximate what "we have just lived through," one is missing the distinction between show and play, on stage or off.

We see in Horatio's own summary of the action the boundaries of his proposed narrative and dramatic presentation: violence and death, the matter of the mute scene "high on a stage," will be his theme. If Shakespeare's play "hold[s], as 't were, the mirror up to nature" and shows "the very age and body of the time his form and pressure," then one can hardly find in a silent scene that mirrors only death a facsimile of Hamlet, however apt its commentary. Such a lifeless show as Horatio projects has counterpart in Hamlet's dumb show; and such a narrative, counterpart in the speech of the First Player (though now the "cue for passion" is a subjective one). Those critics who would find in Horatio's promised show the gist of Hamlet, and in his promised account of a story of revenge the essence of Hamlet, are identifying one aspect of Shakespeare's play with the whole play. Nor is the effect within the play of actions described in an imagery of theater the effect of Hamlet. Shakespeare's influence on his audience will be the subject of my concluding remarks; the effect of Horatio on his audience is projected by the logic of the figurative design: those who watch the duel, which Hamlet characteristically calls "this chance," are "but mutes or audience to this act" of noise and violence that results in "silence" and senseless ears; and we
cannot suppose that anything more than a similar dumbness will be effected by the “dumb show” high on a stage and a narrative that mirrors only that silent scene.

Any other issue is denied by the insistent use, here at the end of the play, of the elements of the *show* symbolism and the strict adherence to the premises of the figurative pattern. Shakespeare ends other plays with the bearing offstage of the dead to the sound of a dead march; but in Hamlet he also employs the noise of the ordnance to mark the action. The use of the guns, like the forecast of a mute scene to succeed the noise of the funeral procession, invests the conclusion of Hamlet with a peculiar pessimism. Again, in this continuation of the process depicted throughout the play, we are told that dumb show and noise follow on dumb show and noise; more particularly, we are told that there is no real change in Denmark. The consequence of the choice of the ruling house of Denmark is manifest, not just in the death of its representatives, but also in the triumph of the guns and the “prophesy” of the election of the militarist Fortinbras, who, most suggestively, has the sanction of a “dying voice” (366-67). Fortinbras may possess admirable qualities and instincts; he may say that the sight he sees “shows much amiss” in court, but it is a show he likes: it “becomes the field” (412-13). His allegiance is to the custom, the ceremony, the “rites of war”; the noise he glorifies is the “warlike volley” (with which he honors the messengers bearing the news of the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) and the “soldier’s music” (with which he honors the Prince for whom Horatio has invoked the singing of angels). He may have earlier accepted the arrests and rebukes of his uncle; but he is a man of ambition (I.ii.21; IV.iv.49), and he wastes no time in declaring a “claim” to “rights” in Denmark (V.ii.401-2). Given what we know of the character of Fortinbras, we can have little doubt that now, as at the beginning of Hamlet, “nightly [will toil] the subject of the land, / [With] daily cast of brazen cannon, / And foreign mart for implements of war” (I.i.72-74). Hamlet’s giving his “voice” to Fortinbras may appear to resolve the attitudes crystallized in the compact of their fathers, and it may appear a fitting sequel to Fortinbras’s giving over his
“pester[ing] . . . message” and accepting rule. But the prospect of a speech “from [a dead] mouth whose voice will draw on” the election of Fortinbras (V.ii.403) subtly and ironically echoes the beginning of Hamlet. And the prospect of a show with a “presenter” who will tell of “acts” of violence (and will no more deal in positive values than did that earlier presenter who was called “as good as a chorus,” [III.ii.255]) intensifies that echo and reinforces the implication that Denmark will not escape, in this new representative of its “voice,” the treadmill of noise and dumbness.

That “the cease of majesty . . . is a massy wheel” is, thus, ironically implied in the accession of Fortinbras. For one must feel the loss to Denmark when a Hamlet, the “courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s, eye, tongue, sword” (III.i.159), gives way to a Fortinbras, all soldier, all sword. One must sense the “boisterous ruin” (III.iii.22) that attends on the waste of great capacities for the public good when “eye, tongue, sword” (the proper order) are as misapplied in fact as they are in the analogy of Ophelia’s order—courtier, soldier, scholar. In the somber echoes, in the final scene, of the figurative comment throughout the drama, one hears the long reverberations of Prince Hamlet’s choice of noise and dumb show when it is manifested—not only in the scene of carnage, the noise of the guns, and the prospect of show—but also in his giving his “voice” to Fortinbras, and Denmark to the rule of a man who “find[s] quarrel in a straw” (IV.iv.55).

In the light of image and symbol, the pattern in Hamlet’s tragedy is clear: the poison poured into his ears works, and he becomes corrupted and corrupter, trapped and trapper. Rejecting the higher rule he is aware of, he limits himself to the dungeon of self. Choosing to cover himself with the crust of madness and to set a mousetrap with the bait of falsehood, he is caught in his own toil and falls into seeming—“quite, quite down” (III.i.162). Making the decision for death, he is subject to that choice: his existence becomes a matter of “dumb-show and noise,” ominously “the rest . . . silence.” He has called Claudius “a thing . . . Of nothing” (IV.ii.30–32),21 a phrase that, if Shakespeare’s figurative and thematic

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comment holds, also eventually describes Hamlet, for he has chosen “not to be.”

But here one pauses. One may believe that those critics who allow Hamlet’s rhetoric to lead them to disregard, extenuate, or justify his wrongdoing are, with him, making morality and religion “a rhapsody of words” (III.iv.47–48) and, with Horatio, confusing nothing with something. One may believe that arguments that Hamlet is Heaven’s minister to scourge Denmark of evil or a scapegoat whose sacrifice ensures the public good are narrowing the scope of Shakespeare’s representation of evil. One may believe it absurd to contend that though Shakespeare insists on the boomerang of violence and the futility of revenge, he intends us to ascribe men’s violent and vengeful actions to Hell in some instances, and to Heaven in others; or that though men who “would circumvent God” (V.i.87), who send a fellow to death “unhousel’d,” or who consign a human soul to the Devil are to be censured, such censure applies only to Claudius and Laertes, not to Hamlet. Nevertheless, one must also concede that the feeling behind efforts to put Hamlet’s actions in a favorable light is a valid response to the drama. The great range of critical reaction to Hamlet’s character—from those who find him ever the “sweet prince” to those who find him “a poison”—stems from apparently contradictory demands that Shakespeare makes on his audience. On the one hand, there is the logic of the figurative and factual pattern: we are told that the monster, custom, can consume the noblest substance and that a habitual use of false-seeming can blast the most sovereign reason; we are shown the disintegration of a man who, despite the most remarkable gifts, chooses to imitate humanity abominably and whose own criteria for human excellence gauge his descent into silence. On the other hand, even as Shakespeare explicates and depicts Hamlet’s ruining from good, he holds our pity and sympathy, even our loyalty, for Hamlet. The resolution of these pulls is not to be found in refusing to acknowledge one of them; and the fact that the thesis developed in this study accommodates them both is an uncommon point in its favor. It supports the proposal that by two de-
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mands, one on a sense that does not blink at evil done and one on a sensibility that does not find justice in taking only evil into account, Shakespeare extends his comment on Hamlet’s judgment of Claudius; and effecting what he has been saying is an aim of art, he leads his audience to exercise a judgment that does not “o’er-step.”

He may employ drama to mirror the particular and the general consequences of unleashing and serving the forces of evil; he may admit of no defeat of those forces in the promise of show and the accession of a prince who glories in noise. His conclusions about the society he pictures may be somber: to flawed man, the singing of angels is a dream; the “reality,” the choice he implements, is the sound of the drum and the peal of the ordnance, worldly honor, power, pomp. From Francisco’s “I am sick at heart” in Act I to Hamlet’s “Thou wouldst not think how ill ’s here about my heart” in Act V and from the Ghost’s concern over the wrong done him to Hamlet’s dying concern for himself, his “wounded name,” one may hardly avoid saying with Ophelia, “O, how the wheel becomes it!” From the Ghost’s begging a hearing to Horatio’s begging a hearing, one may hardly avoid saying with Hamlet (as he responded to the Prologue’s “We beg your hearing patiently”), “Is this . . . the posy of a ring?” With recurrent phrases about foul practice that turns on itself, arrow that reverts to bow, engineer hoist with his own petard, purposes fallen on inventors’ heads; with descriptions, early and late, of a succession of sounds that reverberate from heaven; with a dramatic process wherein dumbness and noise inevitably and repeatedly lead to dumbness and noise—Shakespeare may hardly allow us to avoid the melancholy conclusion that the futile and monotonous round of evil is not, in this play, halted. But, nevertheless, in holding the mirror up to a nature that reflects an individual and a general human failure, Shakespeare images good as well as evil. And although Hamlet is a drama about a time whose age and body are mirrored in the form and pressure of dumb shows and noise, Shakespeare leads his audience to reflect “true play.”

He uses theater to beget a temperance toward a Prince whose cruelty and treachery cannot be gainsaid and a people
whose prizing of dross is undeniable. If both the glorification of ugly fact and the judgment that rests solely on fault are productive and reflective of dumb shows and noise, then Shakespeare encourages us to neither an evasive renaming of evil nor a swinish nicknaming on the basis of it, to neither a denial that Hamlet becomes a "bloody . . . Remorseless, treacherous . . . villain" nor an assertion that he can be summed up in words like villain or beast. Whatever else Hamlet does, he finds it hard to kill a King and kinsman; and whatever he becomes, he finds it easy to forgive his own killer. The point of such differences from Claudius and the Ghost is not that Hamlet is less the murderer. (After all, Claudius's uneasy conscience, in contrast to Hamlet's remorselessness, makes the King no less a fratricide; and the Ghost's admission that murder in the best is most foul, in contrast to Hamlet's refusal to see foulness in the murder of his former friends, makes the Ghost no less the revenger.) The point is simply that judgment cannot rest on an extenuation of evil or a discounting of good. Professor Ornstein says that "Shakespeare creates within us a sympathy with Hamlet which becomes almost an act of faith," and this seems to me a perceptive observation as it applies to both a common reaction and to Shakespeare's intention; but that sympathy does not derive "primarily from what [Hamlet] says rather than what he does." Much of what Hamlet says—particularly in the last act—is as twisted as his deeds, and one deed is better than anything he says. However, even as Hamlet stands a gravemaker among graves, even as his words and deeds reflect corruption, he still can stir our minds to admiring wonder; even grown inhuman, he still can stir us to laughter with a human, humorous amusement at Osric's nonsense (and there is nothing like a sharing of laughter to temper adverse opinion of another); even in the midst of a havoc that his words and deeds have helped to bring about, he still can stir us to approval with his response to Laertes' plea. Shakespeare tells us that corrupted by seeming, Hamlet is still capable of words and actions antithetical to show, as are other representatives of this noisy age. But the significance of our acceptance of this is impor-
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tantly dependent on our cognizance of an individual and general decay.

For Shakespeare thus elicits from us a response that enforces the argument he has been developing in his show/play symbolism and leads us to affirm its validity. The further parted from reason and rule Hamlet is shown to be, “the less [he] deserve[s]” in conjunction with the willingness of the audience to “take [him] in” on the strength of a good incommensurate to his evil, “the more merit is in . . . bounty” and the less that audience can argue that giving bounty to the sinner is “unrealistic.” Hamlet has said that if a man is used “after his desert . . . who should ’scape whipping?” Shakespeare has demonstrated repeatedly, in the choices of an extravagant and erring Prince and society, that if judgment reflects only evil and false-seeming, “who should ’scape [dumb shows and noise]?” And he makes us bear witness to the choice that redounds to every man’s good, and to the reality of a remarkable work of art. Accomplishing what it argues, Hamlet leads us to testify to its truth: by exercising a conception of justice that includes a temperance, a charity, a faith in a man’s nobility despite his manifest evil, one imitates “great creating nature” and mirrors the reality that “passeth show.”