Laforgue’s story is inspired by the most illustrious of the predecessors suggested by the title, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. As with the other *Moralités*, Laforgue alters the title, in this case by adding a qualifying subtitle, in order simultaneously to identify the story as modelled upon another one and to differentiate it from the other.1 The subtitle here is ironic for, although “the consequences of filial piety” might well describe the character and actions of Shakespeare’s hero, it does not in its most obvious sense fit Laforgue’s, who is motivated relatively little by devotion to his father. We might rather take the phrase literally, to mean what happens when the question of filial piety is followed, even superseded, by another one far dearer to the hero’s heart: writing a play, becoming an artist, and making a mark on the world. Hamlet himself confirms this sense in a monologue early on: his original intention in writing the play—to spur his vengeance against his father’s murderers—got lost in his enthusiasm for writing it and his excessive attention to its aesthetic qualities. For Laforgue’s hero, filial piety is only a starting point, a rallying point, perhaps even a pretext, for confronting the matters that really bother, and interest, him: art, women, fame, freedom, and death. In a manner typical of parody, the subtitle comically deforms the original title and therein provides a clue to the parodic hero’s character. This one has the additional significance of reflecting the status of the parody vis-à-vis the
original, for Laforgue's story is, in some of its details, a *suite*, a sequel, to Shakespeare's, with Ophelia and Polonius already dead and Hamlet already courting a new lady.

Laforgue extends the figure of Hamlet, so important to the nineteenth century, into the 1880s, consistent with the *hamletisme* of the period. The famous concerns of Shakespeare's hero—indecision, excessive self-analysis, misogyny, an obsession with death, madness, the question of being, a taste for acting and playwriting—are here exaggerated and given a Decadent cast. The "glass of fashion and mould of form" (III,i,153) becomes an 1880s dandy, with an ever-present taste for the elegant, the refined, and the aesthetic. He is at what Laforgue, in his prose sketch on the Hamlet theme, called the "psychological" age of thirty, a trait common not only to the original Hamlet but also to the stock Romantic and Decadent hero, including des Esseintes. Like Huysmans' hero, Hamlet is a "noctambule," subject to regular bouts of insomnia, anemically pale and frail, with delicate, almost female features. Like the original Hamlet, with his "nighted color," "inky cloak," and "customary suits of solemn black," Laforgue's dresses entirely in black, but ludicrously extends his somber attire to his hat, a sombrero, keeping his face and thoughts ever dark and shadowy. And like Laforgue's transcendental lunar dandy, Pierrot, he wears an Egyptian scarab ring, a play on the Decadent taste for ancient religions.

While calling himself a man of action, Hamlet spends most of his time gazing into a stagnant pool beneath the window of his *tour d'ivoire* (11), stock seat of the superior individual contemplating life, and the rest of it trying to decide what to do, a parodic victim of the late nineteenth-century paralysis of will described earlier. Laforgue explicitly portrays him as all too willing to waste time, particularly when it comes to dreaming about his future glory: "Hamlet, homme d'action, perd cinq minutes à rêver devant son drame maintenant en bonnes mains" (18); or when he suspects that an encounter with Laertes would be inopportune, such as after the deaths of Ophelia and Polonius: "Hamlet, homme d'action, ne quitte sa cachette qu'assuré, bien entendu, que cette brute de Laërtes a filé avec toute l'honorable compagnie" (34).

Hamlet is imbued with nineteenth-century notions of heredity,
Hamlet, ou les suites de la piété filiale

environment, relativism, and the Hartmannian Unconscious. “J’ai mangé du fruit de l’Inconscience” (10): in a parodic reversal of the fall of man, this forbidden fruit has lost him to normal life and enslaved him to a world and an ideal beyond the senses. He wishes to replace the “Impératif Catégorique” of Romantic metaphysics with a more relative and arbitrary “Impératif Climatérique” (10). He is moody, introspective, narcissistic, morbidly melancholic, and obsessed with the idea of death, although unlike the original or even his Romantic predecessor, he has an uncharacteristically dilettante attachment to life, especially when it resembles art. He suffers from the most standard form of ennui, as the transience of things makes him reluctant to bother doing anything: “Ah! que je fusse seulement poussé à m’en donner la peine!” (9). At the same time, however, he is tormented by the Infinite (“mais ce sixième sens, ce sens de l’Infini!” 19f.) and, more prosaically, an infinity of things to do, as a parodic “j’ai de l’infini sur la planche” (34) succinctly expresses. He can never find enough time to accomplish his many projects or even think through his thoughts: “Où trouver le temps pour se révolter contre tout cela?” (32); “La mort! Ah! est-ce qu’on a le temps d’y penser, si bien doué que l’on soit?” (30). “Had I but time . . .”: this troubles Laforgue’s Hamlet throughout his life, not simply when faced with death.

Laforgue includes in his hero suggestions of the nervous disease and madness to which the Decadent temperament was usually attributed, and follows the late nineteenth-century convention of making this the inheritance of a tainted ancestry: Hamlet will parodically discover in the graveyard scene that his father, the King, was a bon vivant, and his mother not the Queen but a travelling gypsy, mother also of the court fool, Yorick. He has nihilistic tendencies but as a cynic and dilettante cannot take them very seriously. He is given to rather perverse acts of violence, an example of typical Decadent depravity rendered comical by his constant childlike efforts to excuse them, and by the nagging moral conscience that these suggest. He has the Decadent’s stock contempt for the majority, a sentiment reflected in his cynicism on social questions and in his attitude toward women; these he regards in typical Decadent fashion as domesticators who aim to deceive him.
into relinquishing his freedom and leading a life of bourgeois conformity. He talks chastity and sterility, the Decadent's rebellion against the rule of vulgar Nature, but hardly practices what he preaches, instead falling in love with every new jeune fille that comes his way, notably the actress Kate. Using a typical device of comedy, Laforgue makes his hero an outrageous egotist, who imagines himself at the heart of a conspiratorial intrigue (“Ah! ils sont tous contre moi!,” 18), when in fact no one in Elsinore pays him the slightest attention (“Hamlet, dont nul jamais ne s’in­quiète,” 41) or even recognizes him (“On ne reconnait guere le prince Hamlet à Elseneur,” 23). He wishes to flee the world, “s’évader” being one of his favorite terms, but, unlike des Esscintes, Hamlet the artist and egotist seeks in his escape not seclusion but glory and fame, imagining himself, according to another stock for­mula, as making a sensation in the literary and theatrical circles of Paris.

The paralyzing conflict in the original hero between his despair and his duty becomes in Laforgue’s a conflict between his pessimistic beliefs and his irrepressibly optimistic hopes for the future. Hamlet loves life too much to play his Decadent role very con­sistently, and thus he vacillates between indolent ennui and visions of artistic celebrity, a sense of utter futility and an all-encompassing exuberance, a belief in fatality and a passion for freedom; he chooses whatever attitude fits his mood or purpose of the mo­ment. But both his Decadent beliefs and his visions of the future derive from a single problem, his essential inability to accept life as it is, whence the ceaseless effort of his imagination to see or make it otherwise. This Hamlet definitely wants “to be,” but only if this means to be a star. Strengthened by his lovely new amour and confident in his artistic future, he renounces his pessimism, nihilism, misogyny, and cynicism, and resolves to live; but his image of life on the Paris stage with Kate is yet another act, fit more for his plays than for the world, and as destined to failure as the parody implies they are. Hamlet’s Decadence ultimately gets the better of him and ironically reminds him of his responsibility to his role. He, of all people, should have known that Decadent heroes never reach stardom; they either die, or return, ill and broken, to the
normal world. Des Esseintes may do the latter, but a Decadent hero based on Shakespeare’s Hamlet can only reasonably do the former, and Laforgue’s accordingly expires. But although he dies, the parody, taking its cue from Shakespeare’s original, remains to “tell his story”; a story, or even a literary movement, which risks being killed off may just as easily regenerate itself, through the parody, and ensure for itself a literary succession.

The Epigraph

Hamlet originally carried two epigraphs, which Laforgue later replaced with a single, different one. The earlier epigraphs deserve attention, however, for they shed special light on the story. Since Hamlet itself changed very little from the early version to the later, the original epigraphs apply as well to the one as to the other.

If thou didst ever hold me [in] thy heart,
Absent [thee] from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.

Hamlet

In vera nescis nullum fore morte alium te,
Qui possit vivus te lugere peremptum,
Stansque jacentem?

Lucrece

Both epigraphs involve a concern for immortality, for someone to mourn the hero and tell his story after his death. They thus reflect Hamlet’s desire for literary fame, literary immortality, and suggest that he can attain his goal only in death. They also imply that the parody to follow performs this function, immortalizing the original by retelling its story in a new way.

The first epigraph, consisting of Hamlet’s dying words to Horatio, is particularly appropriate to the parody, since it comes from the parodied work itself and expresses a theme central to both. Its relation to Laforgue’s Hamlet, however, is ironic in two ways. First, during one of his monologues, Hamlet parodically paraphrases this epigraph, lamenting the fact that he has no friend to tell his story for him: “Je n’ai pas un ami qui pourrait raconter
mon histoire, un ami qui me précéderait partout pour m'éviter les explications qui me tuent” (19). Confronting the original text (in the epigraph) with the hero’s parodic version of it would have structurally mirrored the parody directly from within the story. The original Hamlet asks Horatio to tell his story after his death; Laforgue’s, in keeping with his egotistical interest in celebrity, wants his story to precede him, so that the ladies might weep over his “divin cœur” as over the body of Adonis (19). Despite his obsessive passion for writing and his desire for literary recognition, however, he cannot be bothered with doing it himself; his literary ambition aims higher than the mere writing of memoirs (19).

Second, the epigraph is ironic in that there is no Horatio in Laforgue’s version. Hamlet has no friend to tell his story, or to do anything else, for that matter. He is almost universally disliked, and the inhabitants of Elsinore, when they think about him at all, consider him either mad or wilfully dangerous; a voice from the crowd at Polonius’s funeral expresses the opinion of Hamlet’s subjects: “Hé! Quand on a un fou à la maison on l’enferme!” (25). In fact, the epigraph subtly attributes Horatio’s role to the parodist himself; Shakespeare’s Hamlet authorizes the parodist to tell his story, as it were. The epigraph thus refers directly to the parody; the story of Hamlet evoked by the original hero at the end of the play may be interpreted parodically to produce the one at hand.

The second, more pessimistic epigraph comes from Lucretius’s great meditation on death, De Rerum Natura III. Laforgue, however, has altered the original text, which reads:

```
hinc indignatur se mortalem esse creatum
nec videt in vera nullum fore morte alium se
qui possit vivus sibi se lugere peremptum
stansque jacentem [sc] lacrari urive dolere.9
```

Arguing that death is a relief from suffering and thus contains nothing to fear, Lucretius belittles the man who troubles about what will become of his body afterward, since he will be unable to feel anything. For Lucretius, such a man only worries because, when he sees a corpse being harmed or mangled, he associates himself, a living, feeling being, with it. He does not realize that, after
death, he will have no living self to look on and feel his pain, no living self to mourn the dead one.

There is some evidence that Laforgue saw his own age as a descendant, at least in the scientific and philosophical domains, of the materialistic Epicurean one described by Lucretius. In a note, he called him "ce fils sacré de l'Inconscient." Lucretius's belief (following Epicurus) in an integrated and self-regulating Nature, his attempt to explain all experience and phenomena in terms of it, his doctrine of acceptance, and his ideas on death in Book III and on love and sex in Book IV—these reminded Laforgue of Hartmann's *Philosophie de l'Inconscient*, which accounted for all phenomena by recourse to an unintelligible universal principle, the Unconscious. It is significant, however, that for the epigraph Laforgue changed the third person to the second, and the declarative statement to a negative question. Where Lucretius considers it a truth that death is a finality in which we will feel nothing at all, nor be able to mourn ourselves, Laforgue prefers the less certain negative-interrogative form, and specifically poses the question to the reader. Hamlet cannot mourn himself, but a self may actually remain after death, a parodic Hamlet like Laforgue's. The epigraph realizes what I have argued in chapter 1, that parody implies and ensures the "other self" left even after death, *a Hamlet, ou les suites de la piété filiale*, which keeps the original *Hamlet* from "truly" dying.

The definitive version of Laforgue's tale carries a terser and more enigmatic epigraph whose relation to the story is less clear: "c'est plus fort que moi." He uses the same phrase in *A propos de Hamlet* when the narrator tells Shakespeare's hero about his modern Parisian descendants, Bourget, Rimbaud, and himself:

The narrator quotes Hamlet's line (translated) from the "Alas, poor Yorick" speech of Shakespeare's original ("a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy," V,i,173) and in this way reinforces his acknowledged relation to the jester Yorick. This is a parodic Hamlet, a Hamlet "à la Yorick," whose humor is inevitable; in the *Moralité* he quite literally turns out to be Yorick's half brother.

This gloss, however, is provided only by *A Propos de Hamlet*, to
which the *Moralité* may be easily compared in title and theme. Standing alone as an epigraph, “c’est plus fort que moi” can refer only to something much less definite. What is ultimately at issue in this expression, taken in its common usage, is the weakness of the will, that Hamletic problem *par excellence*. But Laforgue evokes this stock trait only to revise it through the parody, suggesting its peculiar manifestation in his own hero: Hamlet’s exasperating moral indifference and his outrageous ability to justify his actions, however perverse. Indeed, Hamlet cannot help anything. He uses the excuse repeatedly to account for his actions, blaming them on heredity, environment, the times, the nature of things, anything, as long as it lies outside his realm of responsibility: “si les temps étaient moins tristes” (13), “si les temps étaient plus propres” (17), “je ne l’ai pas fait exprès” (20), “Et par mon frère et ma mère et tout, j’étais damné d’avance” (32), “Le sort est jeté” (40), and so on. Significantly, “c’est plus fort que moi” also leads him to his death as, “piqué d’on ne sait quelle tarentule” (44), he is powerless to resist the attraction of Ophelia’s tomb, where he is stabbed by an avenging Laertes. Laforgue thus sends us back to the epigraph and reminds us that Hamlet’s problem is ultimately one of the will: the Decadent’s overpowering conviction that he is not master of his destiny and the dilettante’s unsatisfactory (and in this case fatal) response to the problem. His final defense—or escape—is his hyperactive imagination and his faith in art, but even these desert him as, in a last unsuccessful imaginative effort, he dies uttering the famous *qualis artifex pereo* of Nero.

**The Story**

In a manner typical of parody, many of the original’s scenes do not take place here, because Laforgue either omits them altogether or makes them happen before the time of the narrative. In this case, we are informed of them in another context, usually in Hamlet’s monologues and frequently in parenthetical asides (e.g., the suicide of Ophelia), as though they hardly mattered, a device typical of parodic inversion and trivialization. Most of what the play communicates through dialogue here figures instead in Hamlet’s rambling monologues, which dominate the narrative. Indeed, this reflects a major distortion consistent with the late nineteenth-century
context: Laforgue’s story concentrates on the peculiar, egotistical psychology of the hero. The Ghost, Horatio, Ophelia, and Polonius are all suppressed, the latter two having died just prior to the beginning of the story; and most of Shakespeare’s minor characters are omitted as well. Besides the hero, there remain only two players, two clowns, Laertes, and the King and Queen (who themselves appear merely in the scene of the play). Laforgue has arranged his story to reflect the exaggerated self-centeredness of its hero and stacked the cast of characters with players and clowns, reflections of that chief actor and clown, Hamlet himself.

The story retains some of the plot, major scenes, and famous monologues of the original, which are clearly discernible through the distortion, such as the cemetery scene with its Decadent version of “Alas poor Yorick.” Laforgue quotes from the original in a different context, making Hamlet’s famous “words, words, words” the very motto of his ultraliterary hero. He reduces the genre of the original to yet another of the hero’s moods: “ces comédiens... sur lesquels il compte si tragiquement” (10, emphasis mine). Similarly, at the end of the long, meandering first monologue, the narrative ironically remarks that “le prince Hamlet en a comme ça long sur le coeur, plus long qu’il n’en tient en cinq actes” (10). Laforgue converts the form of the original into a joke about Hamlet’s anxieties and thus signals the parody: this Hamlet is exaggerated and parodic, with more on his mind than could possibly be told in the five acts of the original. Laforgue also retains some of the language and imagery of the original, which he recasts in metaphors or puns relevant to the parody, as we shall see in several instances. By these methods, typical of all the Moralités, the work identifies itself as a parody from within and calls attention to both the model which it transforms and the target which it mocks.

Laforgue makes the parody clear in the opening paragraph:

De sa fenêtre préférée, si chevrotante à s’ouvrir avec ses grèles vitres jaunes losangées de mailles de plomb, Hamlet, personnage étrange, pouvait, quand ça le prenait, faire des ronds dans l’eau, dans l’air, autant dire dans le ciel. Voilà quel fut le point de départ de ses méditations et de ses aberrations. (6)

Hamlet’s favorite activity—making ripples in the water—and the explicit link between water and sky mark him clearly as a dreamer,
and one somewhat subject to his whims and impulses ("quand ça le prenait"). Significantly, we are told that this was the beginning of his “meditations and aberrations”; not until the following paragraph do we learn of the death of his father. The opening lines thus attribute the odd behavior of this parodic Hamlet not to a vision of a ghost, nor even to grief over the death of his father, but rather to the advantageous position of the window for brooding. Hamlet suffers less from grief than from ennui. In suppressing the famous Ghost scene which opens the original, Laforgue provokes the obvious question about Hamlet’s motive for revenge: how does he know the truth about his father’s “irregular” death (mentioned in the following line) if he has not heard it from the Ghost? The emphasis on his meditations here suggests rather disturbingly, and comically, that he may have dreamt the whole thing up. From the beginning, we have a clear sense of Hamlet’s overly active imagination.

The lengthy description of the tower, where the hero “s’est décidément arrangé pour vivre” since his father’s death, reinforces this impression of its melancholy and aberrant inhabitant. The repeated formula, with its noticeable “décidément,” comically calls attention to the legendary Hamletic problem, indecision: the parodic Hamlet is decisive about at least one thing, secluding himself in the lonely, sickly tower. The first piece of information given about the place is a curious and somewhat puzzling comparison of it to a “lépreuse sentinelle oubliée” (6). In a story based on Shakespeare’s Hamlet, this reference directly recalls the famous opening scene, here suppressed, where the sentinels recount to Horatio their vision of the King’s Ghost. Laforgue transforms the scene into a metaphor, which preserves the original and reminds the reader of the parody’s deviation from it. In fact, there is no need for a Ghost scene in this Hamlet, since the milieu which the tower oversees suffices to motivate the hero’s melancholia. “The very place puts toys of desperation, / Without more motive, into every brain / That looks so many fathoms to the sea” (1.4.75–77). Laforgue parodically develops Shakespeare’s suggestion into the nineteenth-century law of milieu: Hamlet’s temperament, as he himself asserts repeatedly, is a product of his environment.

The tower, like the hero, is a “paria” (7), shaken and battered by
the inclement effects of, if not a physical, at least a psychological, autumn: "Pauvre chambre tirailée ainsi au sein d’un insoucissable, d’un insolvable automne! Même en juillet, comme aujourd’hui" (7). It has two yellow-paned windows providing a literally jaundiced view of the world. It stands isolated on a typically Decadent stagnant inlet at one end of the royal park, an insalubrious dump ("cloaque," 6), where bouquets of withered flowers discarded by jeunes filles after the evening ball remind the hero constantly of the ephemeral nature of things, parodic Decadent testimony to the original’s famous "Tis brief, my lord—As woman’s love."

Hamlet’s temperament is reflected everywhere in his surroundings and communicated by a comically subjective narrative. The "pauvre anse" (6, 7), with mucky depths, strange underwater plants in "floraisons inconscientes" (7), and chorus of catarrhal frogs, is described as having a skin disease, thus reflecting the aspect of the sickly, leprous tower itself, and the unconscious mind, like the physical image, of the hero: "C’est pourquoi (sauf orages) ce coin d’eau est bien le miroir de l’infortuné prince Hamlet" (7). The waves of the "pauvre Sund" are likened by apposition to the hero’s nostalgic meditations: "flots abrutis par les autans inconstants, nostalgies bornées par les bureaux très quotidiens du Fortimbras d’en face" (7), an ironic reminder of Fortimbras’ invasion at the end of the original. Laforgue’s Fortimbras, however, is "indigent et positif" (6), the very antithesis of our indolent, introspective, aristocratic, pessimistic Hamlet brooding at his window. One understands why the gravediggers are converting their small savings into Norwegian bonds, as we are told later; Hamlet the Decadent and dilettante hardly inspires faith in the future of his country, economic or otherwise.

The first blatant anachronism to signal the parody concerns the date of the action: "C’est aujourd’hui le 14 juillet 1601, un samedi; et c’est demain dimanche, dans le monde entier les jeunes filles iront ingénument à la messe" (7). Laforgue in fact combines the most famous day of the French Revolution with the year of the first performance of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. This reflects on the parody in two ways. First, the parody is set in the year that the original was performed, as a nonparodic work might be set in the year of the event recounted; the date identifies the parody as a retelling of a
literary text (or, here, a dramatic performance). Second, the fourteenth of July has connotations relevant to the parody, which revolutionizes the original and contains a literal revolution of its own, as everything returns to normal at the end. In this context, the anachronistic and emblematically Laforguian image of young girls en route to church, symbol of bourgeois routine and stability, seems gratuitous, but actually prefigures the outcome of the story, as, after Hamlet’s death, “tout rentra dans l’ordre” (47). This, the penultimate sentence of the parody, qualifies the nature of Hamlet’s parodic “revolution,” his unorthodox attempt to gain freedom and literary fame, which in fact changes nothing at all, except, through the parody, the history of literature.

The décor of the tower’s interior enhances the portrait of Hamlet as a dandy, dilettante, and Decadent: pictures of his native Jutland, that image of gray skies and bleak landscapes; an etcher’s laboratory with the artistic products of his idle hours; 14 books for one who reads too much; a full-length mirror to satisfy his narcissism; and, at the back of the alcôve, a mysterious “appareil à douches, hélas!” (8), with compromising implications for Hamlet’s alleged chastity. A painting of the hero “en dandy” comes as no surprise, but a portrait of his father, King Horwendill, with an “œil coquin et faunesque” is slightly more disquieting. The godlike father in Shakespeare’s play, who was to the usurper Claudius like “Hyperion to a satyr” (I,ii,140), here parodically includes something of the satyr. Laforgue does not explain this peculiarity until the graveyard scene, but it is the first indication of the deceased king’s numerous aventures galantes, and a subtle hint at Hamlet’s shady parentage. His penchant for falling in love is a trait inherited, in good nineteenth-century fashion, from his rogue of a father, a vice present in his family line and reflected in his own portrait, with its “sourire attirant” (8) coming mysteriously out of a shadowy background. The most conspicuous furnishing is a wrought-iron gothic aedicule, a small temple holding two wax statuettes of Gerutha his mother and her new husband Fengo stuck through the heart with needles, that familiar image of evil and ill fortune. Hamlet turns the needles once a day as a votive ritual to his betrayed father and a reminder of his own pressing duty.

The names of Hamlet’s parents are all three surprising to the
reader, who expects King Hamlet, Claudius, and Gertrude, and instead finds Horwendill, Fengo, and Gerutha. Others have observed that Laforgue goes back to the pre-Shakespearean version of Saxo Grammaticus for these details. This specifically serves the parody, extending its target to other Hamlets, to the origin of the whole tradition, and also providing a model of the parody from within. Incorporating Shakespeare’s original into a story ostensibly based on Shakespeare, confronting the alleged original with the one that inspired it, urges the reader to see the story at hand as based upon an earlier one too. Moreover, by analogy this implies that the current version may in its turn inspire another, as I have argued of parody in chapter 1. (Laforgue develops this suggestion more fully at the end.) A similar play with names occurs in the scene with the actors, William and Kate. Both carry obvious Shakespearean associations, William the bard himself, and Kate the heroine of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The original author becomes not only a character in a story based on his own work, as in other examples of parody, but an actor in the play within it. Participation implies consent; in the role of William, Shakespeare consecrates Laforgue’s *Hamlet* as the proper sequel to his own, and also provides a model for the parodist himself, who may do likewise in a future parody of his own work.

Kate presents a more complex case, since at first she gives her name as Ophelia. In a parenthesis, Hamlet perceives the danger of her extraordinary beauty and sulky smile (“Oh! mon Dieu, comme elle est belle! Encore des histoires! . . .,” 14), and can only cover up his agitation by railing about her name:

Comment! Encore une Ophélie dans ma potion! Oh! cette usurière manie qu’ont les parents de coiffer leurs enfants de noms de théâtre! Car Ophélie, ce n’est pas de la vie, ça! Mais de pure histoires de planches et de centièmes! Ophélie, Cordélia, Létia, Coppélia, Camélia! Pour moi, qui ne suis qu’un paria, n’auriez-vous pas un autre nom de baptême (de Baptême, entendez-vous!) pour l’amour de moi? (14)

Hamlet’s diatribe against theatrical names conveniently reflects on the parody: the “usurière manie” of parents who appropriate names from literary works for their children represents the parodist’s similar literary recycling, and, as we will see in his play,
Hamlet's practice too. The diatribe is especially absurd, considering his own name (which comes from the same source as Ophelia's) and the theatrical quality of his life. The ludicrous outburst actually betrays the real source of his anguish: "encore une Ophélie dans ma potion." Kate, alias Ophelia, is a second Ophelia, and will accordingly succeed her in Hamlet's affections. Ironically, the "paria" by which he means to mark his distance from the theatrical names in fact draws him all the closer by its rhyme; he does not realize just how like them he is. He also fails to realize that the name which he considers normal (Kate) is as theatrical as the others and appropriately Shakespearean, evoking an image of woman that he would not like but might well, in his misogyny, believe: the shrew.

Hamlet launches into his first monologue with a characteristic pun: "Ah! me la couler douce et large comme ces flots, soupirer Hamlet. Ah! de la mer aux nuées, des nuées à la mer! et laisser faire le reste . . ." (9). In a manner typical of Laforguian parody, the play on "me la couler douce" exploits the literal sense of this normally metaphorical phrase—to take life easy—both senses comically suiting the context. However, Laforgue makes the joke fit the parody specifically, by deriving it from the famous opening lines of Hamlet's first monologue in the original (I,ii). "O that this too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew" becomes, in Laforgue's parodic and Decadent hero, a plea to dissolve rather into the sea, "l'heureux panorama inconscient" (9), symbol of the mystical bliss of the unconscious. The ennui of Laforgue's Hamlet, however, derives less from a conviction of worldly corruption than from a Decadent preoccupation with the passing of time and the transience of things. Laforgue makes the relation between the original and the parody explicit by deforming Hamlet's celebrated "Frailty, thy name is woman!", aimed particularly at Gertrude, to address a more typically Decadent concern: "Stabilité! ton nom est femme" (9). Such an alteration of Shakespeare's celebrated formula not only produces the humor of surprise, but also reflects a change in the theme of women itself, diverting the issue from female infidelity to the female instinct for domesticity and routine.
With the simple adjustment of one word, Laforgue thus gives the theme of women a Decadent cast: destined, by their biological role, to the propagation of the species and, by their social one, to the maintenance of the family, they threaten the liberty, creativity, and individuality so dear to Hamlet, ever in search of the rare, unique, and original. The substitution is also vital to the story, for it shifts the target of Hamlet’s anguished vituperations from the Queen to Ophelia, who, like all “real” women, represents a well-being and comfort that the hero finds repugnant: “Un Hamlet confortable! Ah, malheur!” (10f.). In fact, the Queen figures rarely in his thoughts and turns out not to be his mother at all. But Laforgue does not dismiss so fertile a theme as Hamlet’s psychological relationship with his mother, which remains, as in the original, the cause of his condition. Laforgue alters the relationship from a temporary state, caused by the knowledge of her adultery and betrayal, to a chronic one: product of an artist, gypsy mother, and a gadabout rogue of a father, and nurtured in a climate of nineteenth-century pessimism, Hamlet turns out a tormented Yorick, the artist at only one remove from his half brother, the clown.

Hamlet’s legendary misogyny actually comes not from his contempt for his adulterous mother, but rather from what his readings lead him to think about Ophelia:

Elle ne m’eut d’ailleurs jamais compris. Quand j’y songe! Elle avait beau être adorable et fort moralement sensible, en grattant bien on retrouvait l’anglaise imbue de naissance de la philosophie égoïste de Hobbes. “Rien n’est plus agréable dans la possession de nos biens propres que de penser qu’ils sont supérieurs à ceux des autres,” dit Hobbes. C’est ainsi qu’Ophélie m’eut aimé, comme son “bien”, et parce que j’étais socialement et moralement supérieur aux “biens” de ses petites amies. (10)
tily, revealed only in an afterthought ("elle ne m'eût d'ailleurs jamais compris"). Hamlet the misunderstood artist wants more than anything to be understood, goal of all his creative efforts.

The only woman capable of satisfying his requirements is, predictably, a literary one, and not from this play, but from another:

Ah! s'il me venait par un soir pareil, dans ma tour d'ivoire, une soeur, mais cadette, de cette Hélène de Narbonne qui sut aller conquérir à Florence son adoré Bertrand, comte de Roussillon, bien que connaissant son mépris pour elle! (11)

Laforgue thus inserts into the parody another Shakespearean model, *All's Well that Ends Well*. This is especially ironic, and apt, in view of Hamlet's repeated "tout est bien qui n'a pas [de] fin" (24, 30), a parodic version of the French title of that play, "Tout est bien qui finit bien." The allusion reminds us directly of the parody by placing one of the original author's own works within it, in a manner typical of the genre. It also bears significantly on our interpretation of the parodic hero, first, because his ideal woman is imaginary, outside the world of the original play on which his own story is based, impossibly unreal, merely a figure in another fiction; and second, because in the play, Helen of Narbonne comes off exceedingly well at the expense of the foolish and vain Bertrand. Hamlet does not realize how much his wish works against him. Ophelia, too, will have the upper hand in the outcome of this story: it is her grave that draws him to his death.

Hamlet's other major concern in the first monologue is the famous question of being. Laforgue parodically alters this, according to his hero's literary ambitions, from "to be, or not to be" to "to be, or to be a hero": "Un héros! Ou simplement vivre" (10). Hamlet's conception of heroism is a literary one, having less to do with avenging his father and conserving the throne than escaping and making a name for himself, keeping himself from being "anonymous" (19), producing quotable formulas, and leaving his life story as an example to the philistine bourgeois (18f.). Hence the quintessential importance of his play: for Hamlet, the play is indeed the thing, as the abundance of his creative efforts attests, not just "The Mousetrap," but also dramas, poems, metaphysical treatises, and fantasies (39).
Indeed, Hamlet’s passion for art specifically gets in the way of his filial duty. An excessive involvement in his play has distracted him from the purpose which it was meant to serve, avenging his father’s murder:

Voilá, pourtant! Mon sentiment premier était de me remettre l’horrible, horrible, horrible événement, pour m’exalter la piété filiale, me rendre la chose dans toute l’irrecusabilité du verbe artiste, faire crier son dernier cri au sang de mon père, me réchauffer le plat de la vengeance! Et voilá (οÏ Πόθος του είναι!) je pris goût à l’oeuvre, moi! J’oubliai peu à peu qu’il s’agissait de mon père assassiné, volé de ce qu’il lui restait à vivre dans ce monde précieux (pauvre homme, pauvre homme!), de ma mère prostituée (vision qui m’a saccagé la Femme et m’a poussé à faire mourir de honte et de détérioration la céleste Ophélie), de mon trône enfin! Je m’en allais bras-dessus, bras-dessous avec les fictions d’un beau sujet. Car c’est un beau sujet! Je refis la chose en vers iambiques; j’intercalai des hors d’œuvres profanes; je cueillis une sublime épigraph e dans mon cher Philoctète. Oui, je fouillais mes personnages plus profond que nature! Je forçais les documents! Je plaidais du même génie pour le bon héro et le vilain traître! Et le soir, quand j’avais rivé sa dernière rime à quelque tirade de résistance, je m’endormais la conscience toute rosée, souriant à des chimeres domestiques, comme un bon litterateur qui, du travail de sa plume, sait soutenir une nombreuse famille! Je m’endormais, sans songer à faire mes dévotions aux deux statuettes de cire et leur retourner leur aiguille dans le cœur! (nif.)

Hamlet’s frequent “horrible, horrible, horrible” comes directly from Shakespeare’s original, in which it is uttered by the Ghost. Since Laforgue omits the Ghost, it is reasonable that he should give the line to his confidant, Hamlet himself; this supports the earlier suggestion that Hamlet’s “Ghost”, or source of information, may be nothing other than his own imagination, ever ready to provide him with a “beau sujet.” Parodically forgetting everything at stake in favor of his fiction is Hamlet’s answer to the question of being, and being a hero; he literally finds himself, creates a self, in writing his plays and creating fictions. Significantly, this is the sole moment in the story where he imagines himself with an untroubled conscience, leading a “normal” life. But Laforgue also hints that Hamlet is self-deluded, perhaps even a fraud: in the parenthetical Greek phrase he tries to justify his absorption in his work by likening his Decadent egoism to the long philosophical tradition of the
“désir de l’être.” But the strategy backfires; the high tradition and the language of literary and philosophical authority reveal his own effort to be merely a parody of them. And the portrait, at the end of the monologue, of the self-satisfied bourgeois man-of-letters supporting a large family by his pen differs hardly at all from the idea of a “comfortable Hamlet” that had so disgusted him earlier. With this highly ironic image, Laforgue implies that Hamlet’s heroic ideal is ultimately as “stable” and unoriginal as he accuses Ophelia’s of being.

As this passage makes clear, the hero’s submission to the lure of his work at the expense of his purpose keeps him also from being a good writer. The play sounds like somewhat of a salad; to preserve his own metaphor, his “immaculate conception” (15) is a bastard: it is written in iambic lines, Hamlet’s parodic attempt to imitate Shakespeare; the epigraph from Sophocles’ Philoctetes, one of Hamlet’s favorites, would evoke the hero’s longing for death, as intense as his alleged own; his zeal for showing his talent makes it difficult to decide between the hero and the villain. Too episodic, with too many flights of fancy and too many unintelligible and gratuitous literary allusions, the play reflects Hamlet’s larger inability to focus attention on a single theme, keep to one topic. An example of this tendency in one of his own monologues occurs in a familiar complaint about women; citing Michelangelo, he blames “ce temps de dannno et vergogna” (9), but cannot help taking the opportunity to express an irrelevant opinion on the superiority of Michelangelo to the Danish neoclassical sculptor, Thorvaldsen. The anachronistic comparison calls attention to the parody, all the more comically for the appropriateness of Thorvaldsen’s nationality; but Laforgue uses it to convey the hero’s cluttered and broken train of thought. He cannot be bothered to develop the comparison of Michelangelo’s “age of injury and shame” to the present situation, and instead, like a bad parodist, he leaves the literary reference lying in his haste to include yet another one.17

The play’s incoherence is confirmed objectively when Hamlet reads portions of it aloud to the actors. Even he acknowledges later during the performance that he got carried away and should have made further cuts in it (42). The play is so free a fantasy that
the King and Queen do not seem to understand a word of it until the garden scene, the bit fortunately retained from Shakespeare's more reliable and effective original. It has less to do with treachery than with Hamlet's favorite topics—love, art, and the nature and socialization of women, indeed, the themes of the *Moralité* itself. Hamlet's play is in fact a parody, albeit an unwitting one, with the same Decadent target as the larger story; as always, such a parody-within-the-parody urges us to interpret the story likewise. Many of the excised verses which Hamlet insists on reading aloud come from Laforgue's own work. Such autocitation provides a blatant example of reusing literary texts and also insists on the self-parodic nature of the genre. It is particularly significant that the suppressed portions are (with one exception) all we actually have of the play; for all we know, it may consist only of bits and pieces of other works, like a bad parody. Hamlet's parody provides a model against which to measure Laforgue's, but, by the parallel with it, suggests the self-criticism that is a basic element of the genre. Perhaps *Hamlet, ou les suites de la piété filiale* should be revised, cut, and eventually abandoned, like the hero's own creation.

Laforgue further suggests the parodic nature of Hamlet's play by one major detail. Although, as in Shakespeare's "Mousetrap," the king is called Gonzago and the queen Baptist, the treacherous murderer here is not the King's nephew Lucianus, but his own brother Claudius. Laforgue constructs the plot of the play-within-the-parody according to the plot of the original play itself, in which Hamlet's father is indeed killed by his brother Claudius. Like putting Shakespeare within the play, this has the effect of conflating the fictional and the real, a frequent device of parody, but here considered from within the fiction: the "real", or at least authentic, Claudius is inserted into the "fictional" play-within-the-parody. The irony consists in the fact that neither is real at all, but merely one fiction within another, consistent with the structure of parody itself.

Hamlet will not take responsibility for the flaws in his play, blaming them instead on the same causes as his failure to be a hero: the gloomy times, his equally gloomy surroundings and vulgar company, the damp castle, "cet antre à chacals et à grossiers
Hamlet, ou les suites de la piété filiale

Hamlet, ou les suites de la piété filiale

personnages” (13), his “répugnantes préoccupations domestiques” (39), and a certain knavery inherited from his father. “D’ailleurs, tout est hérédité” (13): once again, he cannot help it. Laforgue’s insistence on the poor quality of the play ironically suggests why Hamlet later instructs the director not to identify him as its author (39); the original Hamlet may have feared for his life, but this one fears for his reputation, and with reason. Laforgue drives the point home by ironically transferring the famous “horrible, horrible, most horrible” from the crime to Hamlet’s horrible play: “cet horrible, horrible, horrible drame” and “l’horrible, l’horrible, l’horrible pièce” (42).

Another example of a parody-within-the-parody occurs when, taking leave of Hamlet, William comments on the situation by parodying Malherbe:

La démence est partout; et, sans cérémonie
Frappe l’humble marchand ou l’acteur de génie,
Et la garde qui veille aux portes du palais
N’en défend pas Hamlet. (18)

As before, this commentary exposes the methods of the parody itself and provides a model by which to read it. But William’s example also illustrates another aspect of this device: by alluding to the “acteur de génie,” it reflects back upon himself as well as on its more obvious object, the mad Hamlet. As I argued in chapter 1, the parodist sees himself and his own creation as implicated by the parody. Moreover William’s deformation bears significantly upon the larger story, for the unstated subject of the consolatio, death (which he replaces with “démence”), relates ironically to Hamlet’s situation: nothing can defend him from death any more than from madness, however “overflowing with life” (31) he later proclaims himself to be.

Laforgue parodically trivializes the whole Polonius episode by making it one of Hamlet’s many pretexts for self-exoneration. Hamlet initially admits killing Polonius as practice for the killing of Fengo (18): as in the original, Polonius had been spying on him behind the famous arras, here parodically (and prophetically) depicting a “Massacre of the Innocents.” He is informed of the burial but refuses to cancel the evening’s performance of his own master-
work; he even comes up with an irreverent pun on the conflict of events: “Eh bien! En voilà des considérations! Les uns jouent, tandis que les autres rentrent dans la coulisse, voilà tout” (13f.). Hamlet’s joke, however, in fact predicts his own future: he will himself be the next player then on stage to be metaphorically retired to the wings in this way and, ironically, after the very show that he here insists must go on. When he actually sees the funeral cortège, however, he seems to realize it for the first time: “Alors là, Hamlet, qui, en conscience et malgré son âme si lettrée, ne s’en était pas encore avisé, sent qu’il a décidément tué un homme, supprimé une vie . . .” (26). Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t: something is rotten in Denmark, and it has to do with the hero’s “âme si lettrée.” Either he really did not grasp the significance of his deed, in which case his powers of interpretation are exceedingly dull, or he chose simply to ignore it and now conveniently forgets that it ever happened, a characteristic trick that he tries again later, unsuccessfully, on Laertes. Hamlet finds himself, for once, at a total loss for words and thus falls back on “Words! words! mots, des mots, des mots!” (26)—ironically, what the original Hamlet says to none other than Polonius himself (II,ii,191).

Laforgue parodies the Decadent vogue for violent and lurid scenes precipitated by the hero’s depravity (itself a product of his worn-out senses and his tainted bloodline) in two episodes illustrating Hamlet’s sadistic, gratuitous brutality, examples of the “étranges impulsions destructives” (21) that have gripped him since his father’s death. In the first, he wrings the neck of the gatekeeper’s canary and throws it into the lap of a young girl at work crocheting. Although his first instinct is to flee, he as usual has second thoughts and, throwing himself at her feet, asks to be punished in expiation:

Oh! pardon, pardon! Je ne l’ai pas fait exprès! Ordonne-moi toutes les expiations. Mais je suis si bon! J’ai un cœur d’or comme on n’en fait plus! Tu me comprends, n’est-ce pas Toi? (21)

To his dismay, however, the young lady, who by that capital “T” is unmistakably a stock jeune fille, is more than willing to pardon him, and in fact bursts into declarations of love. Hamlet’s disgust at
Hamlet, ou les suites de la piété filiale

thus finding her a potential daughter of Eve ("'Encore une!' pense-t-il," 21), stifles his remorse and, as in the case of Polonius, permits him to rationalize his behavior in the name of practice: "C'est encore pour me faire la main que j'ai tué cet oiseau," pense-t-il" (21).

This peculiar scene recalls and distorts two from the original, Hamlet's interviews with Ophelia. In the first (II,i), he visits her as she is sewing in her closet, like the girl crocheting here; and in the second (III,i) delivers the famous "get thee to a nunnery," in which his sarcastic remarks resemble the parodic Hamlet's here (e.g., "Where's your father" becomes "Est-ce que ton père est malade?," 21). To drive home the allusion and lead the reader to understand it, Laforgue makes the connection between the canary scene of the parody and the Ophelia scenes of the original explicit:

C'est fort commode; et si Hamlet n'en est pas encore à songer qu'il n'a guère autrement apprécié la triste Ophélie (oh! guère autrement pauvre oiseau!) son Ange Gardien n'en pense pas moins. (23)

Hamlet's murder of the "petit oiseau" (22) reflects his treatment of that other "pauvre oiseau" that he drives to death, Ophelia—a fact which may escape the hero's consciousness but, as the parenthesis indicates, certainly not his Unconscious, his Hartmannian "Ange Gardien." Hamlet's Unconscious recognizes this so well, in fact, that it will take its revenge and in the form of yet another "strange destructive impulse"—this time self-destructive—send him fatally to Ophelia's tomb at the end.

In the second episode, Hamlet, while out hunting, gleefully does violence to the insects and animals of the forest, sticking pins through beetles, plucking the wings from butterflies, cutting the hind legs off frogs, sprinkling saltpeter on an ant hill and setting fire to it, gathering up birds' nests and distributing them along the next stream, and so on, following the model of Flaubert's Saint Julien. Later, acting upon another "impulsion destructive," he gouges out the eyes of his victims and greases his hands with them ("il s'en lava les mains, il s'en graissa les phalanges," 22). Hamlet's sadism is related to his cynicism and moral relativism, his conviction that reality contains no inherent morality, which he expresses in the stock nineteenth-century formula of the nihilist, "tout est permis".
Ah! c'était LE DEMON DE LA REALITE. L'allégresse de constater que la justice n'était qu'un mot, que tout est permis—et pour cause, Nom de Dieu!—contre les êtres bornés et muets. (22)

Hamlet deforms the "démon de la Perversité" of Poe (cited by des Esseintes as the source of his own "impulsions irrésistibles") and blames reality for his perverse impulses and unmotivated crimes: a parody reflecting both the methods and the target of the larger one. And although he pays for his escapade by a night of cold sweats and terrifying dreams of gouged-out eyes bathed in tears, he rationalizes his brutality in the name of reality, notably past atrocities: "Et les guerres! Et les tournées d'abattoir des siècles du monde antique, et tout!" (22). Hamlet can always find a precedent by which to excuse his cruelty, except in that most "irréparable" of murders, Ophelia's. Laforgue explicitly relates the two by having Hamlet later remark that he should have put out Ophelia's pure, heavenly eyes and "m'y laver les mains" (33), a scenario directly reminiscent of the night hunt. Ophelia is a victim of the same "impulsion destructive" that made him put out the eyes of the creatures of the forest and wash his hands with them.

Hamlet tries out his peculiarly Decadent brand of nihilism on some proletarians returning from their daily drudgery:

Mettez tout à feu et à sang! Ecrasez comme punaises d'insomnies les castes, les religions, les idées, les langues! Refaites-nous une enfance fraternelle sur la Terre, notre mère à tous, qu'on irait pâturer dans les pays chauds.

Dans les Jardins
De nos instincts,
Allons cueillir
De quoi guérir. (24)

These verses on the primacy of instinct (yet another Laforguian autocitation) suggest Hamlet's idea of social revolution: to give oneself over to the Unconscious. He is a lapsed revolutionary, or more precisely a reformed one, whose pessimism has changed his earlier "folie d'apôtre" from social to psychological and eventually replaced it altogether with Decadent resignation and cynicism. He cheerfully admits to being a feudal parasite, but justifies himself by
parodying a cliché to make it fit his own situation and reflect his own moral relativism: “Ne soyons pas plus prolétaire que le prolétaire. Et toi, Justice humaine, ne soyons pas plus forte que Nature” (25). The workers represent nothing more advanced than the famous bourgeois slogan of Guizot, “enrichissez-vous,” here parodically ascribed to Polonius; they are “pas assez esthétiques” and “trop lâches devant l’Infini” (25), clearly not Hamlet’s type. His position on social inequality differentiates him radically from Laertes, who has taken up the question of workers’ housing and gained the popularity of the people; the revolution of this fourteenth of July does not promise to go in Hamlet’s favor.

The cemetery scene serves the important function of informing Hamlet of his parentage and his relation to the court fool, Yorick. Hamlet sees in his own caesarian section birth a first sign of his Decadent’s reluctance to live in the world, although the reader takes it as a humorously corrupt borrowing from Macbeth, and thus a reminder of the parody. He does not grasp the resemblance of his parents’ story to his own, however: the beautiful travelling gypsy is not very different from the beautiful travelling actress, Kate; the king is here described as having a “coeur d’or” (27), as Hamlet has already said of himself (21); and when Hamlet proclaims, in the Yorick monologue that follows, “Je comprends tout, j’adore tout et veux tout féconder,” we see in the son the literal legacy of the coureur (27) father.

Laforgue deforms the “Alas, poor Yorick” speech to explore the newly discovered fraternal relation between Yorick and the hero. As in the original, the speech is a meditation on death, but here it includes concerns typical of the parodic Hamlet: a desire for escape, a sense of moral relativism, Hartmannian ideas of cosmic evolution, and most of all, himself. Indeed, Hamlet effortlessly passes from Yorick to the first person and considers the obsessive questions of being and death: “Mais ne plus être, ne plus y être, ne plus en être!” (30). Hamlet’s new “to be or not to be” parodically produces three unhappy “not to be”s; he does not want to die, but to be famous. He must find a way of justifying this parodic desire, however, and characteristically turns to “words, words, words,” simply talking himself into the value of living and persuading him-
self, by a ridiculous line of reasoning, that he is overflowing with life:

Voyons: quand j'ai faim, j'ai la vision intense des comestibles; quand j'ai soif, j'ai la sensation nette des liquides; quand je me sens le cœur tout célibataire, j'ai à sangloter le sentiment des yeux chéris et des épidermes de grâce; donc si l'idée de la mort me reste si lointaine, c'est que je déborde de vie, c'est que la vie me tient, c'est que la vie me veut quelque chose! (31)

However, the first thing that this reinvigorated Hamlet encounters is a troublesome and prophetic image of death, Ophelia's funeral train; just as at the end, here his assertion of life is thwarted by the reality of her death.

The sight of the procession brings out Hamlet's ambivalent feelings about Ophelia and provides the occasion for a parody of Decadent attitudes to women in general. On the one hand, he congratulates himself for having saved her from a sordid fate, such as becoming the mistress of Fortimbras, dying of shame, and leaving behind her the scandalous reputation of a Belle-Hélène. This reminder of Offenbach's famous operetta reinforces the parody, not only by alluding to another one which uses the same methods, but also by pointing directly to Hamlet as a parodic hero: he may have saved Ophelia from becoming a parodic heroine by killing her off before the story, but the obvious implication is that he could not do likewise for himself. On the other hand, the hero feels remorse, remembering her "grands regards bleus," her thinness, her modesty, and her eyes. Only pat Hamletic excuses can ease his conscience this time: the proverbial call of art ("l'art est si long et la vie si courte!")), the force of heredity, a newfound one for which he is grateful ("oui, il y a de ça"), and his old standby, fatality ("Je l'ai aidée à se faner, la Fatalité a fait le reste," 34). Hamlet once again deludes himself into believing that he has no cause for guilt, that, in the formula of the epigraph, he cannot help it:

Que puis-je à tout cela, maintenant? Allons, je donne dix ans de ma vie pour la ressusciter! Dieu ne dit mot! Adjugé! C'est donc qu'il n'y a pas de Dieu, ou bien que c'est moi qui n'ai même pas dix ans à vivre. La première hypothèse me semble la plus viable, et pour cause. (34)

But that last "cause" remains in question, and the reader realizes that it consists of nothing more than "words, words, words," the
doubtful rhetoric by which Hamlet, in the parallel instance above, convinced himself that he was overflowing with life. Once again, the specious argument gives away the truth; indeed he does not have ten years left to his life, not even the rest of this one revolutionary day.

Hamlet's love scene with Kate gives the impression of enacting the untold story of his relations with Ophelia. When he encounters her, she is “éplorée comme une Madeleine... prostrée dans la supériorité de ses larmes, de son enfance retrouvée” (35f.), a direct reminder of his previous image of Ophelia bathed in tears, “cette source rajaillie de l'enfance, de la créature primitive incapable de mal” (35). Kate, alias Ophelia, is, as we have seen, another Ophelia, a point to which Laforgue calls explicit attention: she sheds tears on Hamlet's waistcoat “où Ophélie en a déjà pas mal versé le mois passé” (36); he instinctively calls her “Ophélïa,” the name to which he had earlier objected with such vehemence for being too theatrical. And he himself makes the connection: “[Ophélie] avait (comme cette actrice de Kate, avouons-le) deux fins yeux” (33); “[Kate] a, comme Ophélïe, cet air collet-monté” (42). As a “sequel” to Shakespeare's play, the parody deals with Hamlet's second love; but some things never change, notably our hero's relation to women. Indeed, he immediately loses all interest in his play and its “moralité,” his throne, his father's death, and Kate's other lovers (40); renounces his Decadent past, his “jeunesse stérile et mal nourrie” (41); and resolves to elope to Paris with her after the performance.

As the play gets underway, Hamlet becomes totally absorbed, anticipating in it the glory that he will find in Paris: “Le cliché ‘public houleux’ lui vient aux lèvres” (41). He becomes so involved as to respond to Kate's lines himself, even feeling his views about women change as a result of his own play, the quixotic—and parodic—problem translated into the egoism of decadence. At last, the garden scene has its desired—and traditional—effect: the King and Queen understand its message, and the performance is duly interrupted. However just when, for once, Hamlet carries through a plan, and therefore might make his final decisive move, he parodically decides not to bother. Concluding on the spot that the play has been punishment enough for them, he flees without
taking vengeance and, anxious to avoid being poisoned “comme un rat, un sale rat” (43), goes off to join Kate. Here Laforgue uses Hamlet’s paranoiac fear of being poisoned, mentioned earlier in a parenthetical aside (8), as a pretext for alluding to the killing of Polonius, like “a rat,” in the original Shakespeare (IV,i,10). This reminder of the parodied work does not augur well for the hero, however, who is soon to be stabbed by Polonius’ son, as the original Polonius was by Hamlet himself.

Laforgue transfers the details of Ophelia’s burial in the original (V,i), where Hamlet and Laertes struggle with one another in the newly-dug grave, to the death scene of Hamlet himself. The escape occurs initially without difficulty, but a parenthetical aside, like Hamlet’s nagging moral conscience, warns that misfortune lies ahead: “(Non, non! Ce n’est pas possible! Cela s’est fait trop vite!)” (43). Indeed, drawn by a force greater than himself, “piqué d’on ne sais quelle tarentule . . . il va droit à la tombe d’Ophélie, de la déjà si mystérieuse et légendaire Ophélie” (44). The narrative’s allusion to itself, in “légendaire,” signals Hamlet’s fate: his best chance of becoming legendary lies not in writing plays, but in following in the footsteps of “la déjà si mystérieuse et légendaire Ophélie,” dying, and becoming the hero of a parody.

The hero’s last decisive move (the emblematic “décidément” re­appears) is therefore to goad Laertes with an infuriating moral indifference (“O Laèrtes, tout m’est égal,” 45). Ever the progressive positivist, Laertes would excuse him on the grounds of insanity (“un pauvre dément, irresponsable selon les derniers progrès de la science,” 45), but cannot reconcile himself to such an “absence de sens moral” (45). Hamlet’s offer to take his views into consideration and his attempt to question the reality of the killings (“Alors, vous croyez que c’est arrivé?” 45), as he had done earlier in the same setting vis-à-vis Polonius, here drive Laertes into a fury:

— Allons! Hors d’ici, fou, ou je m’oublie! Quand on finit par la folie, c’est qu’on a commencé par le cabotinage.
— Et ta soeur!
— Oh!

À ce moment, on entend dans la nuit toute spectralement claire l’aboi si surhumainement seul d’un chien de ferme à la lune, que le cœur de cet
excellent Laërtes (qui aurait plutôt mérité, j’y songe, hélas! trop tard, d’être le héros de cette narration) déborde, déborde de l’inexplicable anonymat de sa destinée de trente ans! C’en est trop! Et saisissant d’une main Hamlet à la gorge, de l’autre il lui plante au cœur un poignard vrai. (45)

As usual, Hamlet has a ready pun, a vulgar formula of provocation (and a very nineteenth-century one) which, for all its flippancy, nevertheless calls Laertes’ assertion cleverly into question by pointing to the literal example of his sister. If Ophelia was not a ham actor who ended up mad, perhaps Hamlet is not one either. Indeed, Laertes gets the formula wrong; Hamlet is not mad, merely a ham actor, in everything.

But the dagger is, even for Hamlet, unquestionably real (“vrai”) and, falling to his knees in a grotesque death agony, he has just enough strength to utter a relevant cliché, the dying words of Nero, the famous *Qualis . . . artifex . . . pereo!* Hamlet’s appeal to the quintessential artist also bears an ironic relation to the original play, for Shakespeare’s hero had likewise called upon Nero in the scene with Gertrude (III,ii,378–79): “Let not ever / The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.” Laforgue’s hero is, on the contrary, full of the soul of Nero throughout, not in the original sense of his mother’s murderer, but as the exemplar of nineteenth-century Decadence.

With Hamlet thus given his longed-for place in history (“O soir historique, après tout!” 47), the story ends with everything returning to the way it was, a literal, full-circle revolution on this fourteenth of July. Kate goes back to being William’s mistress, although not without being punished for having tried to abandon him in favor of Hamlet, a misfortune on which the narrative comments with a simple but highly resonant digression: “Et cependant elle était si belle, Kate, qu’en d’autres temps, la Grèce lui eût élevé des autels” (47). This Greek goddess has fallen parodically low, perhaps even to the level of a Belle-Hélène, such as Hamlet had earlier predicted for Ophelia. The second Ophelia fulfills Hamlet’s fears for the first; he was not able to save her, however, by driving her to suicide.

Even more importantly, in the final sentence, the return to normal
occasions a comment on the highly abnormal story, the parody itself: “Un Hamlet de moins; la race n’en est pas perdue, qu’on se le dise!” (47). It illustrates perfectly the self-reflexive feature of parody described in chapter 1, that is, the expressed anticipation within the parody of other versions of the story. “One Hamlet less” implies that there are others in the line; and “la race” ambiguously (and punningly) refers either to the human race or, more particularly, to the race of Hamlets. The parody thus suggests that its version of the story is not the only one, or the definitive one, or even, ironically, an important one (“la race n’en est pas perdue”), but rather one among many, past and future. Accordingly, in another line, Laforgue had already called his version directly into question by hinting at the unreliability of the parodist and thus at the inaccuracy of his story. When William punishes Kate (“Ah! . . . c’est comme ça qu’on voulait lâcher Bibi?” 47), the narrative comments parenthetically, “(Bibi est une abréviation de Billy, diminutif de William).” The narrator’s gloss is incorrect, and comically so, for “Bibi” is a popular childish term for “myself.” The parodist is suspect, and so the story may be too.

Moreover, Laforgue actually suggests how the story might have differed. In the passage from Hamlet’s death scene quoted above, the narrator realizes, in the parenthetical aside inserted at the moment of the stabbing, that Laertes could have been the hero: “(qui aurait plutôt mérité, j’y songe, hélas! trop tard, d’être le héros de cette narration)” (45). Laforgue calls attention to the many narrative possibilities by citing one, and also to the unpredictable element of chance that determines which one will find expression. The text gives the distinct impression that Laertes would have dominated this Hamlet if the parodist had merely thought of the possibility earlier. In fact, he even prepares Laertes to take over the hero’s role by making him resemble Hamlet. Laertes goes mad from the deed; the narrative suggests that he may become a monk, again recalling Hamlet, earlier described as resembling a monk more than a crown prince of Denmark (23); and like Hamlet, a thirty-year-old potential hero spurred by the thought of his anonymity (“déborde de l’inexplicable anonymat de sa destinée de trente ans,” 45), Laertes here takes the revenge that Hamlet could
Hamlet, ou les suites de la piété filiale

not. In this way, Laforgue proposes an alternative to his story from within the story, itself already an alternative one; the parody leaves room for, and sometimes suggests explicitly, another version of itself. This “one Hamlet less” actually adds one more Hamlet to the corpus and proposes yet another one, still to be realized, with Laertes as hero. Hamlet himself sets us an example when, after the love scene with Kate, he scornfully rejects his play and its moralité (“je me moque de cette représentation et de sa moralité,” 40); perhaps this Moralité should ultimately be rejected, too, revised and rewritten according to the spirit of a future age. As the final line implies, the race will indeed not be lost, but rather continued, and extended, for it.