THE DRAMATIC CONTEXT OF HAMLET'S 'TO BE OR NOT TO BE' SPEECH

by

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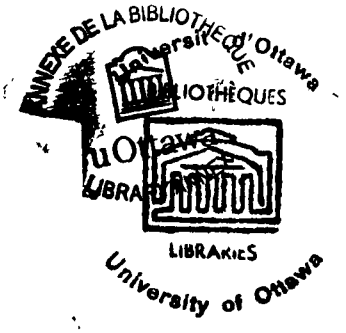

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RESUME

This thesis is a study of the dramatic purpose of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech. Whereas the speech has traditionally been considered a soliloquy I have examined the possibility that the speech be read as a dramatic monologue. By a dramatic monologue I understand a speech which can be overheard and is intended to be overheard. The person who is intended by Hamlet to hear the speech, in my opinion, is Ophelia, who is in full view of the Prince as he enters the stage to deliver his speech. In examining why Hamlet would deliver such a speech to Ophelia, I have posited that there might be a relation between the suicide of which Hamlet speaks and the actual suicide of Ophelia. A consideration of the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship supports the possibility that Ophelia is intended to hear Hamlet's thoughts on suicide and death in the "To be or not to be" speech.

The thesis is divided into three parts. The first of these (Chapter I) deals with the kind of speech the "To be or not to be" speech is. The second part (Chapter II) deals with the larger context of the speech, that is, the relationship of the two characters most involved with the speech, Hamlet and Ophelia. The third part, (Chapters III, IV, V), examines the immediate context of the speech, the Nunnery-scene, and suggests, by a comparison of the speech with other Shakespearean speeches, the dramatic purpose of Hamlet's speech.

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PREFACE

Hamlet criticism has concentrated on no part of the play so much as on the Nunnery-scene (Hamlet, III.i). One of the greatest unresolved problems of the play is Hamlet's attitude toward Ophelia.[1] Critics have been unable to reconcile Hamlet's cruelty to Ophelia with their opinion of her chastity.[2] But the greatest problem of the scene is the famous "To be or not to be" speech (III.i.56-90). Probably the best known speech in literature, it is neither known nor praised for the aptness of its dramatic setting. There is a certain unanimity about the fact that this speech, however excellent in itself, not only seems to bear no relevance to the action of its scene, but is an abrupt and useless impediment to that action.[3] But it is possible that difficulties have arisen for readings of the speech because it has traditionally been considered apart from the action and the characters of the scene.[4] The present thesis will attempt to establish a reading of the speech which restores it to its vital place in the Nunnery-scene.

The whole concern of this thesis,then, is to suggest a dramatic context for the "To be or not to be" speech. In order to do this the argument will unfold in three parts. The first part (Chapter I) will present the two ways of reading the speech, that is,

(1) as a soliloquy, or (2) as some other form of speech than a soliloquy. It will appear that the first of these ways of reading is by far the most popular, but that there are no obvious or positive reasons to support this reading. At the same time, it will be noticed that certain critics have proposed variants to this popular reading in an effort to make it more consistent with certain facts of the play. The second major way of reading will be adopted and developed in this thesis to suggest a dramatic context for the speech which is consistent with the facts of the play.

The second major step will involve the context of the speech, that is, the Nunnery-scene and the events which explain the scene. It would seem that those who tried to find the dramatic context of the speech could draw little of their evidence from the scene in which it is delivered. To determine why the speech has its proper place before Hamlet's maledictions against Ophelia it will be necessary to investigate the nature of the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship. (Chapter II)

In its third part, once that the characters to whom the speech relates have had their relationships clarified, the thesis will consider in detail the dramatic purpose of the "To be or not to be" speech. My contention that the speech is different in form and purpose from what has traditionally been thought will be reinforced by an examination of speeches similar to the "To be or not to be" speech. (Chapters III, IV, V)

CHAPTER I

Readings of the "To be or not to be" Speech

In the history of the question only two substantially different ways of reading the "To be or not to be" speech have been maintained: the speech has been read as either a soliloquy or as some other form of speech besides a soliloquy.[1] The first of these ways of reading is by far the most popularly accepted and has many variants, two of which have proved influential. In the present thesis it is the second and less popular way of reading that is adopted and developed as an alternative to the popular reading. These two readings may be summarized as follows:

1.a) the most important variant of what will be called the "popular view" of the speech holds that the speech is a soliloquy, the subject of which is Hamlet's suicide,[2]

b) another important variant is that the speech is a soliloquy, but at least partly on some subject besides suicide,[3]

2. the interpretation adopted in the present thesis is that the speech treats of suicide but not necessarily Hamlet's own, and not in the form of the traditional soliloquy.[4]

The popular view of the speech has been implicitly accepted by most of the critics and producers of whom we have

record.[5] The word "soliloquy" which has attached itself to the speech has not, I think, been questioned until the present century.[6] We find Johnson, who wrote one of the first of the famous commentaries on the speech, referring to the speech heedlessly as a soliloquy. Similarly, Goldsmith, Goethe, Tieck, Bradley, Richards and Newell make the same assumption.[7] Perhaps because this assumption has never been questioned, however, there is no one who has stated a defence of it.

But the assumption that the speech is a soliloquy on suicide is beset by some rather obvious dramatic problems. Many have observed, for example, that a soliloquy on suicide is out of place in the Nunnery-scene where it is only an abrupt and irrelevant distraction from the action.[8] It is with this view that an important variant of the popular view was developped to show that Hamlet's utterances are not in fact about his plan of suicide but about some plan more vital to the plot and more consistent with Hamlet's purposes.

But in defence of the most popular of readings, it must be stated that Hamlet seems to refer to suicide in his speech if it is not indeed the entire subject of his thought. When Hamlet, after mentioning the evils of this life, wonders "who would fardels bear, / To grunt and sweat under a weary life," "When he himself might his quietus / Make with a bare bodkin," [9]

he is clearly uttering sentiments similar to those of his first soliloquy in which he desired "self-slaughter" (I.ii. 129-32). This fact was pointed out by Dover Wilson inter alia, and it is indeed the natural reading of the lines.[10] It is true there is no use of the word 'self-slaughter' or 'suicide,' or any explicit reference to the act of suicide in the speech as it is found in the best copy texts of the play (Quarto I, Folio I). But the "bad quarto" (1603) uses the word "self-slaughter" consistent with the natural interpretation. It may be self-evident that the speech is on suicide, but the difficulty of reconciling such a soliloquy with dramatic considerations, when the flow of the action will not suffer such an interruption, has set critics the task of finding a different purpose for the speech, or showing it belongs elsewhere in the play. These dramatic considerations will be seen with their proposed solutions as we review the two interpretations.

The second variant of the popular view has had less widespread critical support. By every device possible, this variant has attempted to establish a dramatic context for the speech as an improvement on the view that the speech is a soliloquy on suicide. Irving T. Richards and Alex Newell have been major proponents of this view, though both of them point to several authors who earlier sighted their "discoveries."[11] Hamlet, according to this variant, is not thinking about suicide

only. Suicide cannot be considered by Hamlet, who is bent on courageous and righteous revenge, to be an "enterprise of great pith and moment" (III.i.84).[12] Hamlet is therefore debating whether revenge, for example, is "to be or not to be". Considerations of the after-life only enter his thoughts as a check to his reasoning, because he wonders whether his deed will be justifiable to the Judge that presides in unknown futurity.[13] He scorns "conscience," however, and the conclusion of the speech, insofar as it has a conclusion, favours immediate action.

Two objections shake this theory. First, a dramatic context is not achieved, for if the theory is accepted, we can at best acknowledge that Hamlet purposelessly repeats what he has established elsewhere. The self-reproach, the doubts, the resolutions of his 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, are all in his previous soliloquy, which showed Hamlet's aim of revenge not a hundred lines nor half a day previously:

> Yet I,
> A dull and muddy-nettled rascal, peak,
> Like a John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
> And can say nothing; no, not for a king,
> Upon whose property and most dear life
> A damn'd defeat was made. Am I a coward?
> ..... (II.ii.601-06)
>
> I know my course. The spirit I have seen
> May be the devil: and the devil hath power
> To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,

> Out of my weakness and my melancholy--
> As he is very potent with such spirits--
> Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
> More relative than this: the play's the thing
> Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.
> (II.ii.635-641)

If it is held the speech is for emphasis and to deepen the character of Hamlet, we have forgotten the dramatic context, for a speech in dramatic context must advance or clarify the plot. Second, Hamlet's questioning of the purpose of life is present as we have seen in every line of his famous speech. If, then, Hamlet is not speaking primarily about suicide and the after-life, both he and Shakespeare have done a marvellous job of concealing the fact; and no apparent cause can account for such obscurity.

The question out of which the variant interpretation arose needs still to be answered. Is it possible Hamlet could consider a pusillanimous suicide an "enterprise of great pith and moment"? A thousand critics answer "no".[14] Hamlet cannot be such a coward. He has every reason to live--"revenge toward the usurper; love for the fair Ophelia; and the ambition of reigning".[15] The proponents of this view have therefore not infrequently espoused it because "it removes from Hamlet a serious blemish"[16] by putting some abatement to the image of "the over-sensitive or weak-willed Hamlet".[17] The speech is

"the very height of his project"[18] for revenge, and no time for retreat.

The words "at the very height" enter casuistically in support of the theory, however. Certainly Hamlet has thoughts of suicide both before and after his "soliloquy". If this is so, any theory that Hamlet has forever banished suicide from his mind in favour of action must contend with some discordant facts. If we touch these facts lightly and allow a forced reading of the lines, the most we can say for this variant as a dramatic reading, is that it presents Hamlet's dilemma more fully than do his other speeches. The theory would give a "thematic" or "characterization" context to the speech, but because it does not relate the speech to its scene, it discerns no dramatic context in the true sense of the term. This is an important consideration because it is in neglect of it that many critics and producers have removed the speech from its place in the Nunnery-scene to somewhere in Act II, where it is found in the "bad" quarto.[19] This unwarranted emendation would place the "To be or not to be" speech near the "too too sullied flesh" soliloquy, and before Hamlet's resolution to seek revenge.[20]

The emendation has many "arguments" against it, two of which are outstanding: the second quarto (1605), and the First Folio (1623), the two best texts of the play. It can

be noticed that the emendation would merely complicate the dramatic problem by crowding a soliloquy into the first part of the play. This was not a problem for the editor of the pirated quarto text only because he did not copy all the speeches that are in the present text. Without further comment on the gratuity of this emendation, we must realize the necessity of preserving what seems to be Shakespeare's arrangement of the play. Provisional and non-dramatic views of the speech are the history of the question,[21] from which we learn, at least, that if it were possible to offer an interpretation that defined the topic of the speech as suicide; removed from Hamlet the belief that his own suicide would be a "great enterprise"; and at the same time discerned a dramatic context relevant not only to Hamlet's character, we should finally discover a theory consistent with the facts of the play.

Because the singularities of the speech are probably the partial cause of our difficulties in interpreting it, it will be necessary, before we proceed to the context, to discover the precise character of the speech. A comparison of the "To be or not to be" speech, usually thought to be a soliloquy, with other Shakespearean soliloquies, may suggest that criticism of Hamlet's speech has proved difficult because the speech has not the characteristics of the traditional

soliloquy. To these characteristics we now turn.

The position adopted in this thesis is that many difficulties encountered in the history of the question would vanish if the "To be or not to be" speech were not considered a soliloquy of the usual confidential informative type intended for the ears of the audience only, but an "overheard soliloquy" intended for characters on stage. As this contention, in light of the near unanimity with which critics have regarded the speech as a soliloquy, may seem an excess of skepticism, and as the defence of this contention will later be of first importance, I shall illustrate in some detail why the "To be or not to be" speech should be considered in a class apart from the usual soliloquy. I shall assume, with many critics,[22] that the "To be or not to be" speech is crucial to the play but shall rest this assumption on the existence of a dramatic mode of presentation that is both frequently used by Shakespeare and easily understandable by an audience.

The assumption of many critics is that the "To be or not to be" lines are an interlude within the play during which Hamlet, temporarily isolated from all action while the "lawful espials" are in suspended animation (despite their shuffling into the background to "hear everything"), delivers himself of his innermost thoughts in order that the audience might

be cognizant of his profundity, intentions, and vacillations. This assumption would imply that the speech conforms well with traditional soliloquies in which personal references and introspection abound. But examples show that it does not, in fact, conform to these soliloquies, nor, because of its length, does it conform to the convention of asides.[23]

If we pay special attention to personal references, the opening speech of Richard III suggests some of the inconsistencies of Hamlet's speech:

> But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
> Nor made to court an amorous looking glass,
> I, that am rudely stamped, and want love's majesty
> To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
> I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,
> Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
> Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time
> Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
> And that so lamely and unfashionable
> That dogs bark at me, as I halt by them;
> Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
> Have no delight to pass away the time,
> Unless to see my shadow in the sun
> And descant on mine own deformity;
> And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
> To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
> I am determined to prove a villain,
> And hate the idle pleasures of these days.[24]

Similar are the soliloquies of Iago, whose consciousness of self is emotive for him:

> Thus do I ever make my fool my purse;
> For I mine own gain'd knowledge should profane,
> If I would time expend with such a snipe,
> But for my sport and profit. I hate the Moor:
> And it is thought abroad, that twixt my sheets

> H'as done my office: I know not if't be true;
> But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
> Will do as if for surety.[25]

Often the function of the soliloquy is to ease apprehension in the audience, as with the sudden reversal of Prince Hal who opens his soliloquy replete with personal pronouns,

> I know you all and will a while uphold
> The unyoked humour of your idleness.
> Yet herein will I imitate the sun.[26]

Othello likewise describes himself:

> Haply for I am black
> And have not those soft parts of conversation
> That chamberers have, or, for I am declin'd
> Into the vale of years--yet that's not much--
> She's gone, I am abus'd; and my relief
> Must be loathe to her. (Othello, III.iii.263-8)

It is perhaps because a soliloquy is meant to dramatize thought, and because thinking is so inextricably bound to a thinker, that soliloquies contain so many personal pronouns. At any rate, Shakespearean speeches in which a character thinks aloud abound with "I"s. In all the soliloquies of Hamlet, with the notable exception of the "To be or not to be" speech, such phrases appear as "How all occasions do inform against me" (IV.iv.32), "Now might I do it pat" (III.iii.73), "about my brain" (II.ii.617), "Am I a coward?" (II.ii.598), "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I" (II.ii.586), "Who calls me villain?" (II.ii.599), and "Must I remember?" (I.ii.144).

Now if Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech were of

this kind, dramatic relevance would not be an issue, as the typical soliloquy divulges intended action or is the result of preceding action. The soliloquies of Richard and Iago explain the plots they have laid, their motivation, and warn the audience to beware of their villainy; and, again, throughout Shakespeare the soliloquies of Armado,[27] Berowne,[28] Philip the Bastard,[29] Juliet,[30] Falstaff,[31] Hal,[32] Henry V,[33] Edmund,[34] Edgar,[35] Banquo,[36] Angelo,[37] Imogen,[38] Posthumus,[39] Camillo[40] and Autolycus [41] comment on either what has occured or what is about to occur. Hamlet's speech differs from all these examples in its lack of comment on the action.

This difference from the convention is perhaps not as noticeable as its other peculiarities, however. The traditional soliloquy, unlike the aside, is not delivered in the presence of stage listeners. To again consider the earlier references, Richard delivers a speech by entering "solus", Hal directs his lines to "you all" in the audience, and Hamlet himself, as if it were to clear the stage so that he might think aloud in his sixth soliloquy, tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to "go a little before" (IV.ii.31); just as elsewhere he waits for everyone to leave the stage -"Now I am alone" (II.ii. 584)- and proceeds to expostulate before the audience.

The lack of personal references then, distinguishes the "To be or not to be" speech from most soliloquies. But

the speech does have similarities to a form of speech that is related to the soliloquy, the "overheard soliloquy". In Twelfth Night we are given an example of the "overheard soliloquy", where the three antic schemers overhear a soliloquizing Malvolio;[42] similar to this is that speech in Henry IV [43] where a perspiring Falstaff, in a soliloquy at Gadshill, frets to the amusement of the hidden stage listeners, Hal and Poins. If the "To be or not to be" speech is more like to these "soliloquies" we need a new enquiry into its purpose. Linwood G. Orange, a recent critic, wonders "if the 'To be' passage was not intended to be the confidential informative soliloquy, despite the weight of critical opinion, what was Shakespeare's intent? The soliloquy's very uniqueness suggests the intriguing possibility that it is another type of soliloquy of which Shakespeare was very fond, the 'overheard soliloquy'. Unlike the confidential, informative soliloquy, which by its very nature requires personal reference, plot relevance, and private delivery that Shakespeare always gave it, the overheard soliloquy has no restrictions, for the conditions under which it is spoken sufficiently clarify its function and meaning. And of course, it is always spoken in the presence of stage listeners".[44]

But the view that the speech is not best understood as a traditional soliloquy does not solve all the problems. With

some exaggeration, critics such as James Street said that this kind of speech was Hamlet's attempt to wage psychological war with the listening king.[45] More reasonably, W.G. Bebbington relies on the possibility the "bad quarto" is a valid text, and suggests that Hamlet enters reading a book (for the second time) to deliver his speech. Hamlet is "glossing the text" in an imitation, if not a parody, of a series of aphoristic, even platitudinous, meditations on life, death and suicide.[46] Bebbington's is an expedient to "rid the producer of his nightmare" which all too often ends in "desperate stage devices" for presenting the soliloquy, even such as the "closing of the proscenium curtains so that Hamlet may be left alone in front of them to deliver a sort of lecture to the audience".[47] Other critics, also aware of the difficulties of presenting the traditional soliloquy, and following Wilson's emendations of the text, believe Hamlet is partly addressing the king whom he knows to be concealed. As an improvement upon some "extreme and risible solutions of the problem", a prop for "defeated directors",[48] Bebbington's theory is to be applauded, the more so because it is likely that according as we adapt our reading to stage presentation we are approaching a reading which is dramatically most viable.

Though perhaps lacking support of the best sources,

the view that Hamlet is directing his words toward the espials faces some not insuperable problems, reconciles to its setting many of the speech's peculiarities, provides a general dramatic context, and does not make the speech a repetition of former soliloquies. At the same time, it raises problems of its own raison d'être. If the speech is intended merely to further Hamlet's jest of insanity before the hidden King, why was it needed? For if Claudius does hear it, the speech only helps confirm his suspicion that the madness is "put on": "what he spoke, though it lacked form a little,/ Was not like madness" (III.i.171-72). But there is no reason to suppose that Hamlet detects the presence of the King and Polonius. The text itself indicates that Hamlet enters the stage once, and, despite suggestions to the contrary,[49] only once, after he could possibly have noticed that spies had retired into the background. Nor in the dialogue of the rest of the scene does he show that he has discovered the whereabouts of Polonius.[50] The only person on the stage that we can be certain Hamlet sees is Ophelia, who has been placed deliberately in Hamlet's open view.[51] If the speech is indeed an overheard soliloquy, Ophelia is the most obvious auditor.

Having alluded to the problems entailed in reading the speech as a traditional soliloquy, I have also briefly considered the King and Polonius as auditors in the event the speech is an overheard soliloquy. It has been suggested that these characters, who have frequently been considered the targets of Hamlet's speech, may not coincide with the dramatic purposes presupposed of the overheard soliloquy. It will be necessary to consider the role of Claudius and Polonius in the scene later, for a fourth character, Ophelia, is present on the stage when the speech is delivered and must, for obvious reasons, be considered the first target of an overheard soliloquy. Her possible connection with the speech must be considered in detail. But if the speech is on suicide we must first discover why such a speech would be relevant to Ophelia. This will be done by examining the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship.

CHAPTER II

The Hamlet-Ophelia Relationship

John Dover Wilson certainly speaks for many critics when he remarks that

> The attitude of Hamlet toward Ophelia is without doubt the greatest of all puzzles in the play, greater even than that of the delay itself, a fact which long ago should have created suspicion that in the course of three centuries Shakespeare's original intentions have somehow been obscured.[1]

One of the key pieces to this puzzle has been the possibility of sexual relations between Hamlet and Ophelia.[2] We shall see that critical attitudes toward Ophelia vary from the belief that she was chaste and sorely abused by her lover, to the attitude that she was a flirt and provoked Hamlet to hostility.

In considering the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship with particular regard to their possible sexual relations, I shall first consider some of the problems involved in supposing that Ophelia was always chaste. Secondly, after an examination of the sources of Hamlet, I shall consider the evidence that bears upon this question as it is given to us, scene by scene.

It is obvious that the evidence which could give rise to such debate on a simple question of fact must be scanty

and ambiguous indeed. Careful reading of the play led A.C. Bradley to suppose that "from the mere text of the play" it is perhaps impossible to make a sure interpretation of the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship.[3] It would seem necessary, says Bradley, if Hamlet is to be produced, to follow the stage tradition for Ophelia, or innovate upon this tradition.[4] Traditionally, Ophelia is thought to be a young and innocent girl whose rejection by Hamlet had little or nothing to do with her behaviour, but was merely a manifestation of Hamlet's fatal cruelty.[5] Bradley is not, perhaps, as ready as others[6] to exculpate Ophelia, but believes that her generally innocent character requires us to believe at least two things about her relations with Hamlet:

> 1) Hamlet was at one time sincerely in love with Ophelia. For she herself says that he had importuned her with love in honourable fashion, and given countenance to his speech with almost all the holy vows of heaven.
>
> 2) When at Ophelia's grave he declared,
>
> > I lov'd Ophelia; forty thousand brothers
> > Could not, with all their quantity of love,
> > Make up my sum,
>
> he must have spoken sincerely; and further, we may take it for granted that he used the past tense, 'lov'd', merely because Ophelia was dead, and not to imply that he had once loved her but no longer did so.[7]

It should be remembered, however, that the speech Bradley

quotes is but part of a ranting fit in which Hamlet promises to rival Laertes in eating crocodile (V.i.299) and drinking poison (299) as much as in loving Ophelia.

Bradley believes then, that the popular view is correct in its assumption that Hamlet is sincere in the burial-scene ('I lov'd Ophelia' (V.i.292)) and insincere in the Nunnery-scene ('I lov'd you not' (III.i.120)), because "Hamlet's love for Ophelia never changed".[8] The cause for conflict between the lovers is that

> On the revelation made by the ghost, Hamlet felt that he must put aside all thoughts of love, and it also seemed necessary to convince Ophelia, as well as others, that he was insane, and so to destroy her hopes of any happy issue to their love. This was the purpose of his appearance in her chamber, though he was probably influenced by a faint hope that he might safely entrust his secret to her. If he entertained any such hope, his study of her face dispelled it; and thereafter, as in the Nunnery-scene (III.i.), and again at the play-scene, he not only feigned madness, but to convince her that he had quite lost his love for her, he also addressed her in bitter and insulting language. In all this he was acting a part intensely painful to himself; and the very violence of his language in the Nunnery-scene arose from his pain; and so the actor should make him show, in that scene, occasional signs of tenderness which with all his efforts he cannot conceal. Finally, over her grave the truth breaks from him..., though it is still impossible for him to explain to others why he loved her so profoundly and yet was forced to wring her heart.[9]

Yet Bradley does not find the popular view as he understands it altogether convincing. Among the problems

that afflict this view, he instances the fact that Hamlet, on all occasions when he might be expected to speak of his love for Ophelia, mentions nothing about her. In his soliloquies for example, she appears, according to Bradley, to be altogether absent from his thoughts, just as she is in his private conversations with Horatio. It is, moreover, to be wondered in what way Hamlet's insults to Ophelia in the play-scene are necessary either to the purpose of convincing her of his insanity, or to that of pursuing his revenge. And even if he did regard them as somehow means to those ends, is it conceivable that he would have uttered them if his feeling were one of hopeless but unmingled love?[10] These considerations, Bradley finds, though most unamenable to any theory, are merely difficult to reconcile, "but the question how much of his harshness is meant to be real, and how much assumed, seems to me impossible...to answer".[11] "What is pretence" in the Nunnery-scene, "and what is sincerity seems altogether an insoluble problem".[12] And yet perhaps the greatest problem is that considering Shakespeare's usual scrupulous care to make the facts of relationships clear, if the popular theory is true, how is it that "neither in the Nunnery-scene, nor in the play-scene does Shakespeare insert anything to make the truth plain? Four words like Othello's 'O hardness to dissemble', would have sufficed".[13] Bradley himself finds it impossible

to resist the conclusion that Hamlet was cruel to Ophelia in the Nunnery-scene because of resentment and suspicion after she had rejected his offers of love, yet he does not forget that Hamlet may be continuing to affect madness in the Nunnery-scene because Ophelia is in collusion with the King and Polonius.[14] A final problem in interpreting the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship is that "there seems to be a definite intention to hurt and insult Ophelia, and these insults seem to spring from real feelings at least in part".[15]

The assumption that Hamlet loved Ophelia throughout the play, and that he was sincere in his expressions of love is usually questioned by those who posit a less chaste Ophelia. Salvador de Madariaga, for example, believes that so very far from being pure and childlike,Ophelia is cunning and ambitious after the manner of such Renaissance women as Anne Boleyn.[16] The evidence for this antithetical view we shall now turn to, looking first to the sources of Hamlet.

The Sources of the Hamlet-Ophelia Relationship

It is probable that when Hamlet was first produced Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience expected not so much original characters as adaptations of the characters and actions of the Hamlet legend as they knew it.[17] For reasons we can only

speculate on, Shakespeare seems to have adhered to his sources for Hamlet more than for any other play.[18] The Hamlet legend as Shakespeare knew it featured a Hamlet who had enjoyed the favours of an Ophelia-like character whom he had grown up with at court, and with whom he nurtured a mutual affection. We may incline to believe, because the original of Hamlet included sexual relations between the lovers, Shakespeare might have included these in his play. But to show how closely the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship of the sources and that of Shakespeare resemble one another, I shall draw the pertinent facts of the relationship from Belleforest and Saxo Grammaticus, using Shakespeare's names and the conventional German prefix 'Ur' (source).[19] The whole progress of Hamlet's love for Ophelia in the sources is as follows:

> 1. Ur-Hamlet, by his behaviour, causes the suspicion that he is sane and shrewd under his folly.
>
> 2. Ur-Claudius, on the advice of a courtier, (Ur-Polonius), decides to test him by tempting him with a woman.
>
> 3. This Ur-Ophelia is on familiar terms with Ur-Hamlet, with whom she grew up in the same surroundings.
>
> 4. Their meeting is observed.
>
> 5. He is warned by Ur-Horatio, who communicates with him by a fantastic device.

> 6. He nevertheless does not give up his pleasure, and taking Ur-Ophelia out of sight of the "lawful espials", enjoys sex with her.
>
> 7. She is not unwilling, and even, in Belleforest, loves him. Ur-Hamlet trusts her.
>
> 8. She tells no one of their love relations.
>
> 9. He declares to all that he enjoyed her favours.
>
> 10. She, on his instructions, denies it.[20]

According to both major sources of the play then, the original Ophelia was a courtesan for whom Hamlet notwithstanding felt some affection. Of the ten elements that relate to Hamlet Shakespeare precisely followed his sources in the first four points. He unquestionably did not follow the source in the fifth point, but for the obvious reason that the device for warning Hamlet used in the sources was unrealistic and not stageworthy,[21] and he could have been warned of the presence of espials by other means, as indeed he was. For the rest, there seems to be no reason why Shakespeare did not borrow from the source on the last five points, as they neatly dovetail into the role Ophelia played from the beginning, instead of simply letting the role drop. The details of the sources admittedly do not in themselves imply that things in the play must be the same. They do at least suggest, though, that Shakespeare might have easily followed, and his audience might have expected him to follow, the sources on the matter of Ophelia's lack of chastity because he followed them in most other

instances.

The Evidence of the Play

We may now turn to a sequential examination of the play to see if Shakespeare's Hamlet confirms the suggestions of the sources.

The difficulties that beset an interpretation of Ophelia's role in the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship include no doubt the scantiness of the facts on which to base our interpretation. Not only are allusions to Ophelia in the play rare, but so too are her actual appearances. In these appearances she is often spoken to, but rarely speaks. And the short phrases that make up her half of the dialogue are brief and usually ambiguous. This causes us to look for a reflection of what she is in what is said to her. But the delicacy with which Shakespeare drew her character partly conceals and partly reveals her character.

The scene in which Ophelia first appears (I.iii) has sometimes had its dramatic relevance questioned.[22] When Laertes is about to depart for France his sister is twice warned, in long, sententious speeches, about the pitfalls of Hamlet's courtship. To some, these speeches are justified as showing the protective natures of Laertes and Polonius vis-a-vis an

inexperienced Ophelia; to others they are justified as showing the preventive natures of Laertes and Polonius vis-a-vis an inexperienced, even loose Ophelia.[23]

In any case, before his departure for France, Laertes catechises his sister about what he thinks is the harmful dalliance, not love, of Hamlet. Both Laertes and his father think it necessary to curb the meetings between Hamlet and Ophelia on the grounds of Ophelia's not being able to resist the Prince, and so risking her honour. If critics who assume Ophelia is innocent are right, these warnings are merely variations of one another, and long variations at that. Those who posit a sexual encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia even before these counsels, recognize the timeliness of these emphatic warnings, and the important place they hold in the plot: "His love is forward, not permanent" says Laertes, "sweet, not lasting,/ The perfume and suppliance of a minute" (I.iii.7-8). Ophelia's words do not belie this possibility, and the way we interpret her replies in this scene, whether as the wry equivocations of a court lady or as innocent expressions, depends on our assumptions about her character. In her reply to Laertes "No more but so?" at least one critic[24] can discern equivocation. She is artfully demure. She vows to her father,"I shall obey" your injunction to stay away from Hamlet--all of this so naively and smilingly,[25]--but built on the consciousness that Hamlet's love was "a great deal more"

than "a violet in youth of primy nature" (I.iii.6).

The departure scene typifies the vagueness which surrounds all we learn of Ophelia, but it shows at the same time that she is not altogether innocent. At the moment when she could approve the portraiture of her innocence she merely protests that Laertes, giving such sage and prohibitive advice to her,

> [Should] not, as some ungracious pastors do,
> Show me the steep and thorny way to Heaven;
> Whiles like a puffed and reckless libertine,
> Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,
> And recks not his own rede. (I.iii.47-51)

It is difficult to tell whether Ophelia is reciprocating her brother's concern, or merely suggesting that if there are two ways to go to Heaven she would prefer the "primrose" to the "thorny". Probably her meaning is that Laertes is taking a hard line with her, considering what he may know of her circumstances. She does not promise to keep her brother's word to the letter and in all its particulars, perhaps because it comes ex post facto, and concedes only that "I shall the effect of this good counsel keep" (I.iii.45).

If we suppose there was an illicit affair between Hamlet and Ophelia these lines are part of a dramatically brilliant episode in which Ophelia delicately prevaricates without exposing herself. The reader cannot, at first, be

any more certain of the meaning of her speeches than can Laertes. Unless it can be shown that Laertes, the last defender of Ophelia's innocence, has knowledge of her affair, we may not be certain as to her lack of innocence.

Many facts can be noted to incline us to suspect an affair. To begin with, the stage was set for such an occurence by the fact that Hamlet had "often of late/ Given private time" (I.iii.91-92) to Ophelia, even in her bedroom when she was alone (II.i.76 ff.). She herself "of her audience" had "been most free and bounteous" (I.iii.93). During the meetings in the bedroom he had "made many tenders of his affection" (I.iii.100) to Ophelia. As her father learns of these tenders he warns her that her inexperience "may take these tenders for true pay which are not sterling" (I.iii.105), and though again Ophelia quietly protests that Hamlet had "importuned her with love in honourable fashion" (I.iii.110), her words may well be ambiguous. It is interesting to note that Polonius, perhaps like Laertes, desires to guard his child from bringing any embarassment upon himself:

> ...Tender yourself more dearly;
> or...You'll tender me a fool (I.iii.107, 109)

Polonius has sufficient knowledge of the world and the Renaissance court[26] to know that Hamlet's words may well have been "springes to catch woodcocks" (I.iii.115). He knows from long experience,

personal and vicarious, that "When the blood burns how prodigal the soul/ Lends the tongue vows" (I.iii.116-17). He reminds her that if she should be thus deceived she would certainly not be the first, and "charges" her to "Be somewhat scanty of her maiden presence" (I.iii.121). Whereas she had formerly "set her intreatments [at a rate of] command to parley" (I.iii.123), he tells her to avoid the company of the Prince. Exulting in the sound of his sentences, Polonius continues to admonish Ophelia, piling analogy on analogy and example on example, to show how easily young women are cheated at the game of love.

The long speech of Polonius is also important in that it begins the leitmotif that will be present whenever Ophelia is on the stage. The leitmotif of harlotry, which Dover Wilson found in the Nunnery-scene,[27] begins in Polonius' sermon. He reminds his daughter that Hamlet's words are "mere implorators of unholy suits/ Breathing like sanctified and pious bawds,/ The better to beguile" (I.iii.129 ff.). Whenever Ophelia is present, either to contrast with her innocence or to emphasize her experience, there is always talk of harlotry, lust, wantonness, painting, bawdry, and nunneries. We do not know whether Ophelia's closing words to her father, "I shall obey, my lord" (I.iii.138), are the voice of modesty and filial obedience, or the equivocation of one who knows that her least word is bound to a deception or a lie, that must later return to plague its inventor.

There is, admittedly, nothing concrete against Ophelia in all this. But it does show that the facts that have often been used to support the image of the chaste Ophelia, may also, in their ambiguity, suggest the opposite proposition.

After the departure scene, the next time we hear of any contact between Hamlet and Ophelia is at the beginning of Act II. Polonius has just instructed Reynaldo to spy on his son while he is in Paris, when the "afrighted" Ophelia enters. Polonius changes his paternal mistrust to paternal concern, in an example of the two-facedness that Hamlet will later remark upon. Hamlet had burst in on Ophelia while she was sewing in her closet. In his horror after seeing the ghost, Hamlet had examined Ophelia with eyes and hands, and then, as unexpectedly as he had entered, departed. It is suggested that he is "Mad for thy [Ophelia's] love" (II.i.85). Ophelia fears this is so (II.i.86), and it is decided that Hamlet is in the "very extasy of love" (II.i.102) and did not, as Polonius thought, intend merely to "wrack" (make pregnant)[28] Ophelia (II.i.113). Polonius thinks that it is now time to alter his plans and his use of Ophelia, and seems to have her cooperation as they go to the King.

At the meeting with the King Ophelia is not present (II.ii). Polonius is more verbose than usual as he apparently tries to make the most of his discoveries. He asserts for a

certainty that Hamlet is mad for his daughter's love and produces a letter to prove it. Critics have often instanced the "letter that the obedient daughter handed over to papa, as anything but a passionate outburst of love for a man as tender and refined and warmhearted as Hamlet".[29] The tatty doggerel of the letter speaks so strongly against the theory of a true love between Hamlet and Ophelia, that some have explained that the shrewd Polonius himself wrote it; or, better, commissioned Osric to do so.[30] Polonius finds the letter vile, possibly because of its accusatory double entendres, but reads it aloud:

> "To the celestial and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia"---
>
> That's an ill phrase, a vile phrase: "beautified" is a vile phrase: but you shall hear. Thus: "In her excellent white bosom, these, etc."...(II.ii.109-11)
>
> "Doubt thou the stars are fire;
> Doubt that the sun doth move;
> Doubt truth to be a liar;
> But never doubt I love.
>
> "O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers;
> I have not art to reckon my groans:
> but that I love thee best, O most best,
> believe it. Adieu.
> Thine evermore, dear lady, whilst this
> machine is to him,
> Hamlet". (II.ii.112 ff.)

The love-letter from Hamlet may be cited as not only ridiculous, as many critics have found it, but as a pointer to Hamlet's view of Ophelia as something of a loose woman. If this is true,

Hamlet not unintentionally adopts the Osrickian manner and uses the word "beautified" instead of "beautiful" to show his resentment that her face is more the work of Art than Nature, a resentment which is certainly in other speeches.

After the letter-reading Polonius continues to tell the King of how his daughter informed him of the details of the lovers' meetings and Hamlet's "soliciting" (II.ii.126). The King then asks the embarassing question: "But how hath she received his love?" (II.ii.127). Polonius, feigning or feeling resentment, retorts "What do you think of me?" (II.ii.129), as if to say he did not stand witness to his daughter's amorous activities. But he at length defends himself, saying "What might you think...If I had play'd the desk or table book" (II.ii.131 ff.). However inadequate his schemes have been in the past, then, Polonius promises (always using words with bawdy connotations) to "loose" his daughter on Hamlet to try his madness.

Hamlet then enters reading a book and begins his telling jibes on Polonius by first calling him a "fishmonger", which happens to be an Elizabethan word for "whoremonger" or "pimp".[31] Then, as if it were to turn the conversation to his "fish", he asks "Have you a daughter?" (I.ii.182). Polonius is told to

> Let her not walk in the sun.
> Conception is a blessing, but not as
> your daughter may conceive. (II.ii.187)

Hamlet makes no further references to Ophelia, only expending some wit on insulting Polonius, for it is clear the old man has got the point:

> Though this be madness, yet there is
> method in't. (II.ii.209)
>
> How pregnant sometimes his replies
> are. (II.ii.211)

This dialogue is interrupted by the announcement of the arrival of the players. But it is not long before Hamlet returns to the topic:

> Jepthah, Judge of Israel, what a treasure
> hadst thou!
>
> Polonius. What a treasure had he, my lord?
>
> Hamlet. Why,
> "One fair daughter, and no more,
> The which he loved passing well"
>
> Polonius. Still harping on my daughter.
>
> Hamlet. Am I in the right, Old Jepthah?
>
> Polonius. If you call me Jepthah, my lord, I
> have a daughter I love passing
> well.
>
> Hamlet. Nay, that follows not. (II.ii.426 ff.)

Hamlet accuses Polonius of being a Jepthah, or one who sacrifices his daughter. Later, in the same scene, but perhaps with no direct allusion to Ophelia, he says of Polonius,"he's for a

jig or a tale of bawdry, or he sleeps " (II.ii.531).

It may not be out of place to consider why Hamlet feels a peculiar hatred for Polonius. He insults Ophelia's father only less than he does Claudius, refers to him as a whoremonger, or at least as one who sacrifices his daughter for his personal schemes. For all the Queen's extenuating phrases, Hamlet seems to be glad the "prating knave" (III. iv.215) is slain as he "lugs the guts into the neighbour room" (III.iv.212). Ophelia, for her part, readily complies with her father in his schemes against Hamlet. Our understanding of the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship would be augmented if we could determine Polonius' role in it. Yet because all we know on this point comes from the resentful Hamlet, we can only suspect his bad influence on his daughter. This bad influence, as we shall later see,[32] may be what is referred to in one of Ophelia's statements on her love affair.

If all the mere suspicions against Polonius could be confirmed, he would be the "Tyrrel" of Hamlet, the man who is kept about the court not for his wit and eloquence (which he "plentifully lacks" (II.ii.200)), but for his willingness to stoop to any level to obtain preferment. He appears too frequently behind the arras, reading someone else's letters, sending out spies, becoming one himself, and suggesting plots in which he may be instrumental, to be entirely blameless.

We do not know why Polonius presses the fact that Hamlet is mad from disappointed love: is it because he knows more than he tells, or does he recognize that his usefulness ends with that of Ophelia? It is certain only that Polonius used Ophelia and fostered an environment for his children that was not "honest".

If we leave the Nunnery-scene for later consideration, the next scene to provide comment on the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship is the play scene. In that scene, Hamlet treats Ophelia as if she were a prostitute.[33] In the source of the play it has been seen that the Hamlet there had told the world of his amours. If we are looking for instances in Shakespeare's play where Hamlet advertises his affair, the play-scene offers what can be considered some very broad hints about their intimacy. Ophelia does not remove herself from these insults. On the contrary, she suffers him to "lie in her lap" (III.ii.121) and participates in his banter. She does not stifle his remarks by ignoring him. She asks him if the Prologue will explain the show:

> Aye, or any show that you'll show
> him: be not you shamed to show, he'll
> not shame to tell you what it means. (III.ii.155 ff.)

She tells him, not that he is "insulting", "gross", and "cruel"[34] as the critics think him, but "merry": "You are merry, my lord" (III.ii.129). It is perhaps when Ophelia thinks there has been

too much said in the presence of the court, that she reproves him for being keen. He merely tells her:

> It would cost you a groaning to take off
> my edge, (III.ii.259 ff.)

and adds a reference to the way women are mistaken about their husbands. The entire play-scene is rich in hints about the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship. Whereas many commentators pass over the scene as still more of Hamlet's impertinent and lewd banter, in my view Hamlet's bitterness derives from what he feels for Ophelia. Nor is there any reason to assume Ophelia is genuinely insulted by what Hamlet says. It may, in fact, be that Hamlet is more pained than Ophelia by what happens. The veil his lewd jests throws over his feelings at times falls away. One such instance is his outcry against his mother:

> O God, your only jig-maker. What should
> a man do but be merry? for look you,
> how cheerfully my mother looks, and
> my father died within's two hours. (III.ii.132-34)

Ophelia corrects him, and, before the dumb-show reminds him of female inconstancy, Hamlet would appear to be bidding for Ophelia's sympathy. If he is doing so, the bid is rendered the more pathetic and bitter because he believes Ophelia is unworthy of his confidence.

The slaying of Polonius, which follows the play-scene, prompts Claudius to send Hamlet to England. It is not until Hamlet is gone that we hear of Ophelia again and find that

she is now obviously distracted. Her utterances when mad, however, are revealing. The first thing we learn is that the Queen, who "lives almost by Hamlet's looks" (IV.vii.12), refuses to speak with her. In words difficult to interpret we learn that, in her guilt, Gertrude is "full of artless jealousy" (IV.v.19). But Ophelia is "importunate", and Horatio cautions the Queen about her reputation and that of her son:

> 'Twere good she were spoken with: for she
> may strew
> Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds. (IV.v.14-15)

At first the audience can determine nothing from the reported words of Ophelia. But it is better informed to interpret than are the characters on stage. We are told that Ophelia

> ...Says she hears
> There's tricks in the world; and hems, and
> beats her heart;
> Spurns enviously at straws; speaks things in doubt,
> That carry but half sense: her speech is nothing.
> Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
> The hearers to collection; they yawn at it,
> And botch the words up to fit their own thoughts;
> Which, as her winks, and nods, and gestures
> yield them,
> Indeed would make one think there might be
> thought,
> Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily. (IV.v.5-13)

When the distracted Ophelia enters the stage (IV.v.21) she seeks the "beauteous majesty of Denmark" (IV.v.21), Hamlet's mother. Ophelia then sings a song about a "true love" who is not easily "told apart from other men" (IV.v.23), probably because of his inconstancy. The Queen does not follow

her meaning, but wonders, "Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?" (IV.v.27). Ophelia emphasizes that if she does not understand, she must carefully attend to the following:

> Say you? nay, pray you, mark.
> He is dead and gone, lady,
> He is dead and gone.
> At his head a grass green turf,
> At his heels a stone. (IV.v.28-33)
>
> ...White his shroud as the mountain snow,
> Larded with sweet flowers;
> Which bewept to the grave did go
> With true-love showers. (IV.v.36-9)

Shakespeare's songs are rarely void of dramatic relevance,[35] and it is shown in Hamlet and elsewhere[36] that mad characters speak deep and hidden truths and not "mere madness". The content of this first song could bear reference to Hamlet, and to the unacknowledged death Ophelia may have understood to be his sentence when he was sent to England. The references to "true-love showers" on the other hand, do not easily admit the alternative construction that Ophelia is referring to the hugger-mugger interment of Polonius.[37]

Furthermore, when Ophelia is finished this first song, she makes allusion to a popular legend which the King construes, possibly along with the song, as a "conceit upon her father" (IV.v.45). Ophelia flatly denies this. Despite the King and the Queen's anxiety to contain the facts relative to Polonius and Hamlet, Ophelia insists on speaking. Again, she is importunate

to give her understanding of things. She sings the following song, which may have been an adaptation of an Elizabethan popular ballad, and which I interpret as a depiction of the course of love between herself and Hamlet;[38] I think it is worth noting that the song is interrupted only by one more emphatic statement that Ophelia insists on being heard:

> To-morrow is Saint Valentine's day,
> All in the morning betime,
> And I a maid at your window,
> To be your Valentine:
> Then up he rose, and donn'd his clothes,
> And dupp'd the chamber door;
> Let in the maid, that out a maid
> Never departed more.
>
> King. Pretty Ophelia!
>
> Ophelia. Indeed, la! without an oath, I'll make an end on't.
>
> By Gis and by Saint Charity,
> Alack, and fie for shame!
> Young men will do't, if they come to't;
> By Cock they are to blame.
> Quoth she, before you tumbled me,
> You promis'd me to wed:
> So would I ha' done, by yonder sun,
> An thou hadst not come to my bed. (IV.v.49 ff.)

If we are to find any dramatic context for these songs, we must accept that Ophelia eventually gave in to Hamlet's suit. In giving in, she thinks, she betrayed her honour and proved her frailty and unworthiness. Hamlet therefore rejected her.[39]

It might be argued, of course, that there is no sufficient reason to believe these songs are depictions of reality. But earlier in the play we may find reason enough to interpret the songs dramatically. Not long before the Nunnery-scene, and immediately before the arrival of the players, Hamlet is taunting Polonius as one who sold his daughter (II.ii.43 ff.). He says, we recall,

> Conception is a blessing: but not as your
> daughter may conceive, friend, look to't.
> (II.ii.186)

He mockingly promises to tell Polonius more about his daughter but only speaks impertinences. Instead, on the arrival of the players he says:

> the first row of the pious chanson will show
> you more; for look where my abridgement comes;
> (II.ii.438-9)

now if we search for the stanza of some "pious chanson" in Elizabethan folklore, there is none that so fitly pursues Hamlet's meaning as Ophelia's own ballad. If it were possible that Hamlet's allusion could be connected

with Ophelia's ballad, dramatic significance would be given to both Hamlet's and Ophelia's otherwise difficult lines.

We may suspect that the Elizabethan audience was more alive to the topical significance of songs than we are.[40] For the modern, Shakespeare's great delicacy in treating the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship may be perplexing. This perplexity might continue until near the end of the play, where, I believe, it can be satisfied. Whatever the songs refer to, Ophelia vows "My brother shall know of it" (IV.v.70). Perhaps discovering what Laertes knows we can arrive at the truth.

No character in Hamlet expresses certainty as to whether or not Ophelia died a virgin. Many would seem to express doubts. It is at Ophelia's funeral that a good many of these doubts are raised. The whole dispute between Laertes and the Priest over Ophelia's right to Christian burial is quite revealing, the more so when we search for its causes. We know that Laertes, bitterly indignant about the fate of his family, continually resists any defamatory remarks against his father or sister. The Priest, however, remarks, as if making a special concession to the volatile Laertes, that though deprived of full Christian rites, Ophelia is,

> Yet here...allowed her virgin crants,
> Her maiden strewments and the bringing home
> Of bell and burial. (V.i.255 ff.)

It may be useful to lay unusual stress on the word "yet". Once the matter of virginity is introduced in this manner, Laertes sturdily defends Ophelia from the common opinion, and possibly from the Priest's "Yet", which may have sounded a "doubtful" note over one whose very death was "doubtful" (V.ii.250).

It is when Ophelia's body is laid in the earth that he defends her purity and condemns the injustice that is done to her:

> Lay her i' the earth,
> And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
> May violets spring! I tell thee, churlish priest,
> A ministering angel shall my sister be,
> When thou liest howling. (V.i.262-6)

There could be no requiem sung in her honour. But then the Queen strews flowers on the grave and laments the death as much for her son's sake as for that of Ophelia:

> Sweets for the sweet: farewell
>
> I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife,
> I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
> And not have strewn thy grave. (V.i.266 ff.)

These words throw Laertes into a passion:

> O treble woe
> Fall ten times treble on that cursed head
> Whose wicked deed thy most ingenuous sense
> Depriv'd thee of! (V.i.269-72)

Hamlet is accused of some "wicked deed" that is directly responsible for Ophelia's madness.

The wicked deed could be the slaying of Polonius or Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia. Laertes could not mean, in my opinion, that the wicked deed was the slaying, because he could not believe, any more than generations of readers have been able to,[41] that the death of his father was the sole cause of the madness of Ophelia. Yet Hamlet is accused of a single wicked deed and not the concourse of events that made his sister mad. Laertes should be taken precisely at his word, both because it may be a definite word on an otherwise obscure subject, and because in his rage he seems to have temporarily forgotten restraint upon his thoughts and feelings. Moreover, Laertes is informed by Claudius that Hamlet did not intend to kill Polonius, but pursued the life of the King (IV.vii.1-4), and it is only when the King pretends to doubt the sincerity of Laertes (107), that Laertes, thinking undoubtedly of his duties as subject, son and brother, vows revenge against Hamlet. Further, the attempted murder of a king or a fatal accident, are understated by the epithet "wicked deed". Such an attempted murder is more aptly called "a feat so criminal and capital in nature" (IV.vii.7). "Wicked deed" is more probably a reference to a sin of the flesh to which Laertes himself, if Polonius can be believed, was perhaps susceptible.

Yet even if Laertes does blame Hamlet for his involuntary act in slaying Polonius, it does not seem likely he would therefore also hold him responsible for the insanity of Ophelia, which is a further, unpredictable, and unrelated remove from the initial involuntary act. The doubts that can be raised about Laertes' use of the phrase 'wicked deed' are sufficient to raise the possibility that it was Hamlet's rejection that Laertes thought to be the proximate cause of her madness. Whether the rejection was the result of her proven frailty in succumbing to temptation, or whether she simply thought this was the case, remains an important question.

If we incline to the view that Ophelia did not die a virgin, but had sexual relations with Hamlet, we depart somewhat from the traditional view of Ophelia. There are many critics in all ages who have seen in Ophelia a chaste girl. Some of these, such as Goethe, interpreted Ophelia in a very sentimental strain.[42] The Romantics of England generally did not accept that Hamlet sincerely hated Ophelia.

What is not in the play can be provided on the stage, however, and problems arise wherever critics confuse Shakespeare's work with that of the producer. In a revealing passage, Hackett writes of Edmund Kean that "he brought to Hamlet certain things that other actors, such as Edwin Booth ,[43] were glad to take over from him, "notably an emphasis...on Hamlet's abiding

passion for Ophelia which led him to treat her without the conventional coarseness and almost brutal voracity, and to come to her at the end of the Nunnery-scene and kiss her hand".[44] If Hackett is accurate, it was the convention for Hamlet in the Nunnery-scene to be cruel, but with the actors of his day the convention changed to the more sentimental rendering of the Nunnery-scene, which persists even today.[45]

It has come to pass that a chaste Ophelia is popular. But the reverse interpretation has been shown to be tenable and is perhaps more conformable with everyday experience. If it were possible, some say, to consider the play without the criticism that has been produced over a long period of gradual accretion, we would discover at last that "Ophelia is in fact a flirt, a fast girl such as at Elizabeth's court was the rule rather than the exception; a girl whose model was Anne Boleyn, the young beauty who ascended the throne by way of the king's bedroom".[46] Needless to say, it would be easier, if we put ourselves to it, to discover an original for an Ophelia of this kind, than of any other. "When in England Ophelia has been regarded as a maiden as tender and sweet as if she had been made up of rose-perfume and lily-dust--it is simply ridiculous".[47]

Yet it is still frequently assumed and argued that Ophelia is chaste. Most critics agree, says Dover Wilson, "the difficulty

is not that, having once loved Ophelia, Hamlet ceases to do so".[48] Rather, "his mother's conduct, which put him quite out of love with Love and has poisoned his whole imagination",[49] is the problem. Laertes and Polonius, according to this view, never doubt, but only show honest concern for the defenceless Ophelia. The prince's ugly accusations in the Nunnery-scene are not to be believed. With his tendency to generalize beyond the facts, Hamlet proclaims in his first soliloquy, "Frailty, thy name is woman", speaking of his mother. But this attitude comes to reflect upon Ophelia as well Hamlet thinks, according to Dover Wilson, that Gertrude is to blame for his poisoned imagination because she had done

> Such an act that blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
> Calls virtue hypocrite; Takes off the rose
> From the fair forehead of an innocent love,
> And sets a blister there. (III.iv.40 ff.)

In his text Wilson italicises the line and a half beginning "takes off the rose" in order to show that Hamlet is referring to his own crippled condition. But Wilson misreads the text. Hamlet could not be referring to himself, for he continues without break to show the "innocent love" was that of Gertrude and Hamlet Senior: [The act]"makes marriage vows as false as dicers oaths" (IV.iv.45). The same act therefore, and the same deed "sweet religion makes a rhapsody of words" (III.iv.46) by abusing a holy sacrament with hypocrisy, lust, and incest.

The theory of Hamlet's tendency to generalize cuts both ways. Whether Hamlet generalizes from Gertrude's act to Ophelia's or from Ophelia's to Gertrude's is debatable. Gertrude, at least, whether from turpitude or legitimate ignorance of why her deed has such horrid implications, wonders,

> Ay me, what act,
> That roars so loud, and thunders in the index.
> (III.iv.52 ff.)

To reveal the full moral significance of her deed to his mother, Hamlet goes on to explain how unnatural it was for her to move from the husband with "the front of Jove" and "an eye like Mars" to the "Satyr", her present husband. That the generalization proceeds from Ophelia to Gertrude is made at least possible by Hamlet's pretending no surprise that the affections of "youth"--which he now personifies as female--do burn not only in one, but in both the women to whom he is attached:

> Rebellious hell,
> If thou canst mutine in matron's bones,
> To flaming youth let virtue be as wax,
> And melt in her own fire: proclaim no shame
> When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,
> Since frost itself as actively doth burn
> And reason pandars will. (III.iv.82 ff.)

If Hamlet is here briefly reflecting upon Ophelia, we may notice the word "pandar" and the leitmotif of harlotry which turns up with the thought of Ophelia.

It is possible that Dover Wilson, however, is wrong in reading Ophelia's name into Hamlet's speech to his mother,

and that we are therefore wrong in disputing the way in which her name is used. But those who would explain away Hamlet's lewd and suggestive allusions to Ophelia find themselves explaining away everything. It is a fact that during her life Hamlet says nothing affectionate, nothing good of Ophelia.

If we do not make the assumption that Hamlet was always truly in love with Ophelia, our problems in interpreting their relationship are already greatly resolved. Those who would defend Ophelia, I find, have neglected the facts and pointed to something of which we are necessarily ignorant, such as his state of mind or his subconscious fears, and have attributed to the unknowable factor the cause of all his problems. But if we incline to the opposite view, reason to support the view is forthcoming.

We have already seen that Hamlet had referred to Ophelia as a "beautified", not beautiful woman. In the Nunnery-scene the spur to his highest bitterness seems to be that he has

> Heard of your paintings too,
> well enough, God hath given you one face,
> and you make yourselves another:
> you jig, you amble, and you lisp, you
> nickname God's creatures, and make your
> wantonness your ignorance. (III.ii.148 ff.)

That Ophelia is a woman of this kind is perhaps Hamlet's meaning in the graveyard when he speaks to the skull:

> Now get you to my lady's chamber,
> and tell her, let her paint an inch
> thick, to this favour she must come;
> make her laugh at that. (V.i.216 ff.)

It is at least possible that Hamlet is using the words 'my lady's' advisedly, to refer to Ophelia. Certainly, if he is, the phrase pierces his own side sharply, when he shortly learns that the despised Ophelia is dead. If these lines do refer to Ophelia, they suggest that the Ophelia of the play-scene is not the sylph of the sentimental view, but a "jigging, ambling" court lady who laughs and is merry to hear Hamlet's witty remarks.

Such a worldly Ophelia at first seems strange. Critics who favour this more worldly version of Ophelia, however, need little more than the facts of the play. In recent criticism, particularly in the work of Madariaga, Ophelia is convincingly described in the most unfavourable terms. If,then,some elements of the character of Ophelia can be variously interpreted, one thing is incontrovertible: "Ophelia was not candid towards Hamlet. She allowed herself to be used as a decoy to enable her father and the king to overhear the conversation with the man we are asked--though not by Shakespeare--to believe that she was in love with. This is a pretty broad hint on the part of the author. It means: 'You people down there in the pit, keep an eye on this girl. She looks ever so sweet. But you need not

believe anything she says.[50]

Briefly to summarize, we have seen that it is possible Ophelia is less chaste than has traditionally been supposed. The love affair ended bitterly when Hamlet felt, or Ophelia thought he felt, that she had proved her unworthiness by scheming with her father and the King to entrap him and also, if we weigh her songs, gave in all too easily to his protestations of love.

A love affair of this kind could not end without severe lacerations for the lovers. Hamlet's cruelty to Ophelia is not love cooled by absence or mistrust, but love turned to hatred. He tells her not simply to get out of his life, but to go to a "nunnery" (convent or brothel[51]) where she belongs. Hamlet's estrangement would perhaps have seemed not extraordinary to the Elizabethan. Shakespeare's unfolding of the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship in a ballad perhaps reflects the ease with which a contemporary audience would understand Ophelia's plight. In at least one ballad of the period,[52] we find interest taken in a love affair in which a woman unsuccessfully tried to "marry up" by making good an infatuated seducer's promises. In Measure for Measure and All's Well That Ends Well we have variations on this theme, which seems to have admitted both comic and tragic treatment.[53]

From the Bible itself, not to mention the moral writings and sermons current in Shakespeare's time, it was to be learned that however much the man importunes the woman, after his desire

is fulfilled, he begins to hate her. The Biblical account of Amnon and Tamar[54] teaches this lesson with poignancy. The motivation for this kind of hatred was what Shakespeare represented in Hamlet.

It was a commonplace of Elizabethan morality that a woman is protectress of her honour.[55] It was hers only in trust, and not to bestow. It was made clear to her--and Shakespeare makes doubly sure that Ophelia is informed of the pitfalls in courtship--that men would frequently implore her favours. It was taught that she should not believe men's vows because they are only a part of the game of love in which male prurience is the counterpart of female provocation. Ophelia herself is further taught that the "honourable" promises of a prince not only would not, but could not be fulfilled, because Hamlet was a "star out of her sphere". She is told that it is the fault of the woman if she is beguiled, if she takes his "tenders" (promises) "for true pay which are not sterling" (I.iii.107). Probably the reason behind this seemingly one-sided prohibition was that the woman was thought to be all too pleased, once the necessary promises were secured, to yield to the male passions which she desired and encouraged. "They say Jove laughs at lovers' perjury".

Hamlet makes it clear in the Nunnery-scene that he believes Ophelia gave in to his suit not because of his importunities, but because of her own lust. It is possibly Hamlet's opinion

that she uses all the arts of attraction. Her delay in granting his suit is only part of her lures to entrap him. Hamlet at length promised to marry; he said he loved her. She pretended that she believed him:

> Ophelia. Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.
>
> Hamlet. You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it: I loved you not. (III.i.117 ff.)

Hamlet's bitterness is here stirred by her forcing him to remember his promises, especially that, as in the songs, of marriage. But this treachery against Hamlet fails.

The attitude of the lovers toward one another in the Nunnery-scene will have to be understood. Hamlet probably believes that Ophelia was disingenuous from the beginning, promoting her own desires and ambitions. Men cannot be bound by their promises: "We are arrant knaves all, believe none of us" (III.i.134). Ophelia learns this truth and expresses it in her song. Nor should a wise man permit himself to be bound: "Wise men know well enough, what monsters you [women] make of them" (III.i.145). But Hamlet's whole meaning is involved in his refusal to marry, where he identifies her pretended ignorance of the tenour of his promises as mere lust:

> You jig, you amble and you lisp;

> You nickname God's creatures, and make
> your wantonness your ignorance. Go to,
> I'll no more on't; it hath made me
> mad. I say, we will have no moe marriage. (III.i.154 ff.)

All of Hamlet's intentions, he supposes, were known to Ophelia before she fell in love. He suggests that if men cheat in love, women also have their wiles; this must have been known to Ophelia from the whole history of human behaviour in love. The history of love is not the theatre of happiness.

It seems probable then, that Hamlet and Ophelia had sexual relations; that Hamlet rejected Ophelia after this affair; that Hamlet accuses Ophelia of forcing a marriage upon him; that he bids her get to a "nunnery", or whorehouse, as much because of her own disingenuousness, as because she is a standing reproach to his own misdemeanour. It has further been suggested that Laertes is cognizant of all these events and is therefore pricked with the greater hatred for Hamlet. It seems clear also, that Polonius, however much he used Ophelia in other ways, did not encourage her to bestow her favours. He, in fact, encouraged her to protect her honour, even if this advice was not born of the purest motives.

At the end of the Nunnery-scene Ophelia is exposed before her father and the King as

> Of ladies most deject and wretched, (III.i.164)

and the word "ladies" is perhaps to be noticed for Shakespeare carefully upheld the distinction between "maids" and "ladies".[56]

The King's summary of the Nunnery-scene coincides with Ophelia's:

> Love! his affections do not that way tend. (III.i.170)

After this remark is made, the King and Polonius, with either callous disregard for a suffering, innocent Ophelia, or, more probably, stern and silent understanding of her dishonourable fall, discuss their course of action now that they know Hamlet is sane. Polonius reflects this understanding and there seems to be no sympathy in his tone:

> How now Ophelia! You need not tell us
> what Lord Hamlet said, we heard it all. (III.i.186-7)

Having now heard the dialogue of the Nunnery-scene, Polonius realizes that when he explicitly asked his daughter about Hamlet, "What is between you? Give me up the truth" (I.iii.98), he did not get the truth. Ophelia answers nothing. She is out of favour with Hamlet, with her father, and can expect no sympathy from Laertes.

From what we have seen of the Nunnery-scene, it appears that Ophelia had sufficient cause to be disturbed. But in considering the Nunnery-scene, I have not yet considered the "To be or not to be" speech which is undeniably part of the scene. By supposing that there were sexual relations between the lovers, we have discovered a complexity and consistency in Hamlet that the traditional view of Ophelia does not. It is true Hamlet has come to appear, so very far from being "weak

willed and neurotic",[57] as being both aggressive and cruel. But as I shall attempt to show when relating the "To be or not to be" speech to the scene, Hamlet is still more complex than we have hitherto seen. We will see that the intricate and strained relations of Hamlet and Ophelia heighten the tragedy of Ophelia's end, rather than cause it to appear an undeserved,unpredictable and untragical dramatic conclusion. The key to the tragedy, in my opinion, is the "To be or not to be" speech of the Nunnery-scene.

CHAPTER III

The "To be or not to be" Speech and the Nunnery-scene

In order to understand what happens in the Nunnery-scene we must first come to grips with the use to which Hamlet puts his pretended madness. Hamlet urgently desires Horatio and Bernardo not to reveal the sham nature of his madness:

> Here, as before, never, so help you mercy,
> How strange or odd soe'r I bear myself,
> As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
> To put an antic disposition on,
> That you, at such times seeing me, never shall,
> With arms encumb'red thus, or this head-shake,
> Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,...
> Or such ambiguous giving out, to note
> That you know aught of me: this not to do,
> So grace and mercy at your most need help you,
> Swear. (I.v.169-81)

The tension and dramatic importance of this oath of silence is reinforced by the Ghost who calls from the cellar.[1] Hamlet thinks to himself or aloud at the scene's end:

> The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right! (I.v.189-90)

At this moment the audience of the play is warned that Hamlet will speak in pretended madness to provoke certain responses from characters, move them to certain courses of action, or, more generally, trouble the consciences of his auditors in order to make them conscious of their sins.[2] Under cover of

madness Hamlet is shamelessly insolent to Claudius, as when he calls him his "mother" (IV.ii.51), or expostulates, pretending no direct reference to anyone, on how a king might go a progress through the guts of a beggar (II.ii.32-33).

More important, as concerns Ophelia, are Hamlet's innuendoes to Polonius in the fishmonger scene. Hamlet here calls Polonius a "fishmonger", an Elizabethan word for "pimp".[3] Regarding the "fish", he tells him to look out for his daughter and

> Let her not walk in the sun: conception is a blessing: but not as your daughter may conceive--
> Friend, look to't. (II.ii.184-86)

Polonius in fact usually catches only part of Hamlet's intended meaning:

> How say you by that? Still harping on my daughter: yet he knew me not at first; 'a said I was a fishmonger: 'a is far gone, far gone: and truly, in my youth I suffered much extremity for love; very near this. I'll speak to him again. (II.ii.186-91)

Polonius finds method in Hamlet's madness as the audience does and observes,

> How pregnant sometimes his replies are! a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of. (II.ii.211-14)

Not much after the fishmonger scene Hamlet will, in still plainer terms, accuse Polonius of sacrificing his daughter, mocking him as a kind of "Jepthah, judge of Israel" (II.ii.422) who sacrifices his

> One fair daughter, and no more,
> The which he loved passing well. (II.ii.426-27)

Taking the hint, Polonius defends himself:

> If you call me Jepthah, my lord, I have a
> daughter that I love passing well. (II.ii.430-31)

Hamlet banters "Nay, that follows not" (II.ii.432), for truly it was Polonius that sold her in a plot to entrap Hamlet.[4] Perhaps feeling the barb sharply Polonius retorts,

> What follows then, my lord? (II.ii.433)

Hamlet flings at him, plunging into his madness:

> Why,
> 'As by lot, God wot',
> and then you know,
> 'It came to pass, as most like it was',--
> the first row of the pious chanson will show you more;
> for look where my abridgement comes. (II.ii.434-39)

He is perhaps (1) simply eluding Polonius' enquiry with an irrelevance, or (2) referring to the first stanza of some such ballad as Ophelia sang and was very popular at the time.[5] The second possibility, with much else of course, supports the interpretation of the songs as depictions of Hamlet and Ophelia.

Hamlet is free from the retribution the same would expect in giving such open insults. It is to be noted that Hamlet, when speaking in pretended madness, insinuates one of his own thoughts into the mind of another character by speaking at the person and not with him, as in ordinary conversation. Merely throwing ideas up into the air for the persons to whom they are relevant to catch, Hamlet conceives speeches that touch the most secret thoughts of his auditors.

These dark conceits are for the most part open to the view of the audience of the play and often it is seen, as it has been with Polonius, that the audience perceives Hamlet's meaning before the person to whom the words are directed. The Queen, for example, is like Polonius in missing many of Hamlet's innuendoes; while the King, possibly the most intelligent person in the play next to Hamlet, rarely misses any of the clues, so that we notice such a phrase as,

> I have nothing with this answer, Hamlet;
> these words are not mine, (III.ii.101-02)

in which Claudius acknowledges an innuendo on Hamlet's part.

The conscience of the king is so testy that even when Polonius inadvertently utters something about guilt, the King exposes himself by saying:

> How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!
> The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art,
> Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
> Than is my deed to my most painted word:
> O heavy burthen! (III.i.49-53)

The consciences of characters are continuously at work in Hamlet. The hasty reader who forgets this in reading the play will be as unprepared for Claudius' exposure of conscience as for the Queen's later on in the play, when, seeing the distraction of Ophelia she tells of the torment she herself is undergoing, because of Hamlet:

> To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
> Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss:
> So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
> It spills itself in fearing to be spilt. (IV.v.16-20)

It can be seen that the notion of conscience, particularly as it is found in the King's revealing aside before the "To be or not to be" speech, is present in the Nunnery-scene as a leitmotif almost as much as the leitmotif of harlotry.[6] Just as Hamlet will speak of Ophelia's lewdness, so in the "To be or not to be" speech he will touch on the matter of conscience.

The famous speech, however, is tied more securely into its context. I have maintained, to the end of making this connection, (1) that the principal theme of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy is suicide, (2) that Hamlet has sexual relations with Ophelia and (3) that Ophelia commits suicide.[7] If these three points are premised, the problems of the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship can be resolved. Having concluded that Hamlet has a subtle purpose in the use of his madness, we may see an intimate connection between the speech on suicide and the actual suicide by understanding that the famous lines beginning "To be or not to be" are not in fact, a soliloquy, but a monologue conceived by Hamlet to be spoken in pretended madness and intended to be overheard by Ophelia, who does not leave the stage during the speech. A careful look at the monologue is necessary to justify this claim.

CHAPTER IV

The Speech as a Monologue

It has already been observed that the reading of the speech which is here favoured requires no changes in any of the copy texts of Hamlet;[1] that, on the contrary, reading it as a soliloquy requires changes. It may be added that the speech has not the character of an aside as much because it is too long as because it contains no references to the speaker.[2] It has also been noticed that some critics thought the speech somewhat aphoristic, platitudinous, and not altogether consonant with Hamlet's usual way of thinking.[3] Instead of the fear of God that so frequently stirs Hamlet to moral revulsion,[4] we find in the "To be or not to be" speech a tenor of belief that could easily be that of a pagan character in the Attic tragedies. Instead of the "Everlasting", "God", the "Heaven" to which we must "confess",[5] we find an "undiscover'd country" "from whose bourn", Hamlet says--though he has seen the ghost of his father--"no traveller returns". It has been objected this inconsistency is too flagrant to ignore. Critics reply variously to this objection, saying, for example, that Hamlet sees a ghost not from Heaven or Hell but from Purgatory[6] (which, I suppose, has been better charted than either of the former), or that the ghost has not returned with his body[7] (one cannot return from any undiscovered country soever without his body). But these problems, the scorn of conscience in the soliloquy, and the general skeptical

tone of the speech argue that this speech is out of character for Hamlet, as many have maintained, or simply a skeptical pose Hamlet temporarily adopts.

The skepticism of the speech has caused critics to look to Montaigne as a source.[8] There is, in fact, in the essay on A Custom of the Isle of Cea, a passage which is similar in its argument to Hamlet's speech. Whether or not Montaigne was Shakespeare's source cannot be determined, but for the purpose of this thesis, the association of the ideas of scorn of death and skepticism is worth noting:

> The wise man lives as long as he ought, not so long as he can; and that the most obliging present Nature has made us, and which takes from us all colour of complaint of our condition, is to have delivered into our own custody the keys of life; she has only ordered one door into life, but a hundred thousand ways out. We may be straightened for earth to live upon, but earth sufficient to die upon can never be wanting, as Boiocalus answered the Romans. Why dost thou complain of this world? it detains thee not; thy own cowardice is the cause, if thou livest in pain. There needs no more to die but to will to die:
>
> > Ubique mors est; optime hoc cavit deus.
> > Eripere vitam nemo non homini potest;
> > At nemo mortem; mille ad hanc aditus patent.
>
> Neither is it a recipe for one disease only; death is the infallible cure of all; 'tis a most assured port that is never to be feared and very often to be sought.[9]

Also, Montaigne insists that

> The most voluntary death is the finest. Life depends upon the pleasure of others; death upon our own. We ought not to accomodate ourselves to our own humour in anything so much

> as in this. Reputation is not concerned
> in such an enterprise; 'tis folly to be
> concerned by any such apprehension.
> Living is slavery if the liberty of dying
> be wanting.[10]

To further the parallel, it has been pointed out that with the Florio translation of Montaigne the passages are similar not only in their arguments but in their actual words.[11] It may be concluded that Hamlet's skepticism in the "To be or not to be" speech is readily associated with that of Montaigne.

This brand of skepticism, if we are to accept the evidence of Montaigne's popularity, was fashionable among Elizabethans.[12] The other character in Shakespeare who is dangerous precisely because "he reads much" is Cassius, the conspirator against Julius Caesar. Like Hamlet, Cassius speaks of the man he wishes to goad into action, as

> Groaning underneath this age's yoke.[13]

A similar argument, of course, develops in Hamlet's speech; and the comparison of the phrases "grunt and sweat under a weary life" and "who would fardels bear" to what Cassius remarks, invites itself. To another character Cassius says that if nobility of life is impossible, death is to be preferred:

> I know where I will wear this dagger then;
> Cassius from bondage will deliver Cassius:
> Therein, the gods, you make the weak most strong;
> Therein, the gods, you tyrants do defeat:
> Nor stony tower, nor walls of beaten brass,

> Nor airless dungeon, nor strong links of iron,
> Can be retentive to the strength of spirit;
> But life, being weary of these worldly bars,
> Never lacks power to dismiss itself.
> If I know this, know all the world besides,
> That part of tyranny that I do bear
> I can shake off at pleasure.
>
> Casca: So can I:
> So every bondman in his own hand bears
> The power to cancel his captivity.[14]

The skeptical pose is frequently used to encourage men to some action they would normally recognize as unjustifiable, however desirable. Conscience, reputation, and fear of the unknown fail to daunt the skeptic's opinion of the inherent worthlessness of life. The skepticism of Hamlet scorns conscience in a tone strongly reminiscent of Richard's at Bosworth Field:

> Conscience is but a word that cowards use
> Devis'd at first to keep the strong in awe.[15]

And to make the parallel even stronger we have only to reflect how the qualms of conscience obsessed Richard in his dreams the previous night![16] The Richard of Bosworth Field is a type, as is Cassius, of the skeptical man. Like Hamlet in his speech they satisfy their doubts and seal the resolution to act by contending that heed of conscience is merely cowardice.

Because Hamlet's speech would be inconsistent with what he knows of the ghost and all his former assertions of belief in the unknown, it is proper to examine the speech as an innuendo of the kind he had spoken since he decided to "put an antic disposition on" (I.v.171-72). The fact that

the person he refers to "fardels bears", and "grunts and sweats under a weary life"--almost the very words that Cassius and Montaigne use of the persons they propose to liberate from "conscience"--should put us on our guard lest the speech is directed at someone on stage. Hamlet, like Cassius, with great art will nourish a thought which is perhaps already rooted in the mind of his auditor; he will suggest a proposition which would incur a thousand objections if it were openly stated, but in its covert form insinuates itself with ease. Hamlet's rhetorical device was and is known to the best and the least of orators.[17]

It is much more difficult to describe Hamlet's technique than it would be to deliver such a speech. It will afterwards be shown how all references in the speech to some person are references to Ophelia. Support for this reading can be found in the facts that Ophelia particularly admired Hamlet's scholarly attainments,[18] and that the speech has an obviously scholastic form:

> To be or not to be: that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing, end them? To die, to sleep;
> No more; and by a sleep to say we end
> The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
> To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause: there's the respect

That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despis'd love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourns
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied over with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.--Soft you now!
The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins rememb'red. (III.i.56-89)

Leaving an examination of the scholastic form of the speech until later, it is well to look at the words of the speech in light of what is known about the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship. The speech has an unusual quantity of words that have sexual connotations or other double meanings. The words "flesh", "consummation", "sleep", "grunt", "sweat", "bear", "bare" suggest this criticism of the speech and invite us to interpret the words "rub", "dreams", "To die, to sleep, no more", "arrows", "heartache", etc., as part of the same motif. It may be concluded that Hamlet is simply reflecting an erotic attitude toward death. But words that bear still other connotations point to the possibility that he is again covertly reminding Ophelia of her looseness.[19] The coincidence of the word "devoutly", for example, with the fact that Hamlet sees

Ophelia in the pretended act of religious exercise, may suggest a dramatic reading of this line (III.i.64), and perhaps the whole speech, which demonstrates Hamlet's spirit of mockery. The word itself is used curiously, and, within the entirety of Shakespeare's work, exceptionally, if mockery is not intended.[20] Too many of the curious word usages can be explained by referring them to Ophelia, than mere coincidence would have it. Mocking references are consonant with Hamlet's intention to disturb Ophelia's conscience on the grounds of hypocrisy. Criticism of religious hypocrisy is on the lips of Hamlet more than once,[21] and there is a certain sense in which it could be said that Hamlet throughout is concerned with outward health and inward corruption. These facts warrant the reading, but the uneasy interchange of the "espials" confirms Hamlet's meaning:

> Polonius. We are oft to blame in this,--
> 'Tis too much proved--that with devotion's visage
> And pious action we do sugar o'er
> The devil himself.
>
> King. [Aside] O, 'tis too true!
> How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!
> The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art,
> Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
> Than is my deed to my most painted word:
> O heavy burthen! (III.i.47-55)

It is known from the earlier parts of the play that Hamlet's scholarly attainments are admired. He does not permit himself to be rivalled in insight by Horatio,[22]

in diplomacy by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,[23] or in eloquence, later, by the superficial Osric.[24] Ophelia, be it noted, finds him admirable for

> The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye
> tongue, sword. (III.i.159)

Hamlet, for his acquirements, is the universal Renaissance man, "the observed of all observers", says Ophelia. But Ophelia observed and followed Hamlet more closely than anyone; she indeed,

> That suck'd the honey of his music vows, (III.i.164)

admired Hamlet to a fault.

Ophelia's attitude toward Hamlet in this regard makes possible stage directions for the speech that would present it as a kind of scholastic, peripatetic, meditation. Earlier, when the Queen had remarked of Hamlet,

> But, look, where sadly the poor wretch comes
> reading, (II.ii.167-68)

it was seen that Hamlet continued to read on stage, though Polonius was present, and eventually turned the matter of his reading into malignant insinuations relevant to the inquisitive Polonius. Similarly, for the "To be or not to be" speech, it is a suitable stage device that Hamlet should appear to be continuing a reflection that he had begun earlier, and to be sorting out his ideas, or glossing his text, in a scholastic manner, and in the hearing of Ophelia.

The form of scholastic debate as it was found in the schools of the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, and particularly as it was used in the articles of medieval summae, consisted in "questions", "objections", statement criteria, and "replies" to the "objections". For example, St. Thomas (Summa Theologica, I.Q79.Art.12) proposes as a question "Whether conscience is a power"; he takes a position with respect to this question which he states in his "objections", and will usually refute in his "replies", depending on what criterion is established in his "response".[25] The question is often begun by a "whether" and is almost always resolved through the clash of two antithetical positions.

Hamlet's adoption of this form of debate is remarkable. It is too remarkable, perhaps, to permit reading the speech as a soliloquy. He opens his speech by plainly establishing "the question", and delineates the antithesis that must be resolved:

To be or not to be: that is the question. (III.i.56)

In the following lines the word "whether" appears; and Hamlet indicates the criterion of his debate:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer...(III.i.57)

The criterion by which a question is determined is of central importance and would normally be closely attended to, as it would be the avenue by which "distinctions"[26] would enter the problem. The criterion of Hamlet's speech bears the

skeptical stamp: he proposes to discuss the question of suicide, not absolutely, or on an absolute basis, but on the basis of "what is nobler in the mind" or, in Johnson's phrase, more "suitable to the dignity of reason".[27] Formally speaking, therefore, if one were to refute Hamlet's conclusion respecting suicide, one could first reject the criterion of acting according to "what is nobler in the mind". These intricacies cannot be neglected because it would appear that Ophelia, who hears the speech, at least vaguely understands Hamlet's drift.

It would appear that Ophelia only partly understands the meaning of Hamlet's speech at the beginning, as Hamlet intended. She probably reflected on the content of Hamlet's speech along with that of his curses in the Nunnery-scene, in the depth of her dejection and despair only after that traumatic episode. But immediately after the speech, when Hamlet pretends to notice her for the first time, she arms herself to mention his unkindness and take issue with his lies. She opposes him sharply; she replies to him, using Hamlet's very own words, that between the two of them, it is not he that is actuated by a noble mind:

> Hamlet. No, not I;
> I never gave you aught.
>
> Ophelia. My honour'd lord, you know right well
> you did;
> And with them, words of so sweet breath compos'd
> As made the things more rich: their perfume lost,
> Take these again; for to the noble mind
> Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind. (III.i.95-101)

This initial shrewdness of Ophelia will release the torrent of imprecations that she will not be able to control, will send her to a nunnery,[28] and plunge her into despair. It is with consummate dramatic skill that these fatal words are again given to Ophelia when Hamlet has abandoned her:

O, what a noble mind is here overthrown. (III.1.158)

The third appearance of this phrase (in the space of a hundred lines) connects the proceedings of the Nunnery-scene to the "To be or not to be" speech, suggests Ophelia's misery at seeing Hamlet's perturbation, and anticipates the collapse her own peace of mind will suffer.

Ophelia's use of these crucial words strongly suggests that she hears Hamlet's debate. But Hamlet's deliberate use of antithesis and his choice of words in the speech will enforce the suggestion that she is intended to hear:

> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing, end them? To die: to sleep;
> No more: and by a sleep to say we end
> The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep,
> To sleep: perchance to dream. (III.i.57-65)

If we assume that Ophelia was seduced and rejected by Hamlet, the singular use of the words "heartache", "flesh", "sleep", and "consummation" gains a considerable dramatic significance.[29] But "consummation" is as much a legal term as a sexual one; and as we shall see, the phrase "the law's delay", and the

word "nymph", will both appear later in the speech, emphasizing the legal and emotional aspects of Ophelia's rejection.[30] These subtleties of word usage are to weigh the balance of the debate in favour of suicide, by making life look more hopeless than it is, and death more welcome. The debate itself presents a very obvious choice to Ophelia; on the one hand, there is death, which only possibly may consist in dreams, and which, again, only possibly may be evil:

> Ay, there's the rub;
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause. (III.i.65-8)

Hamlet's opposition to death is minimal. At first, it is a thing to "give us pause", later it will be something to "puzzle" at, and finally it will appear "an enterprise of great pith and moment".

On the other hand, the evils of life are certain, according to the speech. Life consists in the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune", a "sea of troubles" and "heartache", which man, by opposing, can end. Life and death are opposed, then, and the second already appears the nobler. But an objection to suicide has been raised, one concerning dreams in an afterlife, and it must be dispatched. Using another scholastic phrase Hamlet will neatly set out for refutation the only objection to suicide:

> what dreams may come...there's the respect
> That makes calamity of so long life. (III.i.68-69)

The remainder of the speech will settle this objection, on the basis of what the nobler action is for the despairing.

After this initial problem with the evils of dreams Hamlet departs from his antithetical mode, and, as though he were giving his final response to the question, he offers nothing further to support the proposition that the continuance of life is best, but much to show that the evils of life should not be endured. When we come to Hamlet's list of life's evils, as Dr. Johnson and many others have pointed out,[31] it becomes clear Hamlet is not referring to his own suicide:

> For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
> Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
> The pangs of despis'd love, the law's delay,
> The insolence of office and the spurns
> That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
> When he himself might his quietus make. (III.i.70-75)

"These are not the evils that particularly strike a prince", says Johnson.[32] But they are evils that would affect Ophelia. In fact, they are evils that Ophelia actually suffers at the hands of Hamlet.

It is safe to say that Hamlet, in emphasizing these evils, defames himself to the end that his own asserted worthlessness may teach Ophelia hers. The Hamlet who rejects Ophelia suggests that his worthlessness has contaminated her

life in a manner that is irreversible, that the only dignified quittance she can make is her own death. This contention appears to be very strong. The epithets Hamlet uses to define the evils are, of all the epithets of human misery he might have chosen, unequivocally those that do not describe his own sufferings.They are clearly the epithets of the sufferings he inflicts upon Ophelia: a glance at Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia will show indeed that it is characterized by "scorn" and "insolence" deriving from his "office" as prince; "spurns" and "contumely" are the lot of Ophelia at the hands of the "unworthy". The question this raises is, "who would bear" this misery when "patient merit" did not assuage it in the least.

Hamlet makes this point perfectly clear. What he furtively suggests in his "To be or not to be" speech, he will plainly announce in the Nunnery-scene. Whereas he slanders himself in the speech to obliquely suggest suicide, he further demonstrates his gross unworthiness in the rest of the scene to command her to get to a nunnery:

> Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?
> ...yet I could accuse me of such things
> that it were better my mother had not borne me:
> I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with
> more offences at my back than I have thoughts
> to put them in, imagination to give them shape,
> or time to act them in. What shouldst such fellows
> as I do crawling between earth and heaven?
> We are arrant knaves, all; believe none of us.
> Go thy ways to a nunnery. (III.i.122;123-33)

The argument that would send Ophelia to a brothel is, at this point, similar to that which argues for suicide. Death, it is true, is shown to be more honourable than the alternative suggestion. Because Ophelia believed his arrant lies, she "shall not escape calumny" (III.i.140), no matter how chaste the rest of her life is. The scene here reinforces the speech in posing the question,"Death or harlotry, which is nobler?".

To return to the speech and Hamlet's argument, it is clear that the evils Hamlet descries are those that would particularly affect Ophelia. In the following lines therefore, it is fit Hamlet suggest that the sufferer

> might his quietus make
> With a bare bodkin. (III.i.75-76)

This very rare use of the word "bodkin", instead of "dagger" or some more appropriate word, further suggests the suicide implied is Ophelia's own. "Bare bodkin" is not best understood as an "unsheathed dagger" or a "mere dagger", as the usual annotation suggests.[33] Rather, the phrase is to be understood in its common usage, as a woman's instrument for sewing, "a sharp slender instrument for making holes in cloth".[34] A bodkin is securely identified as a means of suicide for Ophelia: Hamlet knew sewing was a passtime with her; he visited her when she was "sewing in her closet"(II.i.77).

After this first explicit reference to a means of suicide, Hamlet again returns to some suggestions which conflict

rather obviously with the usual reading of the speech as a soliloquy on his own suicide. With possibly more faint sexual allusions, allusions which however are on his tongue again in the play-scene, Hamlet pretends to wonder,

> who would fardels bear
> To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
> But that the dread of something after death,
> The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
> No traveller returns, puzzles the will
> And makes us rather bear those ills we have
> Than fly to others that we know not of? (III.i.76-82)

The word "bear" which appears three times (in the space of twelve lines) is marked; and the inconsistency of Hamlet maintaining for himself that "no traveller returns" from the other world has been noticed. But it would seem the importance of this passage is to show how Ophelia, like the Brutus whom Cassius tried to persuade, "bears" the unbearable, at least in one sense of the word, and cannot continue. If Hamlet's proposed solution has therefore not yet been made clear, it will be established in his following words. The puzzle that doubt creates will be solved.

The remainder of the speech states that in the condition of despair, one cannot do better, no more courageously, than to accept death. The desperate meditate upon suicide in long sessions of thought. If once courage could replace pusillanimous doubt, suicide, or any difficult enterprise would be possible:

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;

> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pith and moment
> With this regard their currents turn awry,
> And lose the name of action. (III.i.83-88)

From the depth of despair, it is possible, Hamlet suggests, to reach out and save oneself by the final courageous deed.

In his conclusion to the speech Hamlet continues the bawdy references to Ophelia which his imminent fury will soon be pouring out:

> Soft you now!
> The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
> Be all my sins rememb'red. (III.i.87-89)

Hamlet's closing words, which blend the holy and the unholy, throw the entire speech into context for Ophelia, by drawing attention to his own sin. The word "nymph" is not, in my opinion, a tender, "Natural touch".[35] The erotic love suggested by "nymph" will be the overt theme of Hamlet's impending access of grief, just as it was covertly introduced into his monologue.

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* That Hamlet means the word "orisons" to be a mockery is probably indicated by his former reference to false religious exercise in the word "devoutly", which is used earlier in the speech (III.i.64). These sardonic references to false devotion indoubtedly occasion the choice of the word "nunnery" to signify whorehouse, a word which is not, once again, otherwise used by Shakespeare with this meaning, but commonly carried the bawdy suggestion in Elizabethan English (cf. Oxford English Dictionary).

CHAPTER V

The Problem of Motivation

The attempt to read Hamlet's speech as intended to urge Ophelia to suicide must confront an obvious problem. Though the present reading gives dramatic significance to the speech, it demands that Hamlet have some motive to desire Ophelia's death. It is known that Hamlet desired his own death by suicide; and, on this basis, it could be argued that Hamlet in the "To be or not to be" speech offers his own doubtful counsel to his partner in despair. That one should offer advice, the soundness of which one is himself fearfully doubtful, to discover its acceptability to one's fellow sufferer, is certainly not inconsistent with human psychology. But the state of mind that motivates a man to desire the death of another is a problem for the psychologist. Hamlet's state of mind in the Nunnery-scene is undoubtedly the primary cause of his desiring Ophelia's death; but it is a cause that cannot be adequately discussed in a thesis devoted to the dramatic context of Hamlet's speech.

It is in terms of secondary causes then, that we must consider why Hamlet wished Ophelia to commit suicide. But even as we reduce the scope of the question it seems probable that to understand why Hamlet desired the death of Ophelia is also to understand why he desired her to go to a brothel. These two

desires would seem to suggest that he simply wishes her to get out of his life, perhaps because she is a standing reproach to him, a reminder of all his sins; perhaps because he recognizes in her the barrier to his own peace of mind forever. The fact of a sexual union could bind Hamlet to marriage.[1] For Ophelia, the loss of her honour was a blemish to be effaced only by death, a course which was not infrequently adopted by ladies in like circumstances.[2] But if these were Ophelia's circumstances, even given Hamlet's tormenting thoughts, dreams, and delusion of the incest of his mother, the murder he must commit, the spirit of his father, and the other evils that sicken his mind, is it not unthinkable wickedness in him to desire the death of the girl he loved and then seduced? Is it possible Hamlet could be so cruel as to wish Ophelia dead, or removed to a whorehouse?

Now causes for the maledictions can with reason be adduced to mitigate Hamlet's cruelty. It can be suggested that the Nunnery-scene, for example, presents Hamlet in a flight of rage. But we have seen that Hamlet was not without grounds for anger, nor, in human history without precedent in deeply hating the woman he once loved. Nor, again, can it be denied that Hamlet shows the same cruelty on other occasions; in the opinion of Dr. Johnson, his cruelty toward the King in the prayer-scene (III.iii), which would delay his revenge till it might be made effective into the afterlife, appeared more

than human.[3] Hamlet's cruelty on several occasions is indeed without the "conscience" he scorns in the "To be or not to be" speech.[4] Not without point does Hamlet remark of his slaying of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "they are not near my conscience" (V.ii.58).

If Hamlet's character can be spared the imputation of cruelty in one instance, it cannot be spared in all.[5] But it must be noticed that Hamlet, decidedly the hero in his play, does not believe his actions are evil as he is acting them; indeed, the veriest villain in literature, or in life itself, could not be said to actually believe his deed was evil at the time he is acting it.[6] A Russian author,who excelled in his fine insight into, and depiction of, men of the severest wickedness,could categorically observe,

> As a general rule, people, even the wicked, are much more naive and simple-hearted than we suppose. And we ourselves are, too.[7]

Such a remark served as preface to Dostoevsky's account of the most shamelessly depraved deeds of which man is capable; it is well to remember it when we accuse Hamlet of wicked thoughts.

Such an understanding of wicked deeds may procure sympathy for Hamlet, but not an understanding of his motives. The standing problem,however, of Hamlet's sincerity in the Nunnery-scene or the burial-scene, the instances in which he

denies love for the living Ophelia, and proclaims love for her when dead, may now be answered in the affirmative. He both desired and regretted her death. This behaviour is interesting in itself and seems particularly to have animated Shakespeare's interest. Antony and Cleopatra presents Antony in a dilemma respecting his despised wife Fulvia; he desired the death of one who was an embarrassment to his liberty in the state and in love. But when she is dead, he laments,

> There's a great spirit gone! Thus did I desire it:
> What our contempts doth often hurl from us,
> We wish it ours again; the present pleasure,
> By revolution low'ring, does become
> The opposite of itself: she's good, being gone;
> The hand could pluck her back that shov'd her on.[8]

It seems not unlikely Hamlet evinced similar emotions when he perceived his hatred exceeded Ophelia's deserving.

Seeking a cause for Hamlet's desiring the death of Ophelia may send us far afield: it is a rich theme, "as fluent as the sea". It is most likely there are many precedents for Hamlet's dilemma, and it has been noticed Shakespeare could have known of such a love relationship from the most popular and worthy sources; it has also been noticed the events and sentiments that Hamlet as a youth experienced were recast in Shakespeare's great tragedy of mature love, Antony and Cleopatra.[9] In the beginning however, it was said that I would state the "what" of Hamlet's special form of speech,

rather than the 'why'. Without going into details of causation, we may notwithstanding show what Hamlet intends in the 'To be or not to be' speech.

The purpose of the speech is consonant with Hamlet's general purpose in the play, to right wrongs done to himself and to his father. But his peculiar means are the material cause of the whole play, because they occasion the delay of Hamlet's revenge. The presence of Laertes and Fortinbras, who are effective foils to Hamlet's character (cf.V.ii.76-77), illuminates the significance of Hamlet's choice of means of revenge. Both Laertes and Fortinbras, like Hamlet, are young men, who desire to be "revenged most throughly" (IV.v.35-36) for their fathers, and at the same time hope to promote themselves. But the first, Laertes, incites a coup d'état at Elsinore to arrive at his aim, and eventually fails when he succumbs to the lure of more subtle means for achieving revenge. The second, Fortinbras, less subtle and more successful, attains the throne and so triumphs finally over the house of Denmark. Hamlet, at the antipodes to Fortinbras, redoubles the subtlety and failure of Laertes, but it is for the best reasons.

From what we know of these characters, Hamlet was much more alive to the evils of the prison--world and ward--Denmark. Not much of Hamlet's dialogue is not a reflection on the rank

corruption of man. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" and Hamlet forever senses "rank corruption, mining all within, infects unseen" (III.iv.148-49). Hamlet's foils do not seem to share this deep moral impression, nor has it been instilled in them by the ghost of their father, bad dreams, and every experience. Hamlet is not a procrastinator by nature, but he probably knows that the scars he seeks to heal, could not be healed by a change of administration at Elsinore. Hamlet for this reason does not centre his hatred on Claudius, but dissipates it abroad. Insomuch that the ghost of this revenge tragedy must "whet his almost blunted purpose" (III.iv.111), when it is seen Hamlet attempts to alter the cause rather than eliminate the effect of his mother's adultery, by teaching her virtue.

Hamlet is continually at pains to reform matters. He attacks not the body but the mind of his subjects. He does no violence to the Queen's person, as she feared, but violence to her conscience. He "turns her eyes into her very soul" (III.iv.89), where she may "see such black and painted spots,/ As will not leave their tinct" (90-91). And her conscience, as we have seen, is indeed troubled. Similarly in regard to the King, Hamlet knows,

> the play's the thing
> Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.
> (II.ii.633-34)

and does violence to his conscience in sundry different ways. And his conscience, as we have seen, is troubled. Hamlet does the same with Polonius; so too with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, so too with Ophelia.

It is consistent with the present reading that the "To be or not to be" speech should conform to Hamlet's violent means of amending moral evils. Every time he proves himself, as in his own phrase, "cruel only to be kind" (III.iv.177), Hamlet, as with his mother, "wrings Ophelia's heart" though it is made of barely penetrable stuff. Because of Hamlet's own participation in Ophelia's guilt, as has been suggested, the "correction" enforced in the "To be or not to be" speech is partly visited upon himself and is therefore the more rending and cruel. But Ophelia is its principle object, and this is probably so because Hamlet believes her willingness provoked the sin that her righteous chastity might have prevented. The whole tragedy, of course, is that Hamlet drew too much blood to cure Ophelia, having not realized perhaps that her despair was all it proved to be.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

By reading Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech as an overheard monologue rather than as a conventional soliloquy, I have partly defined Hamlet's role in the madness and death of Ophelia. In so doing, I have presupposed that Hamlet is an integral work of art which provides, within its own terms, the answers to questions that it is possible to raise concerning the relations of characters and events.[1]

Hamlet, unlike a well-made play like Othello, rarely appears on the stage uncut.[2] This fact does not argue an absence of consistency in Hamlet, but the presence of a dramatic consistency or integrity of a different kind. The distinction perhaps lies in the length of the play, which is occasioned by a wide diversity of action carried over a long space of time. The action of the play begins at Christmas (I.i.159) and ends, at the earliest, in the beginning of spring (IV.vii.167-85). The progress of the tragedy is not swift, but natural, in a likeness rather to the rotting of a fruit than to its abrupt plucking from the tree. Hamlet's means of revenge is the partial cause for this gradual development; though fine nuances obscure any tidy relation between cause and effect, consistency is present in Hamlet neverthe-

less. The truth that Hamlet observes of his world is that of the development of his tragedy of revenge and corruption:

> This is th' imposthume of much wealth and peace,
> That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
> Why the man dies. (IV.iv.27-29)

The imposthume of the tragedy has a point at which it bursts: this is the "To be or not to be" speech and the Nunnery-scene.

The "To be or not to be" monologue and its scene are the point of the drama because it is the last time Ophelia will appear sane; it ends the king's doubts as to Hamlet's madness; it begins the rapid concourse of events that follow the hero through the slaying of Polonius, his banishment to England, his return thence, the death of Ophelia, the revenge of Laertes, and the fatal duel that reconciles more characters in death than any Shakespearean tragedy.[3] The dramatic importance of the monologue cannot be overestimated. The retrospective eye that is only granted to the reader, may see that the downfall of Ophelia, decisively begun in the Nunnery-scene by the removal of her mask of honesty, was distant harbinger to the downfall of all the major characters in the play. It is true to the play that these downfalls are also effected by the final breaking of inward guilt.

The present dramatic interpretation of Hamlet's monologue has proved consonant with all the developments after the Nunnery-scene. It has done so without the need of arguments to

show that Hamlet was insincere in his cruelty to Ophelia, without neglecting the songs or the opinion of the characters respecting the final virginity of Ophelia: in its purpose of establishing the reading of the speech, it has shed light on the scene and the whole Hamlet-Ophelia relationship. The limited conclusion of this thesis is that what has unquestioningly been accepted as a soliloquy is best understood as a monologue.

I have set out to demonstrate the validity of a possible reading of Hamlet's speech. The reading, in my opinion, has proved consistent with the facts of the play that I have considered. Further substantiation of my conclusion must rest, of course, with an extensive, line-by-line examination of the play in light of my conclusion.

This conclusion has resolved the problems of dramatic relevance for the speech. But with respect to disclosing its bearing on the state of mind of the speaker of the monologue, or that of she who hears it, it has been a rough-hewing of a great block of problems. The motives that cause one to desire his own death, may or may not be widely different. In Hamlet we know that Hamlet had motives to desire his own and another's death; when he learns of the death by suicide it is hard to tell what guilt he takes upon himself; when Ophelia dies, it is a difficult question how Hamlet suffers. It is an insoluble question without a dramatic reading of Hamlet's monologue.

NOTES

Preface

[1]John Dover Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet (Cambridge, 1935), p.101, .. surely speaks for most critics when he expresses this view.

[2]cf. Kenneth Kirkwood, Ophelia of Elsinore (Ottawa: Le Droit, 1958), pp.62 ff.; also, A.C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy (1904; rpt. New York: Fawcett, 1966), pp.160-65.

[3]Irving T. Richards, "The Meaning of the Soliloquy", PMLA, XLVIII (September, 1933), pp.741-766, represents the range of discussion on this point before 1933. He feels that the most common interpretation of the speech "has proved unaccountably and illogically popular" (p.745); John Middleton Murry, Things to Come (London: MacMillan, 1928), p.230 expressed the view which has been adopted sporadically over the past two centuries (Richards, p.745).

[4]The many who believe that the speech is best interpreted as a development of Hamlet's fatal habit of 'thinking too precisely on the event ' and not as a logical part of the scene are led by Coleridge: Hamlet 'vacillates from sensibility and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve'. (D. Nichol-Smith ed., Shakespeare Criticism: a Selection (New York, 1916), p.256). Similar views have been held by Goethe, Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship (1795-96), translated by T. Carlyle (London: Chapman & Hall Ltd., 1871; rpt. London: Collier, 1917), Vol. I, pp.281-82; A.C. Bradley, Op. cit. 1916, pp.131-32; A.J.A. Waldcock, Hamlet: a Study in Critical Method (Cambridge, 1931), pp.85-86; John Dover Wilson, Op. cit., pp.127-28; and the following, whose views are represented in Claude C.H. Williamson, Readings on the Character of Hamlet (1661-1947), (London: Allen & Unwin , 1950): William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, James Russell Lowell, F.T. Vischer, C.C. Clarke, J.H. Hackett, Victor Hugo, A.W. Verity, Edward Dowden, and Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch.

Those who favour a more active than contemplative Hamlet include Stoll, Hamlet: An Historical and Comparative Study ("Research Publications of the University of Minnesota", Vol.III, No.5, September, 1919), pp.70-75; Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge", PMLA, LXX, (1955), pp.740-49. This second group of critics explain with difficulty Hamlet's meditative state of mind because he is generally impulsive. For analyses of these views see Richards, pp. 741 ff.; Grebanier, The Heart of Hamlet (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1960), pp.203 ff., and Alex Newell, "The Dramatic Context and Meaning of Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' Soliloquy", PMLA, LXXX, (1965), pp.38-50.

Chapter I

[1]This simplification of the great variety of opinions on the speech is always made in respect of the kind of speech the 'To be' lines represent.

[2]It is easier to point to those who except themselves from the great body of critics who believe the speech is a soliloquy than to list those who hold the view. The criticism of the latter may be surveyed in H.H. Furness, New Variorum Hamlet (1877; rpt. New York: Dover, 1963), Vol.I, pp.213-14. For other surveys see Chapter I, notes 3 and 4.

[3]Irving T. Richards, "The Meaning of Hamlet's Soliloquy", PMLA, XLVII, (1933), pp.741-66, and Alex Newell, "The Dramatic Context of Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' Soliloquy", PMLA, LXXX, (1965), pp.38-50, are the proponents of this view in recent times but cite many who supported this view. Bernard Grebanier, The Heart of Hamlet (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co.,1960), p.203, calls the speech "the most completely misunderstood of Shakespeare's soliloquies" and mentions with approval those who have inclined to this second interpretation (pp. 207-09).

[4]Having developed this view independently of all criticism, I discovered that Linwood E. Orange,"Hamlet's Mad Soliloquy", South Atlantic Quarterly, LXIV, (1966), pp.60-70 and W.G. Bebbington, "Soliloquy?", TLS, (March 20, 1970), p.289, hold similar views.

[5]Bebbington finds no exceptions to the rule, while Grebanier feels that anything but the popular view has always justly been taken lightly (p.208).

[6]J.M. Street, "A New Hamlet Query" in Poet-Lore, XX, (1909), pp.468-78; and C.M. Street, "To be or not to be"in Poet-Lore, XXV, (1914), pp.461-72, both doubt the speech is a soliloquy.

[7]cf. Chapter I, notes 3 and 4.

[8]E.E. Stoll, Hamlet: an Historical and Comparative Study ("Research Publications of the University of Minnesota", Vol. III, No.5, September, 1919), p.30, makes this point as if it were undubitable; L.L. Schuking, The Meaning of Hamlet, translated by Graham Rawson, (Oxford University Press, 1937), pp.115-16; Wilson Knight, The Wheel of Fire (New York: University Paperbacks, 1960) is typical in abandoning the hope of finding a dramatic context for the speech in the attempt to find a thematic context (p.304); Dover Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet (Cambridge University Press, 1935; rpt. 1967), p.128, finds the speech breathtakingly surprising and audacious in its actual place; Harry Levin, The Question of Hamlet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p.68, finds that the speech seems "detached" from its context; many actors, including Sir Lawrence Olivier in his well-known movie version, have thought it necessary to move the soliloquy to another location in the play (cf. Orange, Op.cit., p.61).

[9]The quoted text is that of Hardin Craig as revised by David Bevington, The Complete Works of Shakespeare (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1973). This text is used throughout.

[10]Wilson, p.127.

[11]Richards, p.748-n.

[12]Stoll is surprised if this is the case: "He meditates on killing himself--God save the mark--when hot on the tail of the man he is to kill!" (p.30). Richards (p.746-8) lists others who cannot admit that suicide is the main subject of Hamlet's thought. Kenneth Muir, "Hamlet", Studies in English Literature (London: Edward Arnold, 1963), pp.33-34, finds it debatable whether the subject is his own suicide.

[13]See Samuel Johnson in A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: Hamlet, H.H. Furness ed., (1877; rpt. New York: Dover Publications, 1970), p.205.

[14]Richards, p.747-n.

[15]Oliver Goldsmith,"On the Use of the Metaphors"(1765), in Claire Sacks, Hamlet: Enter Critic (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1960), p.68.

[16]Richards, p.758.

[17]Ibid. The image of such a Hamlet, according to Richards, was the creation of such imaginative critics as Coleridge and Goethe, pp.741, 758.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Joseph Hunter was among the first to propose this rather oft-encountered emendation. See New Variorum, p.206.

[20]For discussion of Shakespeare's probable reasons for changing the position of the soliloquy, see Stoll, op.cit., pp.30-36.

[21]See Newell, op.cit., p.39.

[22]Richards, p.741; Stoll, pp.20-25.

[23]An aside, which is delivered in the presence of stage listeners who are usually preoccupied and not attending to the speech, rarely exceeds a few lines. See David Bergeron, Shakespeare: A Study and Research Guide (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975, p.141; see also his definition of 'soliloquy' p. 142).

[24]William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of Richard III, I.i.14-31. The Complete Works, Craig-Bevington, eds., (Glenview: Scott, Foresman, and Co.,); all references to plays are from this text.

[25]Othello, I.iii.389-96.

[26]I Henry IV, I.ii.218-20. Hal addresses the audience.

[27]Love's Labour's Lost, I.ii.172-191.

[28]Love's Labour's Lost, IV.iii.1-21.

[29]King John, II.i.561-98.

[30]Romeo and Juliet, IV.iii.14-58; not all of Juliet's soliloquies are of this conventional type as she is overheard, in the famous balcony scene, by Romeo.

[31]I Henry IV, IV.ii.12-53.

[32]I Henry IV, I.ii.218-20.

[33]Henry V, IV.i.247-301.

[34]King Lear, I.ii.127-149.

[35]King Lear, II.iii.1-21.

[36]Macbeth, III.i.1-10.

[37]Measure for Measure, II.ii.167-187.

[38]Cymbeline, I.iv.1-9.

[39]Cymbeline, II.iv.1-35.

[40]Winter's Tale, I.ii.351-364.

[41]Winter's Tale, IV.iii.1-32.

[42]Twelfth Night, II.v.27-195; cf. Orange, p.68 for example and discussions of other overheard soliloquies.

[43]I Henry IV, II.ii.10-32.

[44]Orange, p.65.

[45]See James Street, "A New Hamlet Query", POET-LORE, XX, (1909), pp.468-478.

[46]David Bebbington, "Soliloquy?", TLS, March 28, 1970, p.289

[47]Ibid.

[48]Ibid.

[49]See Wilson, pp.101-08.

[50]When Hamlet asks Ophelia "Where is your father?" (III, i,133), he is probably being as irrelevant as when he asked Polonius "Have you a daughter?" (II,ii,182), knowing full well that he did and that she wasn't around.Cf. Helen Gardner, "Lawful Espials", MLS, 33, (1938), pp.349-55.

Chapter II

[1]John Dover Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet (Cambridge University Press, 1935), p.101.

[2]Says Bradley: "On this childlike nature and on Ophelia's inexperience everything depends", Shakespearean Tragedy (1904; rpt. New York: MacMillan, 1966), p.130, 134 n. Salvador de Madariaga, On Hamlet (1948; rpt. London: Frank Cass, 1964) believes that nothing can be understood of the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship if these characters are not supposed to be "barbarous and supersubtle" and hiding their sexual relations (pp.53-72). See also Dover Wilson, pp.101-108; F.B. Gilchrist, The True Story of Hamlet and Ophelia (1889;Boston: Little, Brown,196 who speaks of Ophelia in the typical, sentimental strain; Rebecca West, "The Nature of the Will" in The Court and the Castle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), pp.18-26, who believes that "There is no more bizarre aspect of the misreading of Hamlet's character than the assumption that his relations with Ophelia were innocent and that Ophelia was

a correct and timid virgin of exquisite sensibilities" (p.18); Leo Kirschbaum, "Hamlet and Ophelia", PQ, XXXV, (1956), pp. 376-394 who argues it is probably impossible to tell whether sexual relations took place; John Bligh, "The Women in the Hamlet Story", Dalhousie Review, LIII, (1973), pp.275-285; Schell, F.T., "Who Said That - Hamlet or Hamlet?", SQ, XXIV, (1973), pp.135-46.

[3]Bradley, pp.126-7, 134.

[4]Ibid, p. 127.

[5]See Madariaga, pp.31-33.

[6]Against the theory that Hamlet loved an innocent Ophelia Bradley raises nine seemingly unanswerable questions, pp.124-26.

[7]Ibid, p.123.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid, pp.123-124.

[10]Ibid, pp.124-26.

[11]Ibid, pp.126-27.

[12]Ibid, p.127.

[13]Ibid, p.126.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid, p.127.

[16]Madariaga, pp.34-35.

[17]For the sources see Geoffrey Bullough, Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare, Vol.7, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957-74); Sir Israel Gollancz, The Sources of Hamlet (London: H. Millford, 1926). For the audience, see

Alfred Harbage, Shakespeare's Audience (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940); John W. Draper, The Hamlet of Shakespeare's Audience (1939; rpt.New York: Octagon, 1970),pp.vii, 54-70

[18] See Madariaga, p.18.

[19] See Gollancz, pp.109-111. The characters in the parallel stories resemble one another in certain respects only. The courtier for example, is not to be identified as the girl's father.

[20] The ten points are paraphrased from Madariaga, p.50.

[21] The device was a bird trained to flutter about ominously when danger was near.

[22] See Grebanier, p.279.

[23] See Granville-Barker, pp.56-67; Madariaga, pp.41-42.

[24] Tieck, in Furness, Op.cit., p.286.

[25] Ibid.

[26] The worldliness of Polonius is stressed by Bradley,(p.129); Madariaga, pp.20-24; Granville-Barker , p.57.

[27] Dover Wilson, p.127.

[28] Eric Partridge, Shakespeare's Bawdy (London: Routhledge and Kegan Paul, 1947; rpt. (revised) 1968), defines the word as meaning "To deflower; to ruin" (p.222), and cites the instance in question.

[29] New Variorum, p.312

[30] These are facetious suggestions of Madariaga, p.39. Kirschbaum seconds the suggestion, pp.383-384.

[31] Partridge, p.106; Wilson subscribes to this reading, p. 105; against this use of the word, see M.A. Shaaber, "Polonius as Fishmonger", SQ, XXII, (1971), 179-81.

[32]In Act IV, V, 69 and Act IV, VI, 171-76.

[33]Dover Wilson, pp.101-102.

[34]Madariaga, p.43. Madariaga cites Bradley.

[35]Bradley will not allow that Ophelia's songs have any direct relevance, p.35; Goethe explains them in terms of her psychology, (Furness, p.274); Tieck believes the songs show that Ophelia "yielded all" to Hamlet (Furness, Vol.II, p.286).

[36]It comes to mind that both Gloucester and Lear could "see" better when the one was blind and the other not in his perfect mind.

[37]The penultimate line of this song in Qq and Ff read "did not go" which most critics, considering the song referred to Polonius, corrected as an obvious error.

[38]See Madariaga, pp.69-71.

[39]It is of no importance in terms of Ophelia's feelings, whether Hamlet's rejection is caused by this or Ophelia merely believes this is so.

[40]See Grebanier, pp.281-82.

[41]Bradley takes issue with those find it 'weak' in Ophelia to lose her reason (pp.131-33). His explanations, I find, like those of Goethe before him (Furness, Vol.II, p.273) are mostly sentimental and make little appeal to the facts.

[42]Furness, Vol.II, pp.272-274.

[43]J.H. Hackett quoted by Furness, Vol.II, p.251.

[44]Ibid.

[45] See Madariaga, pp.32-33.

[46]Madariaga; cf. Rebecca West, "The Nature of the Will" in The Court and the Castle, New York: Yale University Press, 1957, p.22.

[47]Prof. Dr. J.L.F. Flathe, in Furness, Vol.II, p.315.

[48]Dover Wilson, p.101.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Madariaga, p.40.

[51]I follow Partridge, p.154; Dover Wilson, p.134; vide Q.E.D. "Nunnery" Ib, quoting Fletcher's Mad Lover, p.42. ("There's an old nunnery at hand. What's that? A bawdy-house").

[52]The Royal Forester in Childe, F., The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, New York: Folklore, 1957.

[53]In the plays mentioned the scheming women manage to happily enforce their claims to marriage by proving their betrothed had enjoyed their bed.

[54]II Samuel 13.

[55]See Normand Council, When Honour's at the Stake. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967), p.92.

[56]The word 'maid' in Shakespeare is never applied to a lady. See Spevack, A Complete and Systematic Concordance, 6 vols. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1968-1970); for Shakespeare's distinction between the words, see also Madariaga, p.66.

[57]Richards, p.758.

NOTES

Chapter III

[1]The importance Hamlet sets by this oath is well appreciated by Dover Wilson, pp.78-87.

[2]A recent essay which notices Hamlet's ability to insinuate thoughts to influence his auditors is that of M.D. Fabier, "Hamlet, Sarcasm and Psychoanalysis", Psychoanalytic Review, LV, (1968), 79-90.

[3]See Partridge, p.106; Dover Wilson, p.105. Also Dover Wilson's edition of Hamlet (Cambridge, 1934), note II.ii.174.

[4]The Biblical story is that of Judges 2.

[5]For the difficulties critics have encountered in discovering the meaning of "pious chanson" see Furness, p.175.

[6]Wilson traces the leitmotif of harlotry, p.127.

[7]Sexual relations; see pp.18-55.

Chapter IV

[1]The "good" quarto and the First Folio have the speech in its present position.

[2]See p.11

[3]See p.15

[4]See p.7

[5]I assume that Hamlet's fear of God and belief in the unknown represent his usual state of mind.

[6] See Theobald, in Furness, Vol.I, p.213.

[7] See Coleridge, in Furness, Vol.I, p.214.

[8] It is generally thought Hamlet reflects the influence of Montaigne more than any of the plays. See J.M. Robertson, Montaigne and Shakespeare (1909; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1969), p.33.

[9] Montaigne, Essays in Great Books of the Western World (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), p.167.

[10] Ibid.

[11] See Robertson, p.33; G. Taylor, Shakespeare's Debt to Montaigne (New York:, 1969).

[12] Op.Cit. Taylor; also, Taylor's "Montaigne - Shakespeare and the Deadly Parallel", PQ, 22, (1943).

[13] Julius Caesar, I.ii.61.

[14] Julius Caesar, I.iii.89 ff.

[15] Richard III, V.iii.310-11.

[16] Richard III, V.iii.177 ff.

[17] See M.D. Fabier, "Hamlet, Sarcasm and Psychoanalysis", Psychoanalytic Review, LV, (1968), p.27.

[18] See III.i.151 ff.

[19] See R.A. Foakes, "The Art of Cruelty: Hamlet and Vindice", Shakespeare Survey, 26, (1973), p.27.

[20] See Spevack"devoutly". Shakespeare uses this word only to refer to devotion.

[21] See p.46

[22]I.v.165-167, commenting on the reality of the ghost.

[23]II.ii.214 ff.

[24]V.ii.80 ff. My argument is here indebted to Orange,Op.Cit.

[25]The criterion is usually immediately after the "I answer that" of the response.

[26]If the distinction could reasonably be denied the argument would fail.

[27]In Furness, Vol.I, p.205.

[28]See Chapter II

[29]See Partridge. "seduced" is perhaps the wrong word although some critics (Boerne in Furness, Vol.II, p.290) believe this is what happened.

[30]See "nymph" in Partridge.

[31]See Johnson, in Furness, Vol.I, p.212; Madariaga, p.63; B. Joseph, Conscience and the King (London: Chatto & Windus, 1953), p.114.

[32]Ibid.

[33]See the suggestions of Theobald, Steevens and Hunter in Furness, Vol.I, pp.212-13.

[34]Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, sv. "bodkin"; see also O.E.D., sv. "bodkin", 2 & 3.

[35]See Johnson in Furness on this line.

Chapter V

[1]This fact was represented by Shakespeare in at least two other instances. See Measure for Measure and All's Well That Ends Well, plays in which the woman makes her marriage claim successfully.

[2]Montaigne, "On a Custom of the Isle of Cea" in Essays, Great Books of the Western World(Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), p.169.

[3]Johnson, in Furness, Vol.I., p.283.

[4]Madariaga emphasizes the cruel in Hamlet's character throughout his work. Cf. Schlegel, in Furness, Vol.II, p.279.

[5]See the cumulative evidence for drawing Hamlet's character, as for ascertaining his relations with Ophelia, must be regarded in its total effect.

[6]i.e. men have ends which seem to them to be good.

[7]Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov ,translated by Garnett in Great Books of the Western World (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), p.2. R.A. Foakes "The Art of Cruelty: Hamlet and Vindice", Shakespeare Survey, 26, (1973), p.22, notes the usefulness of applying Dostoyevskian concepts of cruelty to Hamlet.

[8]Antony and Cleopatra, I.ii.125 ff.

[9]See Bradley (pp.64-65) on the similarities and differences in the two plays in this respect.

Chapter VI

[1]This assumption can no longer be taken for granted. Leo Kirschbaum, "Hamlet and Ophelia", PQ, XXXV, (1956), p.376, lists Alfred Harbage, William Farnham, and J.I.M. Stewart as representing the critical trend away from the assumption.

[2]The play is by far the longest in the canon. With over 3900 lines it is nearly twice the length of the Comedy of Errors or Macbeth.

[3]Four characters die in this scene.

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