

“But a Walking Shadow” — A Study of Role Playing in *Hamlet* —

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1

Life's but a walking shadow, a player
That struts and frets his hour upon the
stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (V.v.24-28)

There are few lines in Shakespear's works that are better-known than these in *Macbeth*. The world as a stage and men as actors are recurring metaphors in Shakespear's plays. Another notable example is in *As You Like It* where Jaques compares the world to a stage, “and all the men and women merely players.” Jaques goes on to describe the “many parts” which a man plays, as an infant, a school-boy, a lover, a soldier, justice, and the old man in his second infancy who is in the end “sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything” (II. vii. 139-166). The ages are distinguished by their appearance and bearing, and there is further stress on the insignificance and unreality of life as signified in “merely players.” *Macbeth*'s conception of life is colored by the role he assumed when he constructed his future on an illusion which proves in the end to mean nothing. The murder he committed in order to become king was a futile act.

Richard II comes to a similar recognition when he realizes that

within the hollow crown

That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court, and there the
antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his
pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear'd, and kill with
looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brans impregnable; and humour'd
thus
Comes at the last with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and --
farewell king!

(Richard II, III. iii. 160-170)

The king, with all his royal accoutrement, his power, and his glory is ruled by death which can capriciously destroy with “a little pin.” Being king is itself a kind of illusion as the king, caught up in his own magnificence and power, is likely to forget the final reality behind the appearance of everything which the crown represents.

Several ideas emerge from these lines from three separate plays which bear directly on *Hamlet*. One, that man, whether commoner or king, plays a designated role controlled by the cycle of life itself. Two, that man often believes in his role to the extent that he believes that it is reality. Consequently, Antonio in the *Tempest*:

did believe

He was indeed the Duke. Out of th'
substitution
And executing the outward face of roy-
alty,
.....
To have no screen between this part he
play'd
And him he play'd it for, he needs will be
Absolutely Milan. (I. ii. 102-108)

Antonio made the role he played reality by banishing Prospero, but Prospero, the rightful ruler, will have a bloodless victory in the end. Third, the final reality beneath all roles is the "antic" death which controls the destiny of all men.

Further commentary on role playing arises from the plays themselves. A role itself is an imposed limitation. A man is assigned a particular role, and he must play that part. He must be naturally cast for the role which he plays. If he is a king, he should be a divinely sanctioned king and not a usurper like Macbeth, or his role will have no meaning. He should not abandon his role to play a bigger part unless he is directed to do so, and he is under an illusion if he thinks that he can direct a drama in which he merely plays a role.

The tragic hero and the villain are most likely to assume the position of director as they wish to alter, in some manner, the "dramas" in which they are cast. Consequently, Lear wishes to alter his role as king; Macbeth changes his role to that of king, and Othello assumes the role of judge when he administers "justice" by murdering Desdemona. All are destroyed because they are not aware of their limitations. Among the villains, Claudius, Macbeth, Edmund, and Iago are guilty of the same types of offenses. The villain usually attempts to direct other

people for their own ends. Iago directs Othello; Goneril and Regan direct Lear. Claudius and Macbeth murder in order to assume roles which they are not directed to play.

Hamlet explores the actions possible for a man whose role has been taken from him and who must find and fill a different position from the one he was trained to fill. Hamlet is, when the play opens, a prince without a place, nor is there a status clearly designated for him. He receives directions from Claudius and from his father's Ghost, but he cannot accept directions from Claudius because he recognizes Claudius' unsuitability to guide him. On the other hand, he has difficulty in becoming the avenger his father designate for him because he is not suited for such a role. In attempting to carry out his father's wishes, Hamlet becomes his own director and his own actor, improvising parts as the need arises. Hamlet acts the role of a madman and fool, and therefore, he becomes an "unnatural" actor, speaking "unnatural" language, acting in an "unnatural" manner, and even wearing costumes which are not suitable to his normal occupation. Hamlet's dramas have varied outcomes, but the endings are all unhappy; none of them aid him in carrying out his father's revenge. Finally, Hamlet learns, like Macbeth, that created roles signify nothing, and that if one thinks that he is directing events, he is living under an illusion.

Role playing becomes reality for Denmark because the king who is at the center of society is an actor. Only Hamlet knows this, and therefore he is isolated from a court and society which believe that they "live and feed" on Claudius. Because the king is a Player King, murdering his brother to gain the throne, all of Denmark is affected. However, only Hamlet sees the manifesta-

tions of disorder and disease. The disease-ridden Denmark becomes for Hamlet the microcosm of a general corruption in which the whole world is flawed and Denmark a part of the whole. It is a world in which men become "fools of nature," "no more than a beast, crawling between heaven and earth," who is finally reduced to dust "stopping a bunghole." The earth itself is an "unweeded garden" inhabited by "maggots," "kites," "worms," and "things rank and gross in nature." Everything at the bottom of the chain of being, whether passion, animals, or weeds, becomes the reality. It is a world which is topsy-turvy, where existence becomes a phantasma of evil, ugliness, rottenness, and disease. The disorder affects Hamlet's mind most, not only because he alone sees it in all its ramifications, because he is injured most, but because he is destined to "set it right." This knowledge and the duty of vengeance imposed on him, cuts him off from everyone in Denmark.

Hamlet is limited not only because he is cut off from society, but he is limited by his view of society. Because of what Hamlet becomes during the course of the play, more and more is he restricted by the kinds of actions in which he can engage. In order to scourge Denmark of its unreal king, he must break through the limitations which are imposed upon him and which he has imposed upon himself.

2

Among the protagonists of the major tragedies, Hamlet is unique in that he is a young man without defined position; he has been trained to occupy a role which is taken from him. When *Othello*, *Lear* and *Macbeth* begin, the chief protagonists are occupying their places in the world. Macbeth climbs above his place thus precipitating his tragedy,

and Othello and Lear lose their places. Like Malcolm, Hamlet is thrust aside, but unlike Malcolm who avoids the ensuing conflict and evil by leaving Scotland, Hamlet remains in Denmark and becomes involved in the corruption. Malcolm returns to Scotland to purge it of the usurper, Macbeth, and to take his rightful place. When Hamlet returns from his imposed journey to England he is already so contaminated by the corruption in Denmark that he too is destroyed in the purgation.

Hamlet's education, like Prince Hal's, shows promise of developing a well-rounded young ruler. Ophelia's speech is not only a summary of the qualities of Renaissance prince, "the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword," Hamlet is "the expectancy and rose of the fair state" (III. i. 161). Fortinbras recognizes this promise of fulfilment when he states at the end of the play that Hamlet

was likely, had been put on,
To have prov'd most royally.

(V. ii. 408-409)

There is an indication that Hamlet expected to succeed his father as King when he admits to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that Claudius has "popp'd in between th' election and my hopes" (V. ii. 65). Hamlet is a student prince training to become the ideal king embodying the virtues of the "soldier" and the "scholar" upon whose head the "sanity and health of the whole state" will depend. Hamlet, however, is denied the kingship and the education which would complete his preparation: he must not go "back to school in Wittenberg" as it is "most retrograde" to Claudius' desire. Hamlet must find another role, one for which he has not been trained.

Hamlet is directed to fill two diametrical offices by Claudius and by his father's ghost. He dismisses the one offered by Claudius, but the problem of carrying out the duty which his father expects him to perform becomes crucial in the play. Claudius offers Hamlet a position as his "chiefest courtier, cousin, and son," but it is a part which Hamlet cannot play. Hamlet has received no education or training for the task he is assigned by his father's Ghost. The ghost's time is short, and he does not instruct Hamlet how to be an avenger. He can direct him only to revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (I. v. 25), and forbid him to harm his mother. The young prince who was being trained to become head of the state must now train himself to murder the new king. The Ghost is not primarily interested in Hamlet's figure in society; he bids Hamlet to

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest.
(I. vi. 82-83)

King Hamlet views his murder as primarily a crime in the family rather than the state, and the son is to carry out the family vengeance. To King Hamlet, it is a simple act of revenge, not a state affair, but the son recognizes the implications of the task and the inadequacy of a courtier and scholar to carry it out. At the end of the scene, he shows recognition of both factors:

The time is out of joint; -- O! cursed
spite.
That ever I was born to set it right.
(I. i. 189-190)

The son is more perceptive than his father and views his responsibility as an intolerable burden.

Hamlet accepts his father's role, but he decides to act another part. Taking a cue on how to play his role from Claudius in his discovery that "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain." Hamlet creates his role; he, like Claudius, is to become what he is not. If one can smile and be a villain, according to Hamlet's logic, one may be a wise man under the guise of a fool. The fool can step outside of society and his gibes range over all the poses which society assumes. Therefore, he will "put an antic disposition on." Because of his decision to act a part which Hamlet thinks will lead him into the role of avenger he isolates himself. The appearance of the Ghost and the story he tells must remain a secret. He bids his friends to "Never make known what you have seen tonight" (I. i. 144). The prince who was at the center of society, "the observ'd of all observers," and "the glass of fashion and the mould of form" must, as a result of his decision to become a fool, hover on the periphery of society while he finds a place.

Like Thersites, Hamlet becomes a railer on the stances those in society take. "God has given you one face, and you make yourself another" (III. i. 149). Hamlet makes observations on other aspects of artificiality, "To be honest, as this world goes is to be one man pick'd out of two thousand" (II. ii. 178), and he sees society as accepting indiscriminately the *mask* of royalty and authority.

Those that would make mows at him
(Claudius) while my father lived,
give twenty, forty, an hundred
ducats apiece for his picture in little.
(II. ii. 380-382)

Society judges a man not on his intrinsic worth but on the robes he wears; Hamlet sees the irony in that the fickle multitude has

transferred its adulation to a king who is a villain and a murderer.

Hamlet, like Thersites, criticizes the whole structure of society. Thersites does not even spare the commanders and heroes of the Greek forces, as evident in "Agamemnon is a fool to command Achilles; Achilles is a fool to be commanded of Agamemnon" (*Troilus and Cressida*, II. iii .67-68). Hamlet criticizes and belittles the important figures in the court at Denmark. He pokes fun at the King's chief minister, Polonius:

Hark you, Guildenstern, and you too at
each ear hearer: that great baby you
see there is not yet out of his swath-
ing clouts. (II. ii. 399-401)

Elsewhere he calls Polonius "a foolish, prating knave." The King's tools, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are sponges "that soak up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities," and Osric is a "water-fly." The King's courtiers are representatives of the "drossy age," young men who have "only got the tune of time and outward habit of encounter; a kind of yeasty collection." Claudius himself does not escape his gibes, as Hamlet says of him: "the King is a thing." When Guildenstern informs Hamlet that the king is "marvellous distemper'd" the rejoinder is sarcastic: "With drink, sir?" Thersites is bolder in his remarks, but he is accepted and treated as a fool of the malcontent disposition. Hamlet, however, is not accepted as a natural fool, and he couches his doubting as to whether or not they have actually been insulted. The Court cannot be sure whether his madness is real or feigned, and it becomes leagued against him in an attempt to discover the source of his "distemper."

If Hamlet had cast off his "nighted colour" and assumed the role Claudius designat-

ed for him, that of Claudius' "cousin and son," Claudius would have been satisfied and Denmark would have been at ease. However, once Hamlet assumes his antic disposition, the King and his followers attempt to determine the cause of his "transformation." Like a squad of detectives vying for promotion, the Court at Denmark attempts to solve the mystery for Claudius. As a result the court becomes a stage where, Hamlet, the chief actor, stands outside the circle, wearing his antic mask and attempting to penetrate society's roles, while the Court, in turn, "bait" him and use their masks of friendship and love to interpret his role.

Claudius is the producer and the chief director; he defines the scene for all the acting stems ultimately from his assumption of a role. Claudius chooses for his cast those who are closest to Hamlet and for whom Hamlet would be most likely to unmask. They are Claudius' scenes and Claudius' actors, but Hamlet steals the scenes and upstage the actors each time. Claudius' first choices are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who are admirably suited for their roles in that they are Hamlet's childhood friends, likely to "glean" Hamlet's secret. They are successful only in determining that Hamlet "with a crafty madness keeps aloof." Hamlet uses their friendship to discover their purpose in coming to Denmark ("There is a kind of confession in your looks which your modesties have not craft enough to colour.") and recognizes them as members of Claudius' "company."

Polonius, who does not hesitate to send Reynaldo to spy on his son, needs no prompting to "board" Hamlet, holding it his duty to find "the very cause of Hamlet's lunacy." Hamlet, however, views Polonius as a "rash, intruding fool," and Polonius is successful only in detecting "method" in the Prince's

madness. To prove to Claudius that Hamlet's thwarted love for Ophelia is the cause of his derangement, Polonius casts his own daughter with props and directions for the enactment of a scene. He commands Ophelia to

Read on this book,
That show of such exercise can colour
Your loneliness. (III. i. 44-46)

Hamlet recognizes the role in which Ophelia is cast, and his comments bear this out: "Where's your father?" and later, "I have heard of your painting too, well enough" (III. i. 148). Ophelia is used by both sides as she is planted for decoy by Polonius, and Hamlet, in turn, uses her to show the most disturbing side of his antic disposition. The scene is undoubtedly Hamlet's as Ophelia is thoroughly convinced of his madness. The King learns only that Hamlet is not mad for love and what Polonius had learned earlier, that there is method in his madness:

Love! his affections do not that way tend;
Nor what he spoke, though it lack'd form
a little,
Was not like madness. (III. i. 170-172)

It is Ophelia who suffers most from the scene in which she is hardly more than a puppet. Ophelia's difficulty, which seems to be a family trait, is that she can not penetrate beneath roles. She accepts what she sees and hears and acts accordingly. Consequently, Hamlet's acting, which she accepts as reality, only frightens her; she cannot comprehend, nor does she seem to wonder about its meaning. Her reaction here should be compared to her report to Polonius on Hamlet's behaviour when he confronted her in her chamber. Of that episode, her only comment, other than

the report of Hamlet's behaviour, is that she was so "affrighted." It is Polonius who "interprets" the scene.

When Hamlet's boyhood friends and the girl he loves fail to unmask him, Claudius and Polonius resort to the woman who is closest to Hamlet, his mother. Polonius' directions to Gertrude on how to perform her role are explicit:

Look you lay home to him,
Tell him his pranks have been too broad
to bear with,
And that your Grace hath screen'd and
stood between
Much heat and him. I'll silence me e'en
here.
Pray you be round with him. (III. iv. 1-5)

But Hamlet is also preparing for the scene, and he gives himself directions on how to play his role:

Let me be cruel, nor unnatural.
I will speak daggers to her, but use none.
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites;
How in my words soever she be shent
To give them seals never, my soul, con-
sent! (III. ii. 413-417)

Polonius's directions come to naught. Gertrude does not have an opportunity to follow hers; Polonius breaks his "silence" with his "What, ho! help," and he is killed as a consequence. Hamlet does not use daggers, but he follows his directions so closely in being "cruel" that the Ghost visits him. Hamlet succeeds in making his mother see into her soul, but his mother thinks that he is mad, and he regrets killing Polonius. Hamlet has seen through the roles of each person set to spy on him, and each one suffers as a consequence. He is cruel to those who would

“play upon” him, pointing out to them that they are playing parts.

Hamlet is the only character in the play who has some recognition of the difference between appearance and reality. The other characters govern their behaviour on what is superficial or obvious. Hamlet knows that there is something beyond the surface; there is meaning somewhere: “There is something in this more than natural if philosophy could find it out.” (II. ii. 384-385) and “There are more things in heaven and earth.../Than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (I. vi. 166-167). Hamlet is more successful at discerning the reality beneath the masks which the Court wears than they are at finding out why he puts on an antic disposition. Further, Hamlet attempts to point out to actors themselves the roles they are playing. His attempts to unmask others is frustrated by the fact that the masks have become the reality for Denmark. Therefore, Hamlet in attempting to convince the Court that his view of reality should be their view, merely disturbs the state, the King, and the Queen, and isolates himself further from society.

Hamlet employs several devices to bring the disease in Denmark into the open. He questions: “Are you honest?” “Have you eyes?” “O shame! where is thy blush?” He also uses a mirror, a sponge analogy, but primarily, he dwells upon roles. Hamlet tries hardest to get his mother to see the difference between reality and appearance, and he uses several methods to do so. First, he attempts to persuade his mother to really see:

Come, come, and sit you down. You
shall not budge.

You do not till I set you up a glass
Where you may see the inmost part of
you. (III. iv. 18- 20)

In addition to pointing to her inner self, Hamlet bids the Queen to see the surface, the difference even between the exteriors of King Hamlet and King Claudius (53-58) but also to see below the surface of her marriage to Claudius to the “rank corruption,” “mining all within” which “infects unseen.” Hamlet is successful in his attempt as the queen admits to him that

Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grained
spots

As will not leave their tinct.

(III. iv. 89-91)

While Hamlet is successful to a degree in pointing to the reality beneath the surface to his mother, he has less success with other members of the Court.

During his antic disposition Hamlet attempts to reveal to Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern the roles they are playing. They listen to him and question him further, but there is no evidence that they believe him. When Claudius asks about the whereabouts of Polonius' body, Hamlet answers:

Your fat king and your lean beggar is but
variable service, two dishes, but to
one table; that's the end,

(IV. iii. 24-26)

and explains to Claudius that the purpose of his riddle is to “show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar” (IV. iii. 32-33). Pointing to Polonius' role-playing, Hamlet says to him “would you were so honest a man” as a fishmonger (II. ii. 176). The reality beneath Polonius' pose is described when Hamlet explains the “satirical

matter" which he is reading to be

that old men have gray beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber or plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with weak hams. (II. ii. 199-202)

Not sparing anyone, Hamlet points out to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they are merely sponges to be used by the king: "When he needs what you have glean'd, it is but squeezing you, and, sponge, you shall be dry again" (IV. iii. 21-23). Neither Claudius nor the members of his Court fully comprehend what Hamlet is pointing out to them. The distinction between appearance and reality is left for Hamlet to make: Denmark is quite content to accept appearances as reality.

Neither friendship nor love can survive in a society where everyone is spying or counterspying while, simultaneously, attempting to maintain his own role in society. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sacrifice their friendship to Hamlet for the roles they play for the king. Beneath the facades of love and friendship Hamlet sees only corruption -- corruption of love, of friendship and of order. Such a view alienates him from society that sees and believes only the civilized surface of Claudius and his Court.

As Hamlet sees the ugly reality beneath each person's mask so does he see the manifestations of corruption and disintegration in Denmark itself. The King who is at the centre of the state is in reality a murderer; his Queen has violated customs and morality in her hasty marriage to her husband's brother. Hamlet sees further corruption in the revival of drinking which is "a custom/More honour'd in the breach than the observance" (I. iv. 16). Hamlet's role becomes limited by his view of reality. He can only rail at

society. He can neither break through his own role nor can he persuade the other "actors" to break through their roles. They are imprisoned by what they believe, and because their beliefs and view of life differ from his, Hamlet is totally isolated. He can neither get out of Denmark, nor can he get out of his role; therefore, he pronounces Denmark a prison. By extension, the world, for Hamlet, becomes a prison.

3

Role-playing not only affects the very fabric of society in Denmark, it affects family relationships as well. Hamlet, to a large extent, concerns the relationship between fathers and sons. In the first act of the play, three parallel relationships between father and son are established, and each one is affected to some degree by the poison which Claudius poured into his brother's ear. Fortinbras assumes a role based on his belief that it is his duty to restore lands his father lost, and, according to Claudius' account:

Holding a weak supposal of our worth,
Or thinking by our late dear brother's
death
Our state to be disjoint and out of frame,
Collegued with the dream of his advantage,
He hath not fail'd to pester us with
message. (I. ii. 18-22)

Fortinbras believes that the time is ripe to regain the lands. Leartes is instructed on the role he should play in order to get ahead in the world. Hamlet is designated roles by King Hamlet's Ghost and by Claudius; the role offered by King Hamlet would destroy the appearance of Claudius ruling as a natural king, and the role offered by Claudius would sustain and give support to Claudius'

role.

The most comprehensive instructions on role-playing is given by Polonius to Laertes. Laertes is told when to act and when to abstain from acting:

Give the thoughts no tongue,
Nor any unproportion'd thought his act,
(I. iii. 59-60)

and "Give every man thine ear but few thy voice." Further, he is warned that since "apparel oft proclaims the man" he should be careful about the appearance he makes:

Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
But not express'd in fancy; rich, not
gaudy, (I. iii. 70-71)

If Laertes is dressed well, he has an excellent opportunity to meet the right people, those of the "best rank and station," Polonius's only concern with the inner man is dismissed in three lines, and this precept is one which relates ultimately to reputation. If Laertes is true to himself, then he can "not then be false to any man." It is Polonius' concern for Laertes' reputation which prompts him to send Reynaldo to spy on him. There is no evidence that Laertes governs his behavior by Polonius' "precepts." By contrast, Ophelia acts according to her father's instructions, thus precipitating her own destructions.

Hamlet too is given instructions as to his role, but they come from "parents" who, by their nature, bear an ambiguous and puzzling relationship to him. Claudius asserts himself as Hamlet's father:

And with no less nobility of love
Than that which dearest father bears his
son

Do I impart towards you. (I. ii. 110-112)

Hamlet pointedly ignores Claudius, viewing him merely as "A little more than kin, and less than kind," and "no more like my father/ Than to Hercules" (152-153). The relationship is complicated and confusing as Claudius is Hamlet's "uncle-father" and his mother is his "aunt-mother." In Hamlet's view both are "unnatural" in that they are joined in an "incestuous" union which occurred when his father was "but two months dead!" Claudius wishes to play a role as Hamlet's father and keep the appearance of the family as smooth as his role of Denmark, but Hamlet refuses to cooperate.

The appearance of King Hamlet's ghost to assert his parental relationship plunges Hamlet into doubt and dismay. The specter of his father elicits from Hamlet questions as to reality and appearance, purpose and intent:

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin
damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blast
from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
That I will speak to thee. (I. iv. 40-44)

If the ghost is his father, Hamlet is confused as to the purpose of his visit:

What may this mean,
That thou, dead corse, again in complete
steel
Revist'st thus the glimpses of the moon
.....
Say, why is this? wherefore? (I. iv. 51-57)

Once the ghost speaks, Hamlet responds; his father finds him "apt" in that Hamlet volunteers to "sweep" to his "revenge." King Hamlet does not give his son specific instruc-

tions on how to play the role of revenger, but warns him:

But howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul
contrive
Against thy mother aught. (I. v. 84-86)

Hamlet, however, does not follow his father's instructions. His mind is twisted when he attempts to manage dual personalities, and he is deliberately cruel to his mother. Hamlet is caught up in the moment in the horrible drama which his father unfolds, but later Hamlet comes to doubt even the authenticity of the ghost:

The spirit that 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. (II. ii. 627-632)

If everyone assumes a role, why may not the ghost itself be the devil assuming the "pleasing shape" of King Hamlet?

It is evident that a father cannot, without danger, define or designate a role for his son. Even a father cannot be a "director." It is best for each individual to be in a position to act when he is directed to act. Consequently, Hamlet, with "Heaven's ordinant" dispatches Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and saves his own life. Hamlet finally follows his father's instructions, but it is not deliberate; he merely takes advantage of chance. Neither directing nor deliberate role playing is desirable.

Hamlet's relationship with his mother stands out in a play where there are sons and

fathers but only one mother. As Hamlet questions Claudius' role and the Ghost's role, he questions his mother's role. However, Hamlet is primarily concerned with what his mother appeared to be as his father's Queen. What to him seemed a genuine affection on his mother's part is now questioned:

Why, she would hang on him,
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on. (I. ii. 143-144)

How could his mother's love for his father have been genuine if

Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing of her galled eyes,
She married. (I. ii. 154-156)

What disturbs Hamlet most is that his mother does not seem to be aware of the distinction between reality and appearance - she cannot see the vast difference, in Hamlet's eyes, between King Hamlet and Claudius. Such a union, to Hamlet, ("You cannot call it love") could only result if "reason panders will." This is evident in his comparison of his father ("this fair mountain") to Claudius as a "moor." Hamlet views his mother's marriage as lust:

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, makes marriage-
vows
As false as dicers' oaths. (III. iv. 40-45)

The role Hamlet would have his mother play would be to "Assume a virtue, if you have it

not," by ceasing to go to Claudius' bed.

By contrast when Hamlet confronts Ophelia in the "nunnery scene" he implies that her virtue is a pose:

For the power of beauty will sooner transform, honesty from what it is a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness.

(III. i. 111-114)

Hamlet's bidding Ophelia to go to a "nunnery" can mean either that she should go to a convent to escape "such fellows" as himself who are "proud, revengeful, ambitious," or it can mean that since her virtue is assumed, she really belongs in a brothel. In the scene with Ophelia as in the scene with Gertrude, Hamlet is portraying the role of ranker and railer, but he is also the disappointed son and the disillusioned lover. The reality beneath the role he assumes colors his rhetoric; his bitterness, corruption, and disease, when he is with her, and when he is with Ophelia he dwells upon honesty" and marriage. It is "marriage" which is disturbing Hamlet most, his mother's marriage to his uncle and his own disillusionment with love and marriage.

Hamlet's view that society is playing roles to "skim and film" the "ulcerous place" which is his father's murder, extends to the women whom he loves. Everyone is false in Hamlet's eyes. Since Hamlet has entered into the world of illusion by creating his own role, there is no reality against which to judge appearance. The make-believe world of the drama has become the real world in Denmark. The "player-king" Claudius is at the center and source of the role playing, and it extends throughout society. All appearance, to Hamlet, hides ugliness, corruption, and rottenness, whether it is

Claudius, his mother, Ophelia, or himself.

4

Othello, Lear, and Macbeth act unwisely because they do not use their reasoning powers, and they are unaware of the full consequences of their actions. As illogical thinking about the nature and significance of an action may result in a tragic error, too much thinking about the event may paralyze action. This is what happens to Hamlet. In order to play a role successfully, it is essential that one believe in his role. Othello is convinced that he is administering justice when he murders Desdemona; Lear believes that he can unburden himself of the responsibilities of kingship and yet retain the ceremony when he divides his kingdom. Consequently, they act wrongly but swiftly and decisively. Hamlet's role as avenger is not a created one, as in the cases of Othello, Lear, and Macbeth; it is one which is thrust upon him. Whether to accept the role and how to play it, or to act or not to act, becomes the prevailing question for Hamlet.

Hamlet seems willing enough to assume the character of revenger in the presence of his father's spirit:

Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift

As meditation or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge. (I. vi. 29-31)

However, after the Ghost unfolds his tale, Hamlet seems equally impressed that people can play roles successfully, that "one may smile and smile and be a villain." Thus Hamlet decides to create a part which he believes will lead him into the role his father has designated for him. However, he becomes so involved in his representation of fool and railer that he sometimes forgets the

task his father appointed him. Hamlet becomes interested in acting for the sake of acting; he too is guilty of "words, words, words." He alternates between performing his own part as railer, madman, and fool, and observing other characters as mirrors for a possible role which would lead him into acting. Consequently, Hamlet is alternately the "observer" and the "observed." He is the observer when he watches and interprets other actions, and he is the observed when he plays the fool.

Hamlet regards and interprets the roles which the other young men play. He dismisses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as models for his own action; they do not create their parts, but they are merely puppets manipulated by Claudius. When Hamlet regards Laertes at Ophelia's grave, he competes with his "phrase of sorrow." Determined that Laertes will not "outface" him in his extravagant grief, Hamlet forcibly steals the scene:

Be buried quick with her, and so will I;
And, if thou prate of mountains, let them
 throw
Millions of acres on us, till our ground,
Singeing his pate against the burning
 zone,
Make Ossa like a wart! Nay, an thou'lt
 mouth,
I'll rant as well as thou. (V. i. 302-307)

Whatever Hamlet's true emotions are, he is joining in an histrionic contest here. As on other occasions when he steals a scene, he achieves nothing. It is Claudius' scene finally as he seizes the opportunity to urge Laertes to carry out their plot to kill Hamlet:

Strengthen your patience in our last
 night's speech;

We'll put the matter to the present push.
(V. i. 317-318)

Hamlet never studies Fortinbras directly, but he examines Fortinbras' philosophy of action when he encounters the expedition against Poland. The captain's judgement on the purpose of the army:

We go to gain a little patch of ground
That hath in it no profit but the name.
To pay five ducats, five, I would not
 farm it
Nor will it yield to Norway or the Pole
A ranker rate, should it be sold in fee.
(IV. iv. 17-22)

is used by Hamlet as a mirror for Denmark as he reflects upon the captain's words. At first Hamlet thinks only of Denmark:

This is th' imposthume of much wealth
 and peace,
That inward breaks, and shows no cause
 without; (IV. iv. 27-28)

Hamlet then sees the "quarrel in a
 straw," (IV. iv. 55)

Led by a delicate and tender prince.
Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd
Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death, and danger
 dare,
Even for an egg-shell. (IV. iv. 47-51)

Hamlet envies Fortinbras who can act without reflecting on the consequences or without great reasons for his actions. It is Fortinbras' sense of honour which motivates his action. Fortinbras' "honour" disregards "fortune," "death," and "danger," but his

conception of honour will result in the death of "twenty thousand men" who fight for the sake of Fortinbras' definition of honour. Fortinbras' honour is a kind of illusion, "A fantasy" and "dream of passion" which can cause him to weep. Hamlet, however, uses Fortinbras' action as a means of self-laceration for his own inactivity. Hamlet attempts to use Fortinbras as a mirror for himself, but Hamlet cannot act like Fortinbras, for he does not think like Fortinbras. If Fortinbras saw the implications and consequences of his action as Hamlet sees them, he would not be leading the army against Poland.

Hamlet has the opportunity to observe a group of men who make the playing of roles their livelihood. The players provide Hamlet with another mirror for role playing. These are professional actors, not the amateurs of Claudius' court. Hamlet is impressed by the fact that the actor can make his role seem reality itself, while he, who has seen the reality beneath all roles, cannot act:

Is is not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage
 wann'd,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in 's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function
 suing
With forms to his conceit?

(II. ii. 577-583)

The player, however, believes in the illusion which he creates, and he cannot be a mirror for Hamlet because Hamlet probes for the truth beneath the illusion.

Playing roles and observing others' actions do not result in Hamlet carrying out vengeance, so Hamlet decides to become a

director. Claudius and Polonius have staged scenes whereby Hamlet may be led to uncover his malady. However, Claudius and Polonius have been unsuccessful because they have employed amateur actors and actresses who are not convincing to Hamlet because they do not act well; they conform to the reality of Hamlet and their association with him. As Polonius has directed Gertrude and Ophelia how to perform their parts, Hamlet instructs the players how to enact their roles. He tells them to

Hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature;
to show virtue her own feature, scorn her
own image, and the very age and body of
the time his form and pressure.

(III. ii. 24-27)

If the player who cried over Hecuba could become a mirror for Hamlet, why could not the company become mirrors for the rotten state of Denmark? Once Hamlet has secured his actors, his play, and his audience, he will be the chorus to make sure that his audience understands his drama. Hamlet can be a chorus because he knows his play, his actors, and his audience.

On the surface Hamlet is merely a member of the audience, a spectator at a tragedy presented by a group of strolling players in whom Hamlet had displayed a "kind of joy" at their arrival. The "murder of Gonzago" takes place in another country, and it is spoken in artificial language preceded by an old-fashioned dumb-show. The play, however, becomes reality for Claudius and for Hamlet. The king is so caught up in the enactment of the murder on which his crown rests, that he forgets his own role. Consequently, the play must stop so that Claudius can resume his pose. Claudius' cry for "light" is a cry to be released from the sight

of the act which is a "heavy burden" on his soul. Further, paradoxically, "light" which generally symbolizes truth, and even here means a release from the make-believe world of the drama, signifies Claudius' desire to return to the artificial world over which he reigns. The play becomes reality for Hamlet in that he thinks that he can now act from the infallible evidence that the Ghost was a true ghost. Hamlet is successful as a director because his play does catch the "conscience" of the King, but he is not caught up in the drama to the extent that he can avenge his father's murder when he has an opportunity to do so. Further, the drama serves to intensify Claudius' enmity against Hamlet.

Hamlet has been defeated in each role he has tried to play as no role leads to the successful revenge of his father's murder. He destroys the King's puppet -- Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern -- and he contributes to the death of Ophelia who is little more than a "prop" for Claudius and Polonius. When Hamlet directs or enacts one of his own scenes, the real act for which he plans the scene is lost rather than realized.

Juxtaposed against the character involved directly or indirectly in Claudius' drama is Horatio. Horatio is Hamlet's only friend, but it is fairly late in the drama before Hamlet considers him as a mirror. Horatio is the only young man constantly about the Court who does not play the role; he is neither a "sponge" nor a puppet to be manipulated by Claudius and Polonius. Occasionally making comments on the scenes being enacted before him, Horatio functions as an observer or chorus rather than as an actor. There is no reason for Horatio to play a role. He does not seek to penetrate Hamlet's mask for he alone knows that it is a mask, and Hamlet does not assume his antic disposition for Horatio. However, Hamlet studies Horatio,

not to determine his role, but to understand why he does not play a role. Horatio does not assume a mask because he is "not passion's slave"; nor is he ambitious; therefore, he is, in contrast to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "not a pipe for fortune's finger/To sound what stop she please" (III. ii. 75-76). A man assumes a role for some end in view. If he has no ambition, greed, hatred, or malice, there is no reason to assume a role. The friendship of Hamlet and Horatio survives because they can be honest with each other. There are no barriers (masks, poses) between the two. Hamlet cannot maintain such a relationship with anyone else in Claudius' court as Claudius has created an atmosphere where role-playing is reality.

5

In Hamlet's quest to find out how a revenger should behave, he learns a valuable lesson from Horatio, not to be "passion's slave," but even Horatio is not, finally, a model for Hamlet. Horatio is merely an observer, a commentator, and when he counsels Hamlet, he advises him, not to act. It was Horatio who advised Hamlet not to follow the Ghost, and it is Horatio who counsels him, not to fight the duel, "If your mind dislike" it. Hamlet decides, like Horatio, not to play a role, but he does not decide not to act at all. He will not plan an action, but he will perform whatever is expected of him if the circumstances demand it.

Hamlet learns something from Horatio as to how one should act, but in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, Hamlet considers whether one should act at all. Is death an alternative to suffering? But death itself does not offer an alternative after all; suicide itself is an act which involves consequences:

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. 84-88)

Hamlet explores the consequences of suicide more fully than he considers how one may live. Hamlet's thoughts in the soliloquy are those which occur to one who has no place in society and whose beliefs upon which his life was governed have been shattered. His decision to live is both cowardly and courageous; it is cowardly in that he is afraid of death, and it is courageous because it means to live solitarily in a world in which there is no longer any joy.

Hamlet's own uncertainty as to whether one should live and "suffer/The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" or die is related to his uncertainty as to whether or not he should kill Claudius. Hamlet considers that the motivation for killing Claudius may not be a true one. The spirit he saw "may be the devil." If that is so, the consequences of performing an act of vengeance may be as damning as suicide. This is in contrast to Macbeth who accepts the witches' prophecy without considering their motivations for their predictions. Once Claudius' guilt is established beyond a doubt, and Hamlet will "take the ghost's word for a thousand pound" (III. ii. 297-98), he finds another reason to delay acting. Claudius is not playing a proper role for revenge when Hamlet sees him praying. He must be

drunk, asleep, or in his rage,
 Or in th' incestuous pleasure of his bed,
 At gaming, swearing, or about some act

That hath no relish of salvation in 't.
 (III. iii. 89-92)

Ironically, Hamlet, who tries to penetrate masks and to read roles, cannot interpret this one as Claudius is unable to pray; Claudius is merely in the attitude of prayer.

Hamlet finally recognizes that his revenge is "dull," that there are no more reasons not to act:

Sith I have cause and will and strength
 and means
 To do 't. (IV. iv. 45-46)

He blames himself for the delay without being completely aware of its causes:

whetehr it be
 Bestial obligation, or some craven
 scruple
 Of thinking too precisely on th' event
 A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one
 part wisdom --
 And ever three parts coward.
 (IV. iv. 39-43)

Hamlet's scenes in which, on the one hand, he vented all his emotion, or, on the other hand, spent all his time planning and rehearsing, have been guises to avoid the real action -- the killing of Claudius. If other men can act "for a fantasy and trick of fame," then why can not Hamlet? He cannot act because the role of revenger is not a natural one for him, and he cannot create such a role. Hamlet understands other roles: Fortinbras who can "find quarrel in a straw/when honour's at the stake," the player who can drown in tears for "nothing," Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who allow themselves to be used as sponges, and Horatio who neither acts nor is acted upon, but Hamlet cannot adopt any of these

roles. Further, he has been unable to create a role for himself which would enable him to carry out his father's directions.

Our indiscretion sometimes serves us
well

When our dear plots do pall; and that
should teach us

There's a divinity that shapes our ends;
Rough-hew them how we will.

(V. ii. 8-11)

Previously Hamlet's plots have failed in helping him to combat his enemies, and the plots which the Court has contrived for him have been spoiled by Hamlet's histrionics. This is the first of Claudius' plots in which Hamlet acts positively and successfully. Hamlet does not rehearse, does not think through his actions, and he does not put on an antic disposition. Instead, he becomes briefly what he was trained to be -- the King. In using his father's signet, he assumes his rightful position. Hamlet is successful in dispatching Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and in saving his own life. The action demonstrates to Hamlet that one does not have to be a director of events in order to act.

Hamlet learns his most important lesson about role-playing in the graveyard scene. He has pointed out to Claudius and his court the reality beneath masks, but in the graveyard scene Hamlet learns what lies beneath all painting.

As "The murder of Gonzago" is a dramatization of Claudius' murder of King Hamlet, the poison at the root of Denmark, the graveyard scene is an illustration of where the court of Denmark will end. Ophelia's funeral coming at the end is a vivid example of what Hamlet has discovered; it is ironical that what he has treated so lightly turns out to be bitter reality.

As Hamlet regards the skull which the irreverent gravedigger throws up, he considers one by one, those in society who play roles for their own gain: the "politician," the "courtier," playing his role of sycophant, "which could say 'Good morrow, sweet lord: How dost thou, good lord?'" and the lawyer with his "quilllets, cases, tenures, and his tricks." Symbolically, the skull represents the end of Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, all of whom Hamlet has already killed. Hamlet then recognizes the skull of Yorick, his father's jester. The King's fool is noted for the role he plays in his "gibes," "gambols," "songs," and "flashes of merriment" which are designed to entertain. The skull of Yorick which Hamlet fingers is symbolically that of his own. Hamlet, like Yorick, directed his "gibes" and "gambols" at the whole of Denmark. The Fool entertained even when he was railing, but the Court does not take Hamlet's railings as pure entertainment. The distinction is that the Fool was playing a natural part while everyone recognizes that Hamlet is behaving in an unnatural manner. Hamlet would send the Fool "to my lady's chamber" to give her a message which Hamlet has hinted to Gertrude and Ophelia: "Let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that" (V. i. 213-214). The Fool's end is no more and no less than that of the great conquerors. All role playing is futile.

The last scene of Hamlet is carefully arranged by Claudius and his courtiers. Claudius is the director:

I will work him

To an exploit, now ripe in my device,
Under the which he shall not choose but
fall;

And for his death no wind of blame shall
breathe,

But even his mother shall uncharge the
practice
And call it accident. (IV. vii. 64-68)

Claudius is to stage the action in such a manner that even the Queen will not know the reality behind the masks, the real poison behind the ceremonial duel. The scene is to be enacted in front of the court, but the poison is to be carefully hidden that no one will suspect its presence or its lethal effect. Although Horatio warns Hamlet that he is not prepared to play ("You will lose this wager, my Lord"), Hamlet decides to fight that duel "naked and alone" for

If it be now, tis not to come; if it be not
to come, it will be now; if it be not now,
yet it will come; the readiness is all,
(V. ii. 321-233)

Hamlet recognizes that the "divine providence" which directed his action on the trip to England is the true director. He will play no more roles, direct no more scenes, and there will be no more mistakes about the role he is destined to fulfill.

Like all the scenes which the "player-king" stages, this one fails. Claudius, the director, has designated no part for the Queen, but she enters the drama by drinking from the poison cup prepared for Hamlet. It is she who brings the hidden poison into the open, the reality upon which Claudius' crown rests. Laertes follows the cue and reveals more of Claudius' poison. In a last desperate attempt Claudius brings the audience into the drama: "O, yet defend me, friends; I am but hurt" (V. ii. 335), and Hamlet makes a direct speech to the audience:

You that look pale and tremble at this
chance,

That are but mutes or audience to this
act. (V. ii. 345-346)

Claudius is unsuccessful in bringing the Court in to save him, but Hamlet does bring the audience into his drama. Claudius dies, and Hamlet cannot finish the "story"; it must be completed by Horatio who never really entered the drama. Death, "this fell sergeant" ends all roles. Paintings hide only the skull. Claudius's hidden poison breaks through the illusion he has so carefully created. All involved in Claudius' drama die.

In the end Hamlet has recognized his limitations as a man. Whatever role he is designated to fill, he will do so. When he scours Denmark of its poison he fulfills his role, and he also, almost accidentally, carries out his father's directions. Hamlet recognizes that the end of all roles is the skull, and he can accept that too. In the process of making the discovery that man cannot control his life nor his death, Hamlet raises questions that men have always asked: what is honor, truth, death, what is man's duty to himself, to others? As a result of quest, questions are raised: How can a man eliminate evil in the world, uncover, expose, and root out the "fat weeds," the "ulcerous" places, wisely, justly, and without becoming contaminated in the process? The answer implicit in Hamlet is that he cannot. Horatio survives the rottenness in Denmark, but he does not act; he is one "in suffering all, that suffers nothing." Fortinbras acts, but Fortinbras will unthinkingly bring about the "imminent death of twenty thousand men" for the sake of his honour. Only Hamlet has the insight, the wisdom, and the capacity to suffer the anguish which involvement brings.

his reasons for changing his role or attempting to direct events. The tragic protagonist acts or directs for what he believes to be a benefit for himself, another person, or society. Among the tragic heroes, Othello thinks that his role of murderer will restore his honor. Lear thinks that he will benefit himself as well as his daughters by dividing his kingdom. Hamlet assumes the role of a madman because he thinks that it will lead him to the role of revenger which will benefit all Denmark. He will cleanse Denmark of the poison for which Claudius is responsible. The villains, on the other hand, have purely selfish motives, Iago assumes his role for the primary purpose of destroying Othello, and Edmund seeks to destroy Edgar. Macbeth murders Duncan solely to satisfy his own ambition.

We admire Hamlet because he is heroic in his quest for the truth which all responsible men seek. Those who would not leave the

world to its corruption, who feel a moral responsibility to seek the truth about the world, man, and the self, and to act on the basis of newly found truths, are men who become engaged in the tragic dilemma of their age. Those who would go beyond the limits and break through the barriers, are distinguished from ordinary men. The ordinary man knows when he faces an insurmountable wall with the unknown on the other side, and he stops at the wall, finding safety in the known. The tragic hero does not stop at the wall; he climbs over, daring the unknown, possessing the courage, insight, and the spirit to find out what lies beyond even though the quest destroys him. Hamlet is the incarnation of the man who dares to find out what lies beyond. Therefore, Hamlet does bring the audience into his drama -- the audience does "look pale and tremble at this chance."

-- The End --