

# *Hamlet* and the invention of Tragedy<sup>1</sup>

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The first thing that should be said about Hamlet is that he is a serial killer. He kills off a higher proportion of the speaking cast list, either directly with his own hand or indirectly, than any other Shakespearean character, including Richard III and Macbeth.

To begin with, his victims include the entire Polonius family. He kills Polonius deliberately, though it is true that he believes him to be someone else at the time; but such an instance of mistaken identity, of killing B when one had set out with the intention of killing A, is not acceptable as an excuse for murder in a court of law. Laertes he kills with his own hand, though inadvertently; the text leaves open the opportunity, taken up in many productions, to have Hamlet engineer the change of swords deliberately as result of realizing that Laertes' is unbated, but he cannot know that it is poisoned. Ophelia's death he causes indirectly, but there can be no question but that he carries total moral responsibility for it, first tendering her affection, then proceeding through public humiliation to private violent abuse, and finally murdering her father. The First Quarto has Laertes make the double accusation of responsibility for the catastrophes to both Polonius and Ophelia explicit:

Griefe upon griefe, my father murdered, My sister thus distracted:  
Cursed be his soule that wrought this wicked act.<sup>2</sup>

At no point, however, does Hamlet acknowledge his own role in bringing about her death, nor does he show any compunction over it. The only apology he feels he owes is to Laertes, and that is more because he 'forgot [him]self' than because he caused the death of Laertes' sister.<sup>3</sup>

Hamlet also engineers the deaths of his two fellow-students, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern - not killing them with own hands, but he certainly wills and arranges their deaths, without bothering to check, and apparently without minding, whether or not they are aware of Claudius's own plot to murder him. Even Horatio is taken aback by Hamlet's casualness over the murder:

So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't.  
Why, man, they did make love to this employment.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at a Renaissance workshop at Jadavpur University, Calcutta, and is being published there in that earlier form. The present version has profited from the discussion after its presentation at the SEDERI congress, in particular from the comments of Jesus Tronch.

<sup>2</sup> The *Tragicall Historie of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, Shakespearean Originals: First Editions, ed. Graham Holderness and Brian Loughrey (New York and London, 1992), D. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Hamlet goes on to acknowledge that Laertes' cause is the 'portraiture' of his own (5.2.78-9), but this must refer to the fact that he killed Laertes' father just as Claudius killed Hamlet's; Hamlet has no dead sister to offer as portraiture of Laertes'. Unless otherwise specified, quotations from *Hamlet* are from the edition by G. R. Hibbard (Oxford, 1987; reprinted in the World's Classics series, 1994), since it is based on the Folio text; for reasons given in the paper, I have avoided using as evidence for my arguments passages that do not appear in the Folio.

They are not near my conscience. (5.2: 7-9)

His assertion that they died because they came between ‘the fell incensed points / Of mighty opposites’ almost makes it sound as if their murder is something he can be proud of, by reason of having concerns so far above it.

And finally, of course, he kills Claudius, both with his own hand and deliberately: Claudius who is the murderer of his own father, but also his mother’s husband, therefore his own stepfather, and, given that Denmark is an elective monarchy, the rightful king. Claudius may have ‘popped in between th’ election and my hopes’ (5.2.66), but he has none the less been duly elected, and so the killing is a full-scale regicide.

Claudius’s own tally of corpses is rather lower. Before the play starts, he has killed old Hamlet, with own hand and on purpose. He kills the Queen, with his own hand but accidentally: like Hamlet with Polonius, he means to kill *somebody*. And he kills Hamlet himself, intentionally but indirectly (in his first failed attempt, by means of the King of England; in the second, successful, attempt, using Laertes actually to strike the blow). His own tally of corpses in the play is therefore only half of Hamlet’s - three against six.

Macbeth disposes of a mere four characters with speaking parts: Duncan, Banquo, and Lady Macduff and one of her children. (Young Siward admittedly makes a fifth, but he kills him in fair combat, so he constitutes a rather different case). Other bloodshed is spoken of, but, except for whatever a director may do with the Macduff household, it does not happen in front of our eyes as it does in *Hamlet*; yet we think of *Macbeth* as a bloody play, and Hamlet as an intellectual one. Hamlet himself, notoriously, is the character that people are most likely to identify with, especially intellectuals, and therefore especially also critics; and since they do the writing about the play, it is easy to get the sense that almost everyone finds their alter ego in Hamlet - ‘I have a smack of Hamlet about me, if I may say so,’ as Coleridge put it.<sup>1</sup> If he had said instead that he had a smack of Macbeth about him, everyone would have been very worried indeed. Hamlet, despite his bloody hands, is held to be a man of thought rather than action; Macbeth, despite his much greater agonizing at least over his initial murder, is regarded as a man of blood. The Laurence Olivier film of *Hamlet* goes so far as to describe the play, in its initial voiceover, as the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind - and who presumably just happened to kill half a dozen people along the way while he was trying to do so.

*Hamlet* must be the most extreme instance of where the action within a play - what *happens* - and the perception of what happens by readers and audience are at odds with each other. (Actors, who have to experience the pragmatics of the role rather than just the idea of it, are more likely to get it right: one National Theatre actor recently commented, ‘You can’t do *Hamlet* like you are living it, otherwise you go around killing people.’)<sup>2</sup> It is as if Shakespeare were creating some giant optical illusion: he draws a mass murderer, and makes us see an indecisive intellectual. How does he do it? more particularly, *why* does he do it?

This paper will attempt to offer a possible answer to those questions. The answer I shall put forward suggests that *Hamlet* actually creates the modern understanding of tragedy, at least for the whole anglophone tradition - that it marks the moment when *tragedy* as a literary structure that can be defined and described gives way to the larger idea of the *tragic* as, precisely, something that goes beyond definition and description. It is therefore an argument, ultimately, about the whole English critical tradition, as well as about tragedy; and also an argument about the play as a work that marks the point of transition from a medieval to a Romantic and post-Romantic understanding of the individual within the world, and how that can be expressed in literary form.

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk recorded by Henry Nelson Coleridge* ed. Carl Woodring (London and Princeton, NJ, 1990), II.61.

<sup>2</sup> National Theatre: unnamed actor quoted in *The Independent Magazine* issue 347, 13 May 1995, p. 16 (Garry Jenkins et al, ‘Disparate Dan’).

Why Shakespeare should have written the play in the way he does is not altogether answerable: the question in that form is in effect asking what was going on in Shakespeare's mind, and for that the only evidence we have is the text of *Hamlet* itself. We cannot get beyond that to any of Shakespeare's more covert thoughts and intentions, certainly not to any subconscious desires or fears that are not contained in the text and therefore already transformed and controlled by their dramatic context. And we can no more safely take Hamlet as representing Shakespeare's own mind than we can take Macbeth, or indeed Claudius. To imagine Shakespeare himself drawing Hamlet as a kind of self-portrait (I have a smack of Hamlet about me myself) is a sentimental fantasy, however seductive a one it may be - not least to us intellectuals and critics. But it is possible to see something of *why* in relation to the play itself and how it is written; and most particularly, in the contrast between what the original audience might have been expecting as against what Shakespeare actually gave them. A reconstruction of the horizon of expectation of a playgoer arriving at the first performance of *Hamlet* will, at the very least, show up what Shakespeare is not doing, and so help to define what he does.<sup>1</sup>

That paragraph, however, begs a crucial question before one looks at audience expectation: the question of what text 'the first performance of *Hamlet*' might have staged. The three texts preserved in the first and second Quartos and the First Folio are very different from each other, and give different results in any analysis. Without wishing to rehearse all the arguments, I would accept the conclusion of the editors of the *Oxford Shakespeare* that the Folio text, 'whether at one or more removes, reflects a theatrical manuscript of 1600-3',<sup>2</sup> and can therefore be taken as the best witness to that first performance; that is accordingly the basis of what follows. If, as seems likely, the First Quarto represents a memorial version of staged performances, it gives a unique insight into how an actor's set of conventional expectations can override Shakespeare's own rather different text. Its explicit emphasis on Hamlet's responsibility for Ophelia's death, quoted above - on Hamlet as mass murderer - is one example of that process in action.<sup>3</sup>

To return to the playgoers, with their blissful ignorance of textual complications. Foremost among their expectations would be those raised by the fact that the play is a tragedy. It seems from the start to have announced itself as such in its title, either as a 'tragicall historie' as in the first two quartos, or as 'tragedy' in the third. Presumably it carried some similar designation for its staged form, but in any case it would have been known as a tragedy from the earlier dramatization of the story.

We probably believe that we know what a tragedy is, or at least what one looks like; and for most people that notion would probably be a kind of abstraction or amalgamation of *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*. That, however, will not do for the Elizabethans coming to see *Hamlet* for the first time: they did not have *Hamlet* to set their expectations, and the great majority of them did not have *Oedipus* either. There is no evidence for its being known outside the universities at this date in England, and very little evidence for its being known there. If we were in a similar position to those early playgoers, without access to those key examples of the genre, we would probably fall back on the definition of tragedy as given in Aristotle's *Poetics*: tragedy as the fall of a moderately

<sup>1</sup> My enterprise is therefore rather different from that of Roland Mushat Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet: Issues and Responses in 1600* (Princeton, NJ, 1984), who looks at the contemporary context for individual motifs in the play but not at the larger issues raised by the nature of the play as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion* (Oxford, 1987), p. 400.

<sup>3</sup> The argument that follows needs to be displaced sideways if, as has alternatively been argued, the First Quarto represents the staged version of the play more closely than the Folio: Q1 would then show even more sharply the contrast between the play written or adapted to meet the set of audience expectations discussed below, and the fuller conception, represented by the later texts, that breaks with those expectations. If that were so, the contrast between playgoers' expectations and the Q2 text would first have been evident to readers of Q2 rather than to the theatre audience. The case for the authenticity of the First Quarto as representing the staged text is argued by Holderness and Loughrey in their introduction to *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet*. Giorgio Melchiori argues that Q1 represents a cut-down version of the full text, 'Hamlet: The Acting Version and the Wiser Sort', in Thomas Clayton ed. *The 'Hamlet' first published (Q1: 1603)*, (Newark, Delaware, 1992), pp. 195-210. Wells and Taylor accept the case for the memorial reconstruction of the Q1 text, *Textual Companion*, pp. 398-401.

good man because of some fatal flaw. But the *Poetics* too constituted esoteric knowledge in England at this date. The work had only resurfaced a century or so earlier, and had not excited much interest before 1549, when the first commentary on it was published, in Italy; and the Italians indeed then proceeded to give it a lot of attention, with three further Latin commentaries and two in Italian by 1579. The English did not follow suit. Sidney, who had probably read Castelvetro's translation and commentary, alludes to the *Poetics*, but we know of few other Englishmen who were familiar with it; certainly it was not at all easy of access to the theatregoing world or to playwrights without a university education.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the concept of the fatal flaw received little stress from anyone in the Renaissance - or, it has to be said, from Aristotle himself. Scaliger, who knows his Aristotle and writes his own *Poetics* in seven long books, never mentions it; Castelvetro spends several pages denying that the tragic hero should be moderately good (he prefers villains or tyrants), and devotes a mere two lines to *ajmartiva* which he translates simply as 'errore'.<sup>2</sup> The 'fatal flaw' sense of the word only emerges much later. The speech in *Hamlet* that looks a bit similar, on the 'vicious mole of nature' (itself missing from the Folio), has abundant sources and analogues much nearer home, as any modern edition will testify; and Hamlet himself thinks he is talking about the Danes' drinking habits.<sup>3</sup> There seems to be no conceivable means of transmission by which Shakespeare could have known of the 'fatal flaw' definition of the tragic hero. Our own ideas of Aristotelian tragedy would not have been part of the mental equipment of a typical member of the audience at the first performance of *Hamlet*. nor part of Shakespeare's.

So if in 1600 such an Elizabethan playgoer had been asked what 'tragedy' meant, and what examples he knew, what answer might he have given?

First, the definitions; and there were several available. Perhaps the least academic of those current at the time *Hamlet* was written identifies tragedy as a spectacle of blood: the principle that when the blood flows, the tragedy is good. Shakespeare had himself written tragedy of that sort, most notably in *Titus Andronicus*, a revenge tragedy of the bloodiest variety which is very bloody indeed. The plot, notoriously, includes a heroine who is raped and has her tongue cut out and her hands cut off by the sons of the villainess; and they in turn are murdered and served to their mother in a pie, - or rather *as* a pie, since, as we are informed twice in case we missed it the first time, even their bones are ground up to make the pastry. Killing the children as an element of revenge and serving them up to the parent was quite a popular motif: it also occurs in *Thyestes*, the play of Seneca's that seems to have been best known to the Elizabethans, and in Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*. *Hamlet* does not, of course, go that far, yet the 'spectacle of blood' definition fits the play very accurately, both in terms of gore along the way and, most particularly, in the size of the heap of corpses on stage at the end: there are four of them, those of Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and Hamlet himself. The Q1 redactor makes just this point when he has Horatio call attention to the 'tragicke spectacle' of the bodies. *Titus* itself only manages four actual dead bodies in its last scene, though also on stage is Aaron, whose imminent execution is described in some detail, and also of course the pie - so, in a manner of speaking, seven corpses. *King Lear* also manages four, if the stage direction is followed that stipulates that the bodies of the evil sisters should be brought on stage - a stage direction that has little point except to underline the 'spectacle of blood' element in this tragedy too (though Edmund's off-stage death spoils the chance for a still

<sup>1</sup> See Lane Cooper, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Its Meaning and Influence* (London, 1923), pp. 99-118 (Italy), 129-35 (Renaissance England); and Marvin Theodore Herrick, *The Poetics of Aristotle in England* (New Haven, 1930), pp. 14-33.

<sup>2</sup> *Julius Caesar Scaliger: Poetices Libri Septem* (Lyon: 1561), facsimile intro. August Buck (Stuttgart, 1964), I.vi, viii-xi, xvi (pp. 11, 24-5); *Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata et sposta per Ludouico Castelvetro* (Vienna, 1570), 146v-167v, esp. 157v.

<sup>3</sup> The Olivier film uses the passage as voiceover-cum-epigraph, concluding with the definition of Hamlet's vicious mole of *nature as* indecision. The 'fatal flaw' definition of the tragedy of *Hamlet*, like the 'thinker' model, is more popular with academics than actors: cf. the short review by 'RS' of the actor Michael Pennington's *Hamlet: A User's Guide*, in the *Times Literary Supplement* for 22 March 1966, which castigates Pennington for being 'untroubled by Hamlet's apparent lack of a tragic flaw' and his ascription to him of cleverness - that is, of acting deliberately rather than accidentally.

bloodier spectacle). Only one death (Lear's own) actually takes place in front of the audience in the last scene of *Lear*, whereas all four killings occur on stage in the last scenes of both *Titus* and *Hamlet*. None of Shakespeare's other works matches the spectacle of blood offered at the end of these plays; but the bloodiness of the conclusion is something we would be least likely to mention in explaining why we think of *Hamlet* as something like quintessential tragedy. 'Real' tragedy, to us, lies precisely in what distinguishes *Hamlet* from *Titus Andronicus*, not in what they have in common.

One suspects that a good many Elizabethan playgoers measured the tragicness of the tragedies they saw by the quantity of the blood spilt; but there were less gory definitions around too. One of the best known defines tragedy in terms of its unhappy ending, making it the antitype of comedy. 'Comedies begin in trouble, and end in peace; tragedies begin in calm, and end in tempest' - that formulation is in fact slightly later, from Thomas Heywood's *Apologie for Actors* of 1612 (sig. F1v, translating Donatus), but the idea was familiar enough; it goes back at least 250 years, as far as the *Epistle to Can Grande* ascribed to Dante, and had been around in England since the early fifteenth century. Shakespeare had himself written tragedies that conform to that definition too, most obviously in *Romeo* and *Juliet*. This starts in calm to the point where it looks indeed much more as if it is going to be a comedy; indeed the first three acts of the play could allow it to go either way. It is only at the end of the third act that Fortune, here presented solely as chance, the stars, with no element of poetic justice or retribution about it, makes things go wrong. This kind of tragedy is given an early dramatic definition in *Lochrine*:

O fickle fortune, O unstable world,  
 What else are all things that this globe containes,  
 But a confused chaos of mishaps?  
 Wherein as in a glasse we plainly see,  
 That all our life is but as a Tragedie.<sup>1</sup>

*Hamlet* conforms to this definition in so far as it has an unhappy ending, but in other respects it is much more problematic. It hardly begins in calm: its story is initiated by the sudden death of the previous king, and its first scene offers one of the jumpiest openings in all Renaissance drama. And whatever happens in *Hamlet*, chance does not have very much to do with it, nor, despite our tendency to identify with the hero, do we think of 'all things that this globe contains' as being tragedies on the *Hamlet* model. Coleridge did not ascribe a smack of *Hamlet* to himself on the grounds that he illustrated a commonplace.

The third major definition of tragedy familiar to Elizabethan playgoers refers not just to the ending but to structure and content: tragedy as the fall of a great man from the top of Fortune's wheel - the story of the man who reaches the peak of earthly prosperity and comes to a miserable end. This may sound rather like Aristotle's principle of the prosperous or great man undone by a fatal flaw, or indeed of Fortune's governing of all things by chance, but there are key differences from both. In this kind of tragedy of Fortune, the protagonist is great in the most direct political sense: by rank, not by mind or personality. One can thus measure the tragic fall almost in the literal terms of height: greatest for an emperor, almost as great for a king. More importantly, the Elizabethan definition says nothing about the fatal flaw of an essentially good man. The central characters in some Renaissance tragedies, in which Fortune functions purely as chance, may be completely innocent; but in this kind of tragedy as fall, in which Fortune takes on a much more retributive role, they are much more commonly very bad. Their badness is indeed the point of tragedy of this kind, for their falls give direct moral warnings about how kings should act. Sidney, despite his acquaintance with Aristotle - or because of his acquaintance with Castelvetro speaks of tragedy as the genre 'that maketh Kinges feare to be Tyrants, and... teacheth vpon how weake

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<sup>1</sup> *Lochrine* (Malone Society Reprints) 2116-20.

foundations guilden roofes are builded';<sup>1</sup> the *Revenger's Tragedy* comments that 'heaven likes the tragedy' when a lustful prince dies (V.iii.49-50). This definition of tragedy as the retribution visited on a tyrant brings the form much closer to being a tragedy of state than the tragedy of an individual.

This is the most analysed of the Renaissance definitions, and I hope a brief summary of its history may be excused. It goes back as far as the *Consolation of Philosophy* of the early-sixth-century writer Boethius, familiar to the Elizabethans both in Latin (the Queen herself produced a translation in the 1590s) and in Chaucer's translation: 'What other thyng bywaylen the cryinges of tragedyes but oonly the dedes of Fortune, that with an unwar strook overturneth the realmes of greet nobleye?'<sup>2</sup> - tragedy as tragedy of state. This definition of Boethius's had dominated medieval ideas of tragedy, but not the least interesting thing about it is that it makes no mention of the stage - it separates the notion of tragedy from the notion of drama, and opens the way to a whole tradition of narrative tragedies that feed into Elizabethan ideas of the genre in a very specific way. That process was set in motion in the mid-fourteenth century, when Boccaccio wrote his great Latin compilation *De casibus virorum illustrium*. 'of the falls' (or, alternatively and significantly, 'of exemplary stories') 'of great men'. This is collection of non-dramatic tragedies, though he does not use the term /tragedy' to describe his own work. They take the form of first-person narratives (told by the ghosts of the people concerned) of the disasters that befall the great - almost all male, and almost all in some way wicked - and that hurl them from the top of Fortune's wheel. Chaucer imitated the form (though without making retribution a necessary element) in the Monk's Tale, with the addition of the generic title and an explanation, since 'tragedy' was not at this date a recognized English word:

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie  
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,  
And is yfallen out of heigh degree  
Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly. CT VII.1973-7

Inspired by that, the early-fifteenth-century poet John Lydgate set out to translate Boccaccio's *De casibus* (or at least, a French translation of it) into English, as the *Fall of Princes*; and in the mid-1550s, an enterprising publisher hit on the idea of updating Lydgate's work with a new series of tragedies - falls of great men - from English history, to bring it more closely up to date. The result was the work entitled *The Mirror for Magistrates* - one of the smash hits of Elizabeth's reign. The first part appeared in 1559, but further supplements appeared every few years over the next three decades, and further editions for another three decades after that. The first version consisted of a compilation of verse histories from recent English history, from the time of Richard II through the Wars of the Roses to the advent of the Tudors. A later supplement added tragedies from the legendary history of Britain, 'from the coming of Brute to the Incarnation', and included figures such as Cordelia. The full title of the work offers an effective definition of tragedy of this type: 'The Mirror for Magistrates. Wherein may be seen by example of other, with how grievous plagues vices are punished: and how frail and unstable worldly prosperity is found, even of those whom Fortune seemeth most highly to favour.'

The tragedies of the *Mirror* may not have been dramatic, but they very soon became so. It has been calculated that the work provided the plots for at least thirty Elizabethan plays, and it served as the model for many more. If you asked had asked an Elizabethan in 1580 what tragedies he knew, then the answer might well have been, the *Mirror for Magistrates*; if you had asked the same question fifteen years later, perhaps even ten, then the answer would probably have come in

<sup>1</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry* in G. Gregory Smith ed. *Elizabethan Critical Essays* (Oxford, 1904), I.177.

<sup>2</sup> *The Riverside Chaucer*, general ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987; Oxford, 1988), *Boece* II pr. 2.

the form of a list of plays - but a good number of the plays named might well be based or at least modelled on the *Mirror*.

This definition of tragedy as the fall of the great was backed by Seneca, who also tends to stress the retribution element, not least in that Elizabethan favourite *Thyestes*. One couplet from that play could indeed almost serve as an epigraph to Elizabethan tragedy of this kind:

Quem dies vidit veniens superbum  
Hunc dies vidit fugiens iacentem.<sup>1</sup>

It is quoted verbatim by Marlowe in *Edward II* (IV.vi.53-4), alluded to by a number of other playwrights, and translated literally by Ben Jonson, as the closing couplet of *Sejanus*:

For whom the morning saw so great and high,  
Thus low and little 'fore the even doth lie.

The couplet maps the rise and fall of the tragic protagonist onto the movement of the sun, in an image taken up again and again by Shakespeare and most other Elizabethan tragedians: the tragic fall is imaged as the descent from midday to night, from summer to winter. It is so commonplace as almost to serve as a defining image for this kind of tragedy.

Again, Shakespeare himself had written tragedies that conform to this fall-of-princes didactic model, most notably the plays that appeared in quarto under the titles of 'The Tragedy of King Richard the Third' and 'The Tragedy of King Richard the Second'. It was the innovation made by the editors of the First Folio, in their decision to create a distinct category of 'histories', that has led to Shakespeare's own classification of these plays as tragedies being so often downplayed or overlooked. Three of his five early histories were indeed originally cast as tragedies, if one accepts the quarto of 'The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York' as representing *Henry VI Part 3*; and they are indeed much closer to the Elizabethan idea of tragedy than *Hamlet* is. They share, for instance, in that rhetoric of the cycle of the sun - in the opening lines of *Richard III*.

Now is the winter of our discontent  
Made glorious summer by this sun of York,

a statement that invokes by irony the continued turning of the cycle. Richard II falls from the height of his power to a miserable death to the accompaniment of just such imagery: he had once had a 'face / That like the sun did make beholders wink' (4.1.281-2); and he envisages his descent into the base court of Flint Castle as a metaphorical fall,

Down, down I come like glist'ring Phaeton. 3.3.178

Richard III was explicitly a tyrant; Richard II is never described as such in the play, but he surely represents seriously flawed kingship. As the *Mirror for Magistrates* has its ghost of Richard point out,

Woe to him whose will hath wisdom's place.

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<sup>1</sup> *Thyestes* lines 613-4 in vol. 2 of *Seneca's Tragedies* ed. Frank Justus Miller, Loeb Classical Library (London and Cambridge, Mass., 1961).

Macbeth is another tyrant, and Shakespeare's play again comes close to fulfilling this Elizabethan definition of tragedy. We think of it as being less of a quintessential tragedy than *Hamlet*, largely because Macbeth comes too close to being evil; but for the first audience of *Macbeth*, that was precisely the point: tragedy is the genre that maketh kings fear to be tyrants.

*Hamlet* has the potential for being this kind of tragedy; but if it were, its title would be the *Tragedy of Claudius*, not of Hamlet. As the *Tragedy of Claudius*, it would have fitted Elizabethan tragic expectations very nicely; as the tragedy of Hamlet, it does not. Hamlet has no significant political power, for a start - at best, he is heir presumptive; and his career does not give any clear moral teaching to anybody, least of all tyrants, because of his lack of any kind of public or political role.

So - Shakespeare had already written three different kinds of tragedy that fitted recognized Elizabethan definitions and models; then he wrote *Hamlet*, which does not. Whatever is going on in the play, it is clearly something new; something different enough, and powerful enough, for it to have changed our own notions of tragedy sufficiently to make *Hamlet* the archetype in our minds.

The most useful starting-point for understanding what that was is this idea of tragedy as fall: the fall of a great man off Fortune's wheel. That definition locates tragedy in the event, in what happens to you. In *Richard II*, however, Shakespeare doubles that movement with something else: with what happens *in the mind* of the tragic protagonist. Richard is great in the sense of being politically powerful at the start of the play; he becomes great as a dramatic protagonist - as what we would recognize as a tragic hero - in proportion as he loses that outward power. His political fall is paralleled by his rise within the play. To the Elizabethans, Richard is tragic because he falls; to us, it is his capacity for mental and emotional growth that makes him so, his capacity for suffering that increases as his outward power falls away.

*Hamlet* takes this same process a large step further. His fall in any political sense is not an issue here (though it is of course still important that things don't work out, that Hamlet should die): tragic action is now decisively relocated in the mind of the hero, and it is precisely that interiority that makes him so centrally a tragic hero in our own eyes. The interiority can indeed be brought out even more unequivocally in modern media than on the Elizabethan stage: film and television versions regularly present the soliloquies as voice-overs, words spoken not in any sense aloud for the audience to overhear, but within the mind. Even in a stage production - and presumably in Elizabethan productions as in modern ones - Hamlet is likely to spend much of the play downstage, in closer communication with the audience than the other actors even if he is not directly addressing them. Many productions will thus tend to have the action going on literally in the background, behind the prince, as if the events were secondary to the currents of his own mind. It is this phenomenon that Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* exploits so brilliantly, when it turns the action inside out, to put Hamlet himself in the background - an effect that is seriously disorienting precisely because we take the opposite phenomenon for granted. It isn't just the story that is inverted; it is like having your mind turned inside out too. We know very little about how the Elizabethans staged *Hamlet*; but it is at least possible that the actor would have come forward on the great apron stage of the Globe, inviting association with the audience, while the court action proceeded further back. The existence of the reconstructed Globe may help to illuminate such stage practices. But however it is done, the first court scene isolates Hamlet sharply: socially, because he is dressed in black, a misfit, not playing the polite games prescribed by etiquette; and theatrically, in his first soliloquy, when he is left alone on stage to reveal the inside of his mind.

If you were to play the psychoanalysts' word-association game in which you are given one word and instantly have to produce the next word that comes to mind, then I would guess that the word 'Hamlet' might elicit 'ghost' as a first response, but the second might well be 'soliloquy'. Soliloquies do of course have a long history in drama before Shakespeare, right back to the earliest layers of Greek drama with its single character and a chorus; and they also had a well-established function, most commonly to inform the audience about the action of the play as well as about the speaker. Richard III's opening soliloquy at once tells you the action so far, what you need to know to understand what happens next; informs you as to the nature of Richard himself, that he is

‘determined to prove a villain’; and outlines the action to come, in the shape of a list of those who stand in the way of his ambition to take the crown. A more sophisticated use of the soliloquy is for speaking thoughts aloud, thoughts intended as private rather than being designed for the benefit of the audience: this is the kind that Shakespeare gives to Brutus as he wonders whether to kill Caesar. Here it is a moral, largely intellectual debate - a soliloquy almost in the technical, academic sense, of a *soliloquium*, a debate with one’s self rather than with an opponent.<sup>1</sup>

Hamlet’s first soliloquy, however, is about his feelings, not about the action of the play, nor representing structured thought; or at least it is set us that way:

O that this too too solid flesh would melt. 1.2.129

It does contain information that we have not been given by any other source; but its facts are framed within passionate feeling -

But two months dead - nay not so much, not two - 1.2.138

- so that we get the sense of individual response, of the inside of Hamlet’s mind, as the foremost thing, while the information being conveyed about the appalling speed of his mother’s remarriage again gets mentally upstaged, just as the activities of the court are likely to have been literally upstaged in the earlier part of the scene. In this play, the inside of the protagonist’s mind consistently takes precedence over outward event; and that shift is clearly marked in the shift in the function of the first soliloquy, from *telling* - the direct giving of information, ‘this is what has happened’, or even ‘this is what I think’ - to *showing*, the display of a mind on edge that expresses itself not in the traditional fashion of formal exposition but in broken syntax and exclamations. The information it gives is enclosed and coloured by the intensity of the speaker’s response to it: ‘Heaven and earth, / Must I remember?’ And so the information - the facts that initiate the action of the play, come to us as already deeply unsettling; we never get them objectively. We know from the start why Hamlet is so troubled because we never see the reasons for it independently of the emotional suffering they have caused him.

At the start of this paper I described the optical illusion created by the play - that we don’t think of Hamlet as a mass murderer, that we are quite prepared to think of ourselves as having a smack of Hamlet when we wouldn’t dream of having a smack of Macbeth. That, I think, is largely to do with that readjustment of focus: that our view and our understanding of the action are Hamlet’s own. This is of course a critical commonplace - you cannot see the play at all without realizing how closely it follows the movement of his mind; but it is not so often observed that Hamlet is a fallible narrator. This is an effect that should be impossible in drama, where the actions take place in front of our eyes: they should appear as objective fact, without any possibility of colouring by a partial point of view or an unreliable narrative voice. But the reception history of *Hamlet* shows that that is not true even of the actions we do see on stage, and certainly not of actions that take place offstage. I would guess that most of you who have followed my arguments so far will also have been making excuses for Hamlet to remove some of the blood from his hands: that Ophelia did not give him the support he needed (but what did she need from him?); or that Polonius or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern deserved it (but would we think that of such victims if they were murdered by anyone else?). The occasional production may try to gesture towards such qualifications, but there is no continuing stage tradition that opposes Hamlet’s own reading of events.

*Hamlet* replaces dramatic objectivity precisely with subjectivity, in both senses: of giving a personal angle on things, taking sides, not offering an impartial study of the facts; and in the more

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<sup>1</sup> The term in this sense goes back to St Augustine; for a concise history, see Raymond Williams, ‘On Dramatic Dialogue and Monologue (particularly in Shakespeare)’, in his *Writing in Society* (London, [1983]), pp. 40-50, and, on *Hamlet*, pp. 57-60.

modern critical sense of being based within the individual mind - the premises of the play as Shakespeare writes it lie entirely in what Hamlet calls 'this distracted globe'. Almost his very first words mark his difference from earlier tragic protagonists: 'I am too much i'th' sun.' It is, of course, a pun on 'sun' and 'son'; but it insists on Hamlet's discontent with the position assigned to him, and so makes an immediate contrast with that image deeply familiar to the first audience of the play, of the sun as representing the hero at his highest point. The dominant images of this play establish themselves in the first soliloquy: images of corruption and sickness, for the condition of Denmark and of the world. Such images, though, are perceptions rather than statements, as Hamlet himself will point out:

This brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire -  
why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of  
vapours. 2.2.298-301

What is happening here is a radical recentring of drama inwards; and with that goes the radical recentring of tragic experience.

The degree to which Shakespeare succeeds in this can be measured by the critical history of the play: by all those studies that present Hamlet as thinker, as Romantic, as an idealist betrayed by his society; studies that show him as being every age's icon. They can result only from the readers' and audiences' acceptance of the optical illusion of the play; for the objective unfolding of events that contradicts such readings does happen too Hamlet's vicious stabbing of Polonius, his callous account of dispatching his fellow-students to their deaths, Ophelia's madness, the whole trail of blood that he leaves.

And even the soliloquies are not what they seem. The first does give essential information about the plot as well as revealing Hamlet's state of mind. The final one, 'How all occasions do inform against me', is the passage that is largely responsible for creating the reading of Hamlet as having the fatal flaw of hesitancy, but its textual status is nothing like so central: it appears only in the Second Quarto, so presumably Shakespeare did not see it as the key passage of the play it has tended to become. Even the most famous of the soliloquies, 'To be or not to be', is not the great piece of introverted psychological realism often assumed: that it is so often taken as such is perhaps the biggest optical illusion of all. Hamlet never says 'I' in it, or uses any form of the first person, until the very end when he sees Ophelia and stops soliloquizing Hamlet moreover is a student, a trained intellectual; and this soliloquy is a soliloquy in the precise technical sense, an argument in which one person takes the parts normally divided between disputants. It is a one-man debate, moreover, on a specific *quaestio*, the technical term for the doubtful proposition that constitutes a debate topic; and the soliloquy is set up precisely as such: 'To be or not to be: that is the question', the *quaestio*, the issue for debate. The formula was, moreover, a familiar one: an understanding of when *being* and not being are absolute contradictories and when they are merely contingent is one of the basic steps in all Renaissance logic, whether in the schemes of Aristotle or Melancthon or Ramus. So Marlowe's Dr Faustus' farewell to the whole study of logic epitomised as *ovjn kaiv mhv ovjn*, being and not being;<sup>1</sup> 'To be, and not to be, are terms of contradiction which never fall together into one and the same thing' (Hooker, in a casual statement of the obvious in manuscript notes<sup>2</sup>); or Melancthon, the great Reformation scholar of Hamlet's university of Wittenberg, writing a logic textbook that went through forty-six editions before 1600, and noting that God has set in our minds the principle *Quodlibet est. aut non est.* and that resistance to this law is madly to bear arms against Heaven.<sup>3</sup> For an actor now, the first line of that

<sup>1</sup> *Faustus* 1.12, 'Bid Oncaymaeon farewell, Galen come'; see R. W. Dent, *Ramist Faustus or Ramist Marlowe? Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 73 (1972), 63-74; the formula is widely found in both Latin and Greek logic texts.

<sup>2</sup> Dublin Fragments #22, p. 126 in *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker* vol. 4: *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity: Attack and Response*, ed John E. Booty (Cambridge, Mass., 1982) (general ed W. Speed Hill, 4 vols 1977-82).

<sup>3</sup> *Philippi Melanthonis Opera quae supersunt omnia* ed Carolus Gottlieb Bretschneider (Corpus Reformavorum XIII, Halis Saxonum, 1846), *Erotemata Dialectices* II, cols. 585-6: 'Deus... inseruit nostris mentibus hoc prin-

famous soliloquy is a difficult one because it is too well known, and there is a risk that the audience will start singing along. Many in that first audience would also have recognised it, but for entirely different reasons. The line sets Hamlet up, not as an individual agonizing over whether to commit suicide, but as the pattern of the intellectual; it spells a rationalizing detachment from his emotional situation rather than passionate involvement.

The logical modelling continues throughout the speech, with the divisions of the main *quaestio*: is it nobler to suffer, or to put an end to suffering? The crucial moment of the argument is framed as a syllogism: death is like sleep; sleep may bring nightmares; therefore death may bring nightmares - and therefore may be worse than real waking life. And when Hamlet lists the evils of real life, once again the key mood is one of rationalizing detachment: they relate not to his own present state but to broader social injustices that mostly have nothing to do with his own condition - the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, the insolence of office and so on. If 'dispriz'd love' might be thought to bring in personal note, Hamlet himself does not seem to notice.

Hamlet, and Shakespeare, are getting into deep philosophical waters. The age of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is also the age of Descartes, who hadn't quite yet said *Cogito ergo sum*, 'I think, therefore I am'; but it was in any case not a new proposition - St Augustine, for instance, had made the same point on several occasions, it appears in some of the logic textbooks, and in any case Shakespeare was probably quite capable of thinking it up for himself. The way in which the initial *quaestio* is set up, with its opposition of *to be* and *not to be*, also implies a Cartesian *to think* or *not to think*: ceasing to be implies a cessation of consciousness. As the *soliloquium* progresses, however, being and thinking turn out not to be commensurable after all, for ceasing to be in the sense of living is no guarantee of ceasing to be in the sense of thinking or feeling. There may be something after death - dreams, a continuing consciousness: and so thinking itself, the condition that according to Descartes and Augustine proves one's being, becomes an agent to maintain an unwanted existence. One can't opt out of *being* by suicide; conscience, the pale cast of thought, interposes between those options of *to be* or *not to be*, rendering them not incompatible contradictories but a non-existence of nightmare consciousness. If the whole play is an optical illusion to suggest the sensitive thinker rather than the cold-blooded murderer, then its most famous speech is perhaps the greatest optical illusion of all, in that it has fooled generations of playgoers into thinking they are seeing someone's inmost heart when the method, at least, is a textbook model of scholastic disputation.

But to go back to the original question of this paper: why did Shakespeare write *Hamlet* like this, with that extraordinary disjunction between the events of the play and their effect on the audience? Presumably not just to get the pleasure of a conjuring trick successfully performed. We can't second-guess Shakespeare's mind, but the answer may be in the play itself. If tragedy is to be located inwards, in the mind rather than the world, in response rather than event, then there needs to be set up a measurable difference between the mind and the world, between response and event; otherwise the play would come over as simply a tragedy of event, only a rather more thoughtful one than usual - as perhaps had already happened with *Richard II*. An Elizabethan audience, however, expecting a tragedy of event or a spectacle of blood, would have been much more alert to those aspects of the play than we are: it would have been its deep subjectivity, which we take for granted, that to them would have been unexpected and startling. They, in fact, would see both sides of the optical illusion - both what is 'really' there in terms of action and event and bloodiness, and the new perspective through which they are invited to view such things. Our own expectations of subjectivity have tended to blind us to what is 'really' there, to the point where we are not able to see it any more.

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cipium: Quodlibet est. aut non est. Et pugnare cum hac divina lege ... ut si quis furiosus arma coelo inferret.' On the number of editions, see Peter Mack, *Renaissance Argument: Valla and Agricola in the Traditions of Rhetoric and Dialectic* (Leiden, 1993) p 320, citing W. Risse, *Bibliographica Logica I: 1472-1800* (Hildesheim, 1965). The overlap between the soliloquy and the logic texts has been remarked by e.g. Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet*, p. 188; and by letter to the *TLS*, December 1993.

I called this paper 'Hamlet and the Invention of Tragedy'. 'Invention' does of course have different meanings in the Renaissance and now. Now, it is a matter of making things up - of originality, of creating something that did not exist before. In Renaissance (and indeed Classical) rhetoric, it is a term that indicates rather some skilful variation on what is already established: the recasting of a subject or a convention, even of a genre. In *Hamlet*, I would suggest, Shakespeare is doing both. He takes the established parameters of tragedy and bends them to new shapes; and he invents, in the modern sense, a form and definition of tragedy so convincing that it is easy to believe it to be archetypal, something so deeply representative of human nature and human understanding that it never needed to be invented at all.

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