The Mousetrap of *Hamlet*'s Mystery

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[(essay date 2004) *In the following excerpt, Ko interprets* Hamlet *as a mystery play involving several characters rather than just the title character, as is commonly assumed.*]

In this [essay] I examine another character who is a prolific master at the art of self-invention, namely, Hamlet. Yet I would also remember that the play *Hamlet* is a mystery play in the modern sense. From the very beginning to the end of the play, it continually raises questions that remain mysteries. For too long, however, these mysteries have been considered principally in relation to the eponymous hero. What would happen to our understanding of the other characters if we extended the mystery of the play to them? This is a question I would like to explore in this chapter. It is also a question that will lead to the ultimate mystery: What lies beyond the grave, and what does it matter what lies there?

**I**

*Hamlet* opens in gloomy darkness into which is thrown a question of identity: "Who's there?" (1.1.1). The inky cloak of midnight that obscures the answer does not prove, however, to be much of an obstacle as identities get quickly unfolded. Part of what makes it possible for this opening mini-drama to be resolved swiftly is the notion of identity assumed in the unfolding process. Barnardo, whose opening question above receives a counterdemand ("Stand and unfold yourself," l. 2), first identifies himself essentially as a friendly Dane ("Long live the King!" l. 3), before disclosing that he is indeed Barnardo, and thus signals the primary importance of his collective identity--that which erases individual distinctions, and hence is most easily distinguishable. Put in the language of the play, the "common" rather than the "particular" (1.2.74-75) becomes the distinguishing sign. But the question of identity does not, of course, end there. If there is one thing that distinguishes the play's eponymous hero, it is his continual insistence that his core identity cannot be subsumed under collective names or moulds of form. From his very first appearance in customary mourning attire, he displays the most commonly shared gestures and "shapes of grief" for the most "common theme" of the "death of fathers," only to insist that these outward shows cannot "denote [him] truly" (1.2.82-104). Indeed, perhaps punning on the inability of signs to "de*note*" him, his later outburst at Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for trying to sound him from his "lowest note to the top of [his] compass" (3.2.367) continues his assertion of autonomous illegibility; the "heart of [his] mystery" (l. 366), he insists, will elude fingering, sounding, or plucking out. While some readers, Polonius-like, have claimed to have discovered that heart, far more have more wisely taken Hamlet at his word and instead have focused on illuminating aspects of the play that make defining the character so difficult.

In following Hamlet at his word, however, too many readers have fallen into what I will argue is the true Mousetrap of the play: absorbed as much in Hamlet's mystery as Hamlet himself is, they have recapitulated a characteristic gesture of Hamlet and all self-engrossed selves in casually pinning down others--the "minor" characters--with formulated phrases and denying them the contours of human fullness. If we look again at the opening mini-drama, we can see how subtly the play introduces the problem of self-absorption in the seemingly unremarkable exchange between Francisco and Barnardo after identities are clarified:1

Fran.

For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter cold,

And I am sick at heart.

Bar.

Have you had quiet guard?

Fran.

                    Not a mouse stirring.

Bar.

Well, good night.

(1.2.8-11)

Francisco's rather gloomy expression of melancholy or disconsolation that looks forward to the abundant metaphors of sickness and disease in the play occasions an oddly irrelevant question from Barnardo (could heart sickness be caused by an unquiet guard?) and a rather dismissive farewell. Barnardo, having previously seen the ghost, is clearly so absorbed by his fear that he cannot properly listen nor attend to the troubles of Francisco's heart. The exchange between the two guards then becomes a drama of misconnection that, I hope to show, prefigures the misrecognitions that result from our and Hamlet's absorption in his mystery. Indeed, it is a measure of Hamlet's inadequacy as a reader of others that at a pivotal moment, he neglects to ask the central question of the play--"Who's there?"--before stabbing through the arras to kill the wrong man.

This is not to say that Hamlet's character is not endlessly fascinating; on the contrary, it is precisely the fascination that lures one into the trap of Hamlet-centeredness (and into ourselves, I would venture). The language of the play would also seem predominantly to endorse Hamlet's self-assertions. While the term motivation, not to mention subtext, was not available to the Elizabethans, a related term with similar resonances does appear from the start, and its various uses throw into relief the complexity of Hamlet's psychology. If "motive" is unproblematic in Horatio's explanation that the threat of Norway's military designs is "the main motive of [their] preparations" (1.1.105), assured causality breaks down in Horatio's warning to Hamlet against following the ghost to the cliff that beetles o'er its base:

The very place puts toys of desperation,

Without more motive, into every brain

That looks so many fadoms to the sea

And hears it roar beneath.

(1.4.75-8)

This picture of desperation induced without an identifiably correlative object (to twist Eliot's phrase about this play's missing ingredient) seems a perfect emblem for the difficulty of reaching fully into the capacious depths of Hamlet's inner being. It certainly contrasts with Polonius's foolishly identifying the "very cause of Hamlet's lunacy" (2.2.49), and supplying the narrative of the "declension" from "sadness" to "madness" (2.2.147-50) that relies on humor psychology. Indeed, all such analyses of Hamlet's "motive and [...] cue for passion" (2.2.571) come to seem attempts to impose mere words, words, words--contingencies, or factitious models of normative behavior--on a character who is too elusive, and fascinates by that very elusiveness.

Nonetheless, the problem of recognition, or misrecognition, attendant on that fascination is as much at the center of the play as Hamlet's character is. One way to think through this problem is to consider the conflict that James Calderwood has shown in the play between "the autonomous Hamlet" and "the instrumental Hamlet." If one Hamlet seeks individual "fullness" and self-definition "in his unrelated particularity," the other acknowledges and embraces an identity defined by location and instrumental function within a larger context--"the providential plot that governs human experience in Denmark and the revenge tragedy plot that governs dramatic experience in the Globe theatre."2 However, Calderwood ultimately argues that we see a resolution of the conflict at the end. In Hamlet's declaration at Ophelia's grave, "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane" (5.1.257-58), Calderwood suggests that "the anonymous 'This' becomes the unique 'I,' who is part of the paternally shared 'Hamlet,' who merges with the universal 'Dane'" (40-41). I would first note that Calderwood's argument has the important virtue of continually holding in balance two opposing terms, which thus sets him off from romantic, theological, historicist, and materialist readings both before and after him.3 Nonetheless, the continually jarring conflict between the "autonomous" and the "instrumental" identities of Hamlet (that I noted in the Introduction) makes it difficult to accept Calderwood's notion of "fusion" (40) between the two. And if there is one thing that intensifies this conflict, it is the quality of Hamlet that most defines him--his theatricality.

Our understanding of his theatricality has been hampered, however, by the long tradition of implicitly following the shrewdly purposeful logic of his famous address to the players. From a metadramatic point of view, the appeal to the "modesty of nature" (3.2.19) is also an assertion of confidence that a new naturalism distinguishes not only Burbage and company's "good" acting from that of their contemporaries, but also the personages of this play from those of previous drama. Within the drama proper, the address highlights Hamlet's own brand of "naturalism"--"Seems, madam? nay, it is, I know not 'seems'" (1.2.76)--that presumably distinguishes his genuine actions from those that "a man might play" (l. 84). As such, the address appears clearly intended to align naturalistic theatrical acting with an ethical decorum of sincerity. However, it is highly ironic that a character whose theatrical brilliance is manifested most fully through putting "an antic disposition on" (1.5.172) should appeal to the modesty of nature in articulating a new decorum of acting. As Robert Weimann puts it, there is an "extraordinary amount of incongruity" between Hamlet's "theory" and "his actual histrionic practice."4 More specifically, the new naturalism does not seem adequate either for an actor to perform the many instances in which Hamlet himself "tear[s] a passion to tatters" and "out-Herods Herod" (3.2.9-10, 14), or for Hamlet to individuate himself.5 On the one hand, it seems impossible for an actor not to "split the ears of the groundlings" (3.2.10-11) or "drown the stage with tears" (2.2.555) when Hamlet unpacks his heart like a whore in his "peasant slave" speech with a torrent of words like, "Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!" (2.2.580-81). On the other hand, precisely the words and actions that call for robustious histrionics most palpably separate Hamlet from his milieu, so that the very theatricality that he condemns as unnatural is utterly central to defining his individual character. Indeed, the question he poses to Laertes at Ophelia's grave reflects most of all on his own capacity to stun his audience into transfixed wonder:

                                                                      What is he whose grief

Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow

Conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand

Like wonder-wounded hearers?

(5.1.254-57)

As Hamlet enters into a competition to "outface" (l. 278)--or "out-conjure"--Laertes, his method of defining the unique quality of his love, and therefore of his being, is to out-brother the brother's outward display of Herodic passion. The possibility of Hamlet and Laertes recognizing their shared grief--their being similarly sick at heart at Ophelia's death--thus gets lost, not only because Laertes remains intent on avenging his father's and sister's deaths on Hamlet's "cursed head" (5.1.247), but also because Hamlet chooses to display through inimitably unnatural histrionics how incomparably beyond the modesty of nature his grief is.

The irony attendant on Hamlet's address to the players does not stop there, however. In foregrounding yet again Hamlet's deep-seated interest in play-acting, the address reinforces the link the play continually makes between the actor's art and Hamlet's actorliness, thus throwing into further (productive) confusion the distinction between outward show ("seems") and inward substance ("is"). It should first be remembered that even the most self-directed of Hamlet's soliloquies--those speeches uttered in isolation and hence seemingly representative of what "is"--were probably delivered to be shared with the audience.6 *Hamlet* the play appears keenly aware of this irony. After the players give a taste of their quality and exit in 2.2, Hamlet's declaration, "Now I am alone" (2.2.549), provides a segue into his "peasant slave" speech by noting his isolation--his being alone incapable of mustering the passionate urgency that even the player, "in a dream of passion" (l. 552), seems able to do, *and* his being on stage alone. However, Hamlet is not alone in being in front of the theatre audience; as all the self-reflexive allusions to the theatre make abundantly clear, Hamlet stands on stage as a *character.* Accordingly, as he goes on to compare himself invidiously to the player, the theatrical meanings of words like "motive" and "cue" color his display of "passion" as an "act"--however sincere--for an audience: "What would he do / Had he the motive and the cue for passion / That I have?" (2.2.560-62). Indeed, the index of sincerity becomes his capacity to reenact, in the moment and space of the soliloquy, the actions that a man might play (and that the player *has* played) on a stage; Hamlet proceeds, as if in an effort to substantiate his inner passion, to "cleave the general ear with horrid speech" (l. 563). In all this, the creative art of the actor playing Hamlet becomes continually more visible; the audience witnesses Hamlet the character emerging from the body of the actor, as though the actor's theatrics were chiseling out a human figure from a block of marble.

One consequence of this is that Hamlet's brand of self-display becomes so inextricably bound up with the actor's art of creating a character that Hamlet's theatrical antics come to seem as much to create, as express, his inner mystery. Continually rough-hewing new particulars that redefine and mystify the self, Hamlet becomes a dynamic composite of startling provisional moments: "I am but mad north-north-west" (2.2.378). No character before Hamlet raises self-display so compellingly to the art of self-genesis; if we think of Hamlet as the origin of subjectivity, that is because we know the artistry of self-dramatization primarily through him. The melancholy posture of the Romantics, in England and on the Continent, is only one strand of the confessional mode in poetry that scripts the contours of madness as the surface embodiments of inner being. Nonetheless, Hamlet never manages to escape a simple irony inherent in his theatrical model of selfhood, and which engenders such bitter resentment: inasmuch as his brand of self-creation proceeds through acts for an audience, the audience is necessary for self-validation.

In this context, I would briefly mention the narrator of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground.* Dostoyevsky's novella takes the form of a confessional journal by a former government bureaucrat who secludes himself underground for twenty years in an attempt, essentially, to assert his "individuality," to prove by living out his "disastrous, lethal fancies" that "he's a man and not a piano key."7 As he writes from his isolated chamber, however, he continually addresses himself to "imaginary readers" (122), even as he equally persistently insists that he is "writing this just for" (122) himself. In revealing contradictory desires for isolation and shared readership, the underground man's act of literal self-composition intimates that the self still seeks completion in public recognition. Accordingly, the underground man recalls Anthony Cascardi's notion that the dual desires for differentiating self-genesis and for the recognition offered by community are bound up together in that self-genesis also proceeds from a desire for recognition. Cascardi takes this coincidence of origins, as it were, as offering hope for a form of communal solidarity conditioned upon *mutual* recognition.8 Hamlet, for whom the created self lies outside the terms through which recognition can take place, throws such optimism into doubt. As he takes up with growing fervor inimitable modes of self-display, an alienating distance widens between himself and those whom he fixes in imitable, or stock, roles, even as the increasingly audience-directed nature of the display attests to a growing need for spectator recognition from them. His "tow'ring passion" (5.2.80) at Ophelia's grave is, in the end, a demand that his love be recognized as towering immeasurably above that of others, but by those who are thought to be no more like himself than a "cat" (5.1.292) is to "Hercules" (l. 291) precisely because they cannot recognize such a love. Put another way, it's not only that others are conceived merely as audience, but that they are thought of essentially as an audience of "mutes" (5.2.335)--those who don't deserve speaking parts. Clearly an imbalance exists at a fundamental level between the self and other that makes fully mutual recognition impossible. What is not clear is how this imbalance can be redressed so long as Hamlet remains Hamlet, so long as those qualities that most make him fascinating lie at the heart of the imbalance. Try as he might to think himself just another of God's creatures, the mind that can taunt and dodge with the riddling dexterity of "I am but mad north-north-west" will seek its own artistry in a differentiating, and in that respect alienating, self-creation. It is further critical to understand that mute absorption by readers and audiences in Hamlet's self-creation obscures their view of the ways in which the so-called minor characters can be fascinating, disturbing, equally resistant to fixed forms--if explored.

**II**

Claudius provides an instructive model of a character who can easily remain unexplored because of the power of Hamlet's glosses. In our first view of Claudius, we see a politician who seems so morally bankrupt that he can promiscuously couple the most incompatible words in a public display of shamelessness: he takes the Queen to wife "with a defeated joy ... With mirth in funeral, and with dirge in marriage" (1.2.10-12). Accordingly, it may appear that he is accurately if unceremoniously depicted, for example, by the torrent of words from Hamlet that I quoted earlier: "Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!" And yet who would have thought the old man to have so much conscience in him? Even before his remarkably unflinching self-assessment during the prayer scene (3.3), the depth of his conscience becomes visible in an aside that responds to Polonius's lament over deceptively "loos[ing]" (2.2.162) his daughter to Hamlet:

How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience.

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,

Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it

Than is my deed to my most painted word.

(3.1.49-52)

To judge from the diction, Claudius clearly understands that, even though Ophelia is here being prostituted in a certain manner, he has whored himself more reprehensibly. We could contrast these words of self-reproach to what Hamlet says to Ophelia in the ensuing nunnery scene: "I have heard of your paintings well enough. God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another" (3.1.142-44). The very fact that Claudius turns his gaze inward suggests that at least there is something--a certain substance--to be gazed at.

Hamlet's own words regarding Claudius actually point to the discrepancies in the character of Claudius, but Hamlet never registers the contradictions in any way that would render the King interesting. In one breath, Claudius is monstrously "remorseless"; yet the very speech in which that charge appears ends with Hamlet planning a play wherein he will catch the King's "conscience" (2.2.605). We thus get two equally restrictive, but incompatible, pictures of Claudius, one as the stock villain of Herodian dimensions, and the other as just another "guilty creature" (l. 589) who responds normatively to his conscience being pricked. The strategy of using the play is all the more remarkable since Hamlet must confer epistemological certainty on outward shows ("If 'a do blench / I know my course," ll. 597-98), when he had insinuated earlier that Claudius knows nothing but "seems" (1.2.76) and has also just witnessed an actor whose very "visage wann'd" (2.2.554) in a show of passion. To Hamlet, Claudius remains within a contradictory and alternating either/or binary, but once out of the Mousetrap of Hamlet's mind, it becomes possible to see that Claudius can be both, and can as a result be interestingly complex.

One could proceed along such lines with virtually any character in *Hamlet.* For less tame models for exploring the so-called minor characters, however, one can turn to creative rewritings of Shakespeare's plays by writers who have the most at stake but who operate with the most liberty, namely, women playwrights with decidedly feminist bearings. If Shakespeare is a burden for these playwrights, it is principally because some of his most famous and influential female characters embody and extend the legacy of patriarchy. A character in Margaret Clarke's *Gertrude and Ophelia* spells out this legacy in a stinging reading of Shakespeare's Gertrude that articulates with pointed economy the thinking of feminist critics like Janet Adelman:9

Look, what you don't understand is that as "The Mother," Gertrude is like an ideological sponge. The crap and piss left over from shaping the play is sucked up into the Gertrude character, where we can safely feel all the disgust and contempt we want. Then we're supposed to identify like crazy with Hamlet and his pals, feeling our ever-so-neat fear and pity, because all the nasty bits have been displaced into her. Well, I'm here to tell you it's a crock. I identify with Gertrude and I don't like the bad press she's been getting.10

The premise here is that Gertrude is an outgrowth of, and repository for, a patriarchal sexual anxiety that figures the maternal body as a source of corruption. If the speaker identifies with Gertrude, it is presumably because she, as a woman, has also suffered similar kinds of ideological scripting. But the speaker is also a playwright (named the Playwright). She is, in fact, the leading character, whose action in the play consists of rewriting *Hamlet* as "Gertrude and Ophelia" and staging a production of it within the play with herself playing the role of Gertrude. The play-within-the-play structure is flipped inside out, that is, to give prominence to the act of rewriting, and to celebrate the liberty with which one can, in the act of rewriting, transform the burden of Shakespeare. As the Playwright herself says in response to the charge that she's merely "writing inside other people's plays," "I'm doing it to write myself out of the world that Shakespeare had to write in. The world we still live in because of the power of his plays" (S14).

In this, the Playwright and her playwright Margaret Clarke are also engaging in a form of revisionary criticism that Carol Thomas Neely calls "transformational." This kind of criticism differs from the two kinds into which Neely feels that most feminist responses to Shakespeare fall: "justificatory," which concedes that many female characters are frankly disappointing but attributes the cause to the "limiting conceptions of women" in the "male-defined and male-dominated world of the plays"; and "compensatory," which compensates for the neglect that "women characters" of "complexity and power" have suffered by focusing "a new kind of attention" on them.11 Transformational criticism, while it overlaps considerably with these two modes, attempts to go beyond them by essentially looking in the text for opportunities to struggle free from, and thereby to transform, the patriarchal structures that inform gender relations and shape character. Thus Carol Neely feels, for example, that critics "must 'tell' Ophelia's 'story'" as a way of excavating the play's "matriarchal subtext" (9). Margaret Clarke tells the stories of both Ophelia and Gertrude, but with the greater liberty afforded a creative writer.12

Clarke does retain--and indeed bring attention to--the limitations under which the characters operate in Shakespeare's original text. Ophelia, for example, remains very much a victim, being pregnant with the child of her rapist, Hamlet. As for Gertrude, she is shown to be very much an agent, if not a puppet, of a patriarchal order. In fact, part of what drives Ophelia to suicide is that when she turns to Gertrude for maternal solace, Gertrude remains most interested in protecting Hamlet and thereby preserving the royal line. Nonetheless, both women are endowed by Clarke with considerable complexity and self-consciousness. Furtive signs of an inner life beyond what is explicitly depicted are provided, for example, in the suggestion that Yoric, the King's jester, was killed by the King for having introduced Gertrude to feelings--presumably romantic--that left her incapable of being emotionally "satisfied with a queen's life" (S15). More importantly, after Ophelia's suicide, Gertrude is given a moment of poignant self-reflection that promises the possibility--for herself and for the audience--of transformation:

Ophelia, if you hear me, if such a place exists where you can hear me, forgive me. You knew that all I did was for him. ... In being true to him, I wronged you. I was as true and as wrong as any woman can ever be.(S15)

In this reflection, Gertrude recognizes that in having taken Hamlet's side, she has been colluding with a patriarchal power that expresses itself in political and sexual aggression; she also recognizes that the primary form of collusion was her "obsession" (S14) with Hamlet that made him the only person worthy of care and interest. *Gertrude and Ophelia* as a whole then provides a reading of the structures within which the characters of *Hamlet* live and operate, but imagines in the end the possibility of escaping those structures.

Much the same could be said of the work of other playwrights like Bryony Lavery and Jane Pendergrast. In Lavery's *Ophelia,* for example, it is Ophelia who takes the pen, rewriting *Hamlet* to tell her story of literal survival; she does not suffer a doubtful death, but is the victim of a murder attempt by Gertrude, which she manages to escape by holding her breath under water. She is also given a hopeful future as the play ends, even though she is carrying her brother Laertes' child. In such rewritings, the playwrights are very much crushing things as Malvolio does, though to a pulp and not just a little. In doing so, however, they can be said to be similarly, I would argue, running with hints offered by the text itself. Certainly a crucial difference exists in that Malvolio looks to the text to confirm and authorize his fantasies, while the playwrights are using and transgressing the text in order to escape it (and thereby authorize their own visions). Nonetheless, I believe oddities in the text supply the starting points for all of them. More specifically for the playwrights, they often appear simply to take the road less traveled by when confronted with a hallmark of *Hamlet*--a fork in the text, and one that has a distinguishing feature: one road of the fork leads back to Hamlet, but the other extends the question "Who's there?" to other characters and enables indulgence in extravagant variations of How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth? Put another way, the other road leads to alternative playworlds--parallel worlds that are neither real nor unreal, but which offer vantage points from which to reassess the main playworld. Such a parallel world is rather like what Susanna Kaysen calls the "parallel universe ... of the insane," a world whose odd and defining feature is "that although it is invisible from this side, once you are in it you can easily see the world you came from" and see how different its features can appear.13 This parallel world holds its own mirror up to the playworld proper, though it is a funhouse mirror that will bend and distort shapes out of proportion.

It is no coincidence that Ophelia has served as an entry point--or ghostly guide--into a parallel playworld for so many playwrights. As scholarly commentators have also recognized for generations, Ophelia's songs during the mad scene gesture ambiguously towards a range of experiences from which the onstage persona would seem decidedly distant; a textual crossroads appears, that is, as the image of the pure maiden who is pliant to her father's wishes collides with, for example, the unexpected "matter" (4.5.174) of the "Valentine" song:

By Gis, and by Saint Charity,

Alack, and fie for shame!

Young men will do't if they come to't,

By Cock, they are to blame.

Quoth she, "Before you tumbled me,

You promised me to wed."

(He answers)

"So would I 'a' done, by yonder sun,

And thou hadst not come to my bed."

(ll. 58-66)

What's jarring is of course not only that Ophelia should sing such a bawdy song at all (raising the question of where she might have learned the song14), but that it might parallel an actual experience in Ophelia's past;15 what's more, while telling the sordid but archetypal tale of the abused and abandoned maid, the song also paradoxically figures the maid as an adventurous suitor who approaches the man.

Given the shock value of the song and the extended length of the mad scene, it is difficult to accept the suggestion that the incongruities introduced by the song should go "unnoticed."16 More fundamentally still, the scene is clearly designed--as the text explicitly indicates--to "move / The hearers to collection" (8-9) and "strew ... conjectures" (14-15) about the possible darker meanings of Ophelia's disordered "words ... winks and nods and gestures" (10-11). Indeed, as the scene proceeds, more material for strewing conjectures about Ophelia's sexual experience appears; among the wild flowers that Ophelia distributes, for example, are well-known abortives like rue, about which John Gerard's *The Herbal or General History of Plants* (1597) notes: "The juyse taken with wine purgeth the women after their deliuerance, driuing forth the secondine, the dead childe and the unnatural birth."17 Obviously, neither the scene nor the play as a whole will provide anything approaching a definitive answer to the question of how "real" the matter of the Valentine song is. But that seems precisely the point: the more fully one enters into what Maynard Mack has famously called the "interrogative mood"18 of the play, the more difficult it becomes to distinguish between seemingly straightforward verities (e.g., that Ophelia is not sexually initiated) and strained interpretations (e.g., that she is not only initiated but pregnant). Choosing any direction requires some degree of denial and selective attention.

In *Gertrude and Ophelia,* then, Margaret Clarke simply follows one suggestive possibility (as actors in the freer space of the rehearsal room routinely do). But other possibilities are also available. As an examination of another of Ophelia's songs will indicate, even the common assumption that Ophelia's love interest could only be Hamlet is itself the result of selective attention. The first of Ophelia's songs begins by following the conventional ballad-narrative of a lady searching for her absent lover, but introduces a significant twist by making the lover's death the cause of his absence:

"How should I your true love know

From another one?"

"By his cockle hat and staff,

And his sandal shoon ..."

"He is dead and gone, lady,

He is dead and gone,

At his head a grass-green turf,

At his heels a stone ..."

"White his shroud as the mountain snow

Larded all with sweet flowers,

Which bewept to the ground did not go

With true-love showers."

I believe Harold Jenkins is right in thinking, contrary to the still pervasive view, that the three stanzas belong to one song;19 they certainly make sense together in telling the story of the absent lover whose pilgrimage leads to the final destination of the grave. I would also agree--with Jenkins and just about everyone else--that the most obvious and plausible interpretation of the song is that it reflects Ophelia's double loss of Hamlet and her father; the confusion of the lament for a lost lover with the lament for a dead father seems appropriately to reflect not only Ophelia's disjointed state, but also the actual involvement of Hamlet in her father's death. Nonetheless, insofar as the song is a lament for a dead lover, it also points explicitly away from both Hamlet and Polonius. Who might this lover be then? Does he bear any relation to "the false steward that stole his master's daughter" (4.5.173)? Is that a door that beckons, promising entry to a parallel world? I would note here that feminist commentary tends to read Ophelia's mad songs and exclamations, not as indirect allusions to actual events, but as revelations of her "censored feelings."20 Such "compensatory" responses suffer, however, from an either/or binary between the "false" Ophelia constructed by patriarchal oppression and the "true" Ophelia expressed only in madness. I believe this latter binary restricts Ophelia within a model of psychological consistency that the play resolutely undermines; Ophelia is most enigmatic and worthy of critical interest when she can be equally true in being both a self-effacing picture of genuine compliance and a defiant sexual suitor or simply a woman with a romantic past.

In entertaining these thoughts, I am not making the kind of interpretive claims one would stand by; rather, I am again pointing out that in following an interpretive path through the text, readers do not follow a single, straight path, but continually choose one direction from multiple possibilities. More importantly, I want to emphasize that the more one strays from the beaten path, the more one comes upon opportunities to imagine a challenging inner life for the so-called minor characters. And the more one seizes those opportunities, the more decentered the play becomes: attention shifts from Hamlet to the degree that one imagines other characters departing from normative models of human behavior. That desire to change the balance of attention, as it were, is clearly behind Bryony Lavery's choice in her *Ophelia* to have Gertrude attempt to murder Ophelia. This last twist, I would note, has actually been suggested independently by a Renaissance scholar (Stephen Ratcliffe) as part of the storyline of *Hamlet.* In Ratcliffe's reading of the play, it is significant that the account of Ophelia's death is delivered by Gertrude and from an eye-witness position. To be sure, given that swimming was not a widely acquired skill in the Renaissance, and given the possibility that the sight could have been witnessed from a distance, suspicion of foul play need not be raised. (The suggestion that Gertrude performs merely as a conventional messenger provokes the question of why a messenger is not then enlisted to perform the speech.) Nonetheless, as Ratcliffe points out, the language of the speech obliquely hints at darker actions at work.21 Included in Ophelia's garlands are "long purples / That liberal shepherds give a grosser name" but which "cull-cold maids" call "dead men's fingers" (4.7.169-71). Long purples, or dogstones as liberal shepherds might call them, are clearly phallic symbols, and as such, intimate sexual violation. Further, slippages in the syntax raise questions of agency, as when Gertrude says, "There on the pendant boughs her crownet weeds / Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke" (ll. 172-73). The subject of the main clause should of course be "she"; instead, an envious sliver breaks in, reenacting in the abrupt shift in agency the action of an envious intruder at work. The thought is fetched from afar, but the possibility is raised by Ratcliffe that Gertrude has witnessed, or was somehow complicit in, a "rape and/or murder."22

Without affirming or refuting this reading, I would add that Gertrude is continually shadowed by suspicion in the play. And at least for the audience, her own words sometimes add fuel to the fire; after reluctantly agreeing to speak with Ophelia at the outset of Ophelia's mad scene, Gertrude adds an aside:

To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,

Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss.

So full of artless jealousy is guilt,

It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.

(4.5.17-20).

If the first two lines provide something of an explanation for Gertrude's unwillingness to see Ophelia, the last two lines clearly refer to the fear that the reasons for what the play calls "occulted guilt" (3.2.80) will be spilled in the very attempt to conceal them. The thought operates with an epigrammatic logic similar to that in Hamlet's conviction that "murder, though it have no tongue, will speak / With most miraculous organ" (2.2.593-94). Though we are never told what the guilt specifically refers to, its concealed nature clearly rules out general guilt about the o'erhasty marriage (which is the candidate most favored by commentators). The more likely reference is to her complicity in Old Hamlet's murder, though, the long history of critical debate notwithstanding, we can never know for sure the degree of her complicity.23 Nonetheless, the specter of her complicity is continually raised--most explicitly in Hamlet's charge that she "kill[ed] a king, and marr[ied] with his brother" (3.4.29)--so that some form of suspicion attends her actions. This suspicion can then become the motive for turning an inquiring gaze towards her and extending the mystery of the play to her.

I should now confess that some of the extravagant possibilities that were considered above were raised during, and incorporated into, a production of *Hamlet* by the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express that I was involved in. In fact, the Renaissance scholar I cited (Stephen Ratcliffe) was a party to this madness, and his essay on Gertrude that I quoted from above arose from the production. Though we encountered resistance from many quarters, and though the actors' signals to the audience were often ambiguous, I would still maintain that for the actors and many members of the audience, the play became, because of the suggestions of darker intrigues, much more than the story of Hamlet. It became a genuine mystery play.

**III**

To pursue bits of text as gateways to parallel worlds, as in the above examples, is to acknowledge that the play is, as Katharine Maus has persuasively argued, "radically synecdochic, endlessly referring the spectators to events, objects, situations, landscapes that cannot be shown to them."24 In this respect, Horatio's gesture of greeting in the opening darkness of the play--extending a hand, presumably, as he replies "A piece of him" in response to Barnardo's "What, is Horatio here?" (1.1.19)--stands as an apt metaphor for the dramatic use of synecdoche. However, the moment is also inadequate as a metaphor in that synecdoche also slides in this play into a version of occupatio: a self-negating gesture of revelation that neither fully negates nor reveals. "But that I am forbid / To tell the secrets of my prison-house, / I could a tale unfold ..." (1.5.13-15); "Had I but time ... I could tell you ..." (5.2.336-67). That is to say, these self-negating gestures stand as metaphors as well for answers to the question "Who's there?" The fact that these gestures are performed from somewhere beyond the boundaries of this world is also fortuitous; they are reminders that death holds the power to reveal that which is hidden--that which will ultimately define who's there. "Then shall I know even as also I am known" (I Corinthians, 13.12, *King James*). Even as death is conferred this power to reveal the truth of identity, however, the identity of death itself remains, as the text hints, "doubtful" (5.1.227). As is fitting in this play of uncertainties, the vision of death is radically divided--it accommodates both a secular horror of absolute finitude and belief in a sanctified (or damned) afterlife.

The gravedigger scene (5.1) provides the clearest illustration of the secular view of death. As scholars from as long ago as Willard Farnham and Theodore Spencer have recognized, the Medieval-Renaissance tradition of the Dance of Death enters into the graveyard scene;25 somewhere behind Hamlet's musings on the indiscriminate destructiveness of death is the image of an antic figure of death leading a decomposed, skeletal body in a grisly dance. What is most disturbing about the entire scene, however, as scholars like Michael Neil and Robert Watson have more recently argued, is that the Dance of Death is present in *Hamlet* less as a memento mori--a reminder of death intended to motivate pious remembrance of the soul's afterlife--than as the expression of "annihilationist" anxieties.26 As Hamlet meditates with horror on the "revolution" (5.1.90) of countless lords and ladies into skulls, we are reminded that in the Dance, the figure of Death--though often portrayed as a macabre jester--is also a grotesquely parodic version of the dead person, or a "doppelgänger";27 that is, the Dance of Death and the graveyard scene serve as reminders that beneath all the surface particulars that would seem to define and distinguish a human being lies Death. "Do not for ever with thy vailed lids / Seek for thy noble father in the dust" (1.2.70-71), Gertrude had implored Hamlet in Act 1; by Act 5, the act of seeking a person in the grave becomes literalized as Hamlet continually asks variations of "Who's there?" by a grave: "Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer?" (5.1.98-99); "What man dost thou dig it for?" (l. 130); "What woman then?" (l. 132); "Who is this they follow?" (l. 218).

It is thus no coincidence that in the grave dug for Ophelia, the skull of Yorick the jester should appear; individual differences suffer obliteration--as if one had never been "Such-a-one" (l. 84)--as the antic figure of death overtakes and nullifies each life:

But age with his stealing steps

Hath clawed me in his clutch,

And hath shipped me into the land,

As if I had never been such.

(ll. 71-74)

Further, if there is any gesture towards metaphysical comfort in the scene, it is mordantly undermined. Though the scene begins with a discussion of a key theological distinction--who does and does not deserve "Christian burial" (l. 1)--that distinction joins the differences that suffer obliteration in the scene. With all the parodic logic, errant literalism, and emphasis on the sameness of the fate for the multiplicity of skulls that emerge from the grave, it becomes meaningless whether one is buried in "ground unsanctified" (l. 229) or not. Simply put, death is understood as absolute extinction, and this Death is the only answer the scene offers to the question "Who's there?"

Looked at further from the annihilationist perspective, the ultimate Mousetrap of the play is the gravedigger's "pit" (l. 96) into which all bodies fall. The space of the pit on stage, after all, would have been the trap--the space beneath the trap-door--and, as such, may have invited morbid analogies with contemporary "devices, snares, and gins" that used a "trap-door" or a "pit" (according to Edward Topsell) to catch mice.28 Even if the audience avoids the mousetrap of Hamlet's mind, the play reminds us, it will nonetheless eventually join all those characters who have toppled like mice into the grave. Adding to the brutal and grotesque irony of the last Act is a series of puns on the word "arms" that begins with the gravedigger linking himself with Adam. After remarking that "there is no ancient gentlemen but gard'ners, ditchers, and grave-makers" because "they hold up Adam's profession," the gravedigger adds the punchline: "The Scripture says Adam digg'd; could he dig without arms?" (ll. 29-37). The pun on "arms" mischievously associates the grave-maker with the most ancient line of the gentry; in doing so, it also recalls that the defining labor that is imposed by God on the exiled Adam--working the soil--contains within it the action of burial and thus a reminder of the punishment of mortality: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it was thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis, 3.19, *King James*).

The macabre punning in *Hamlet* does not stop here, however. The man who eventually inherits Denmark is a kind of grave-maker himself whose very name makes him eminently fit for gravedigging--Fortinbras. What Hamlet says he "see[s]" as Fortinbras's army marches towards Poland reinforces the sense that Fortinbras's strong arms are made for digging graves:

The imminent death of twenty thousand men,

That for a fantasy and trick of fame

Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot ...

Which is not tomb enough and continent

To hide the slain.

(4.4.60-65)

The implied picture here is that of a mass burial in which cadavers overflow the earth itself. Fortinbras's words upon seeing the dead bodies of the Danish royal family strewn on the floor are thus eerily and ironically appropriate: "O proud death, / What feast is toward in thine eternal cell ... ?" (5.2.364-65). If "funeral bak'd-meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (1.2.180-81) for the wedding of Claudius and Gertrude, the wedding party itself becomes the new meat to furnish forth the funeral tables; and with Fortinbras now in charge of the feast, the tables will surely never be short of newly baked meats.

To take the secular view of death in this play is then to concede that it ultimately makes no difference whether one is Hamlet or one of the "twenty thousand men" in Fortinbras's army. This is a devastating concession given that the play also centralizes the distinction between Hamlet's mode of self-invention and the kind of seemingly willing self-erasure that produces militaristic solidarity. If we take up the tantalizing mystery that surrounds the "minor" characters as they too struggle between autonomy and conformity, the tragedy of abruption extends fully to all who die by the play's end. If death brings truth, it is the comfortless truth that the expectation of revelation--something that illuminates the truth of identity or provides purposeful closure--is a delusion. Another irony that attends the entry of Fortinbras seems meant to dramatize this point. Although Claudius suggests the "heavens" will respeak the "trumpet" and the "cannons" (5.2.272-74) that announce Hamlet's hits in the duel with Laertes, the final echoes we hear turn out to be the flourish announcing the arrival of a new *earthly* king; indeed, the three flourishes in succession--the two marking Hamlet's hits and the "warlike volley" (5.2.357) from the Norwegian army--seem calculated to recall the three trumpets of the Archangel announcing the Second Coming. All we are left with in this End is the heap of bodies whose idiosyncratic stories remain unexplained and who had inhabited a world whose elusive plot leads only to death.

In this context, it is tempting (for me) to imagine how the play might originally have ended on stage. The available evidence indicates that the practice of performing jigs at the end of plays continued during the period in which *Hamlet* was performed.29 The last thing the audience saw, in other words, would not have been a solemn procession ordered by Fortinbras, but a jig. What might the effect have been? And what kind of a jig might it have been? The link Hamlet makes in the play between "a jig" and a "tale of bawdry" (2.2.500) sums up what seems to have been the common expectation regarding the genre of jigs, and the text of an extant jig like "Singing Simpkin" reaffirms this.30 I wonder, however, whether Shakespeare's company might not have performed a Dance of Death. The Dance seems to have been a common theme, after all, in a genre that lent itself to adaptation for the stage, namely, the broadside ballad, as in the circa-1569 "Daunce and Song of Death."31 The illustration that accompanies this particular ballad also highlights a feature of the Dance that is common to many surviving illustrations--its theatricality. In the middle of the illustration is a deep, rectangular pit that recalls a stage trap; lying criss-crossed across the pit are a shovel and a spade, on top of which is precariously balanced a chair made of bones; and on that chair sits a gruesome figure called "Sickness, Death's Minstrel," playing a pipe and a tabor. Around this figure the usual cast of characters--ranging from "The King" to "The Fool"--is led in a circular dance by skeletons. Presumably the skeletons sing the verses that are printed, the first of which begins, "Come dance this trace ye people all." If such a jig did get performed, it would have provided, with due macabre irony, a parting stage emblem of the annihilationist fear that animates so much of the last act.

And yet a radically contrasting view of death equally holds sway in the play. Most obviously, the ghost returns from the bourne of the undiscovered country and drives the action with his commands to Hamlet. Far from being decayed into loam that might "stop a beer-barrel" (5.1.212), he is an intensified version of the self, distilled to the desire for vengeance that possesses and animates him: "O horrible, O horrible, most horrible" (1.5.80). He is also there *in body,* though it is presumably in the virtual body of the soul (*similitudo corporis*) that is capable of experiencing the unspeakable horrors of its "prison-house" (1.5.14). The presence of the ghost is moreover fully compatible with attitudes towards death and the afterlife that all the characters, including Hamlet, more generally return to. As I discussed in the Introduction, even as Hamlet meditates in the final act on the power of death to evacuate meaning from life, he turns towards Providence, assured that the be-all is the "readiness" (5.2.222) of his soul--a "thing immortal" (1.4.67), as he had earlier said--for what Providence holds in store for the hereafter. Fittingly, the instant eulogy Horatio utters upon Hamlet's death looks to heavenly intercession in the next world: "Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" (5.2.359-60). This "rest" that Horatio envisions is clearly the kind of peace, rather than dormancy, that Hamlet wishes for the ghost of his father: "Rest, rest, perturbed spirit!" (1.5.182).

What does one do with this contradiction in the attitude towards death in this play? In the older humanist view, as articulated most recently (and somewhat surprisingly) by Stephen Greenblatt, the contradictory attitudes form two points in a progression from spiritual sickness to enlightenment; if sickness reveals itself in revulsion and fear about corporeal decay, the sickness is also "the spiritual precondition of a liberated spirit that finds a special providence in the fall of a sparrow."32 However, it's not only a matter of characters holding inconsistent views that eventually get reconciled; the play itself remains inconsistent, as exemplified in the way in which the play incorporates contradictions regarding the ghost into its very structure. To elaborate a point from above, the play begins in a fully enchanted space in which a ghost returns from death to direct the hero's action, but it also shows, without obvious irony or promptings to take notice of the discrepancy, the hero expressing frustrated anguish that no "traveller" returns from the country of the dead to verify, not only what, but *whether* there is "something after death" (3.1.77-78). Such anguish, which is the "dread" (l. 77) that "perchance" (l. 64) conscious experience may continue after death, is a compatible counterpart to Hamlet's fears about living in a disenchanted world in which death is absolutely final; however, it is incompatible with a world in which ghosts do return from a purgatorial space. As Greenblatt himself has eloquently remarked (rather undermining what he said in the quotation above), *Hamlet* combines "wonder and skepticism" regarding ghosts in ways that are "contradictory, slippery, and complex" (195) and without "a clear move from ... credulity to disenchantment" (199).

Indeed, uncertainty attends the status of ghosts from beginning to end. In its first appearance, the ghost of Hamlet's father "*fade*[s] on the crowing of the cock" (1.1.157), despite the seemingly palpable materiality of its presence ("Such was the armor he had on," l. 60); in like fashion, the ghost ambiguously fades from the play, appearing only to Hamlet in its final appearance (in Gertrude's closet), and then disappearing altogether. At the same time, the presence of a new ghostly father--the Holy Ghost--becomes more acutely prominent; it is as though, from a structural point of view, the fading of one ghost ushered in a new ghost. To press this point further, the play as a whole seems to recapitulate the eerie sense contained in Horatio's celebrated depiction of dawn that a new ghostly presence in the form of a personified morn "echoes" and replaces the displaced ghost ("But look, the morn in russet mantle clad / Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill," 1.1.166-67).33 The use of personification is further suggestive; it intimates the role of fictive construction in ghostly hauntings. Of course no ghost in the play--whether paternal or heavenly--is simply a fictive construction, or, for that matter, an illusion; nonetheless, the recursive movement of fading and appearing as circumstances change registers the suspicion that ghostly presences are also fictive reflections of deep-seated human needs. That is, the frightening confrontation with mortality when one can experience self-extinction with sudden clarity comes to seem the emotional ground beneath the play's machinery of spiritual presences. As Robert Watson puts it, "God the Father in act 5 proves to be merely an extension of the father's ghost in act 1"; each provides a redemptive purpose or vision that allows Hamlet "to flee the specters of inevitable decay and unaccommodated death," but each appears significantly constituted by "projective beliefs about afterlife" and by "how badly [Hamlet] needs faith at any moment."34 If there is a confusion of "empirical reality and psychological invention" (87) in the play, it is the kind of confusion that characterizes "compelling illusions" (75). However, I would argue with Watson's claim that "*Hamlet* deeply condemns the illusions of afterlife" that a pervasive "cultural mythology of denial" (76) creates. The complex, paradoxical dramaturgy of *Hamlet* gives body to, even as it exposes the projective capacity of, human needs and desires; in doing so, the play memorializes in its very structure the divided nature of the characteristic human response to mortality.

Indeed, the two ghostly fathers in the play further express distinct and incommensurate fantasies of the afterlife (thus making it further necessary to qualify Robert Watson's idea that God the Father is "merely an extension" of the father's ghost). God the Father, as emphasized in the play by the allusion to Matthew, attends to the fall of even a sparrow, thus assuring that all human beings, as the highest creatures on earth, share something constitutive in being privileged to receive the highest of divine care. "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered," the relevant passage says in Matthew (*King James,* 10.30). If death nullifies all the carefully cultivated distinctions among human beings, the common promise of heaven restores the highest distinction to human beings and redeems death. In the universal sweep of this redemptive vision, that which is collectively shared acquires primacy as the loss of individual distinction comes to seem the precondition for afterlife survival. However, the onstage image of the afterlife the play provides in the ghost of Hamlet's father is that of a self that continues in its distinctiveness and vigorous intensity. The ghost's parting command to Hamlet--"Remember me" (1.5.91)--is not a general plea for the souls in purgatory, but an individual mandate concerning only him: Remember *Me.*

To be sure, an analogy might be drawn here to the individual nature of Catholic suffrages (intercessionary prayers and masses said for individuals who paid for them through bequests), and thus one could certainly hear in the ghost's command an anguished resistance to the Protestant repudiation of Purgatory.35 Nonetheless, the ghost's command contrasts directly with what Ophelia says as she finishes the final song of the mad scene:

               "He is gone, he is gone

               And we cast away moan,

               God 'a' mercy on his soul!"

And of all Christians' souls, I pray God.

(4.5.197-200)

Ophelia moves from lamenting one death to praying for blessing for all the dead, thus reenacting a supplication that permeates the *Book of Common Prayer* from the Litany to the Burial of the Dead. And rightly so. The number of deaths in *Hamlet* multiplies as the play goes on; it includes not only those who die on stage, but those whose deaths are reported (including Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's), are conjectured (Fortinbras's soldiers'), and are materially evidenced in skulls and remains. The need to remember all the dead swells, that is, as the play goes on. The ghost's command and Ophelia's prayer then carry into the afterlife the separate desires for individual distinction and collective solidarity. That the two desires remain, in this play, irreconcilable is brought home by the fact that Hamlet's pursuit of the ghost's command breeds in him a lasting resolve to send Claudius to "hell" (3.2.95), even as Hamlet himself represents piety as recognizing the presence of providence in the fall of all creatures great and small. But the play is significantly not alone, I would note, in recognizing this tension. In a passage from Thomas More's *The Supplication of Souls* that reflects generally on *Hamlet,* if not on Ophelia, souls from Purgatory observe the ongoing lives of their wives and children and bitterly lament their erasure from the memories of the living:

We see there our children too, whom we loved so well, pipe, sing, and dance, and no more think on their fathers' souls then [*sic*] on their old shoes, saving that sometimes commeth out "God have mercy on all Christian souls."36

As Stephen Greenblatt remarks about this passage, "The dead in their individuality, their intense suffering, their urgent claims on personal remembrance, are consigned to oblivion or become at best an anonymous, generalized category, the 'all Christian souls' casually invoked in a ritual phrase by thoughtless children" (146). With its two distinct ghosts, *Hamlet* brings to life not only two ways of envisioning afterlife survival but also the conflict between them.

In this respect, we might remark that the intricately paradoxical structure of *Hamlet* is itself the missing objective correlative that Eliot blamed for the play's failure to accomplish "complete adequacy of the external to the emotion."37 The play's irreconcilable visions of death affirm both annihilationist fears and beliefs about afterlife survival, even as those beliefs endure questioning as fictive constructions. Moreover, the vision of afterlife survival itself divides, promising continued individuation and collective sharing. These contradictions *are* the externals to the deepest, most privately held emotions. These contradictions also define the contours of the world that all the characters, and not merely Hamlet, live in. In this world of structural impasses, ghosts are and are not real. Parallel worlds do and do not exist. The furtive inner lives of the minor characters are at once of great pitch and moment and of absolutely no consequence. The simplest and the most profound question is "Who's there?"

**Notes**

1. The germ of the idea in this paragraph comes from Ralph Cohen, artistic director of the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express.

2. James L. Calderwood, *To Be and Not to Be,* 45, 44, 36.

3. In recent memory the critic who has most unashamedly embraced the romantic Hamlet has been Harold Bloom, who cites the reflections on providence in 5.2 (10-11, 202-6) as primary evidence of Hamlet's final engagement in, and not break from, an estranged self-creation. Hamlet's apparent deferral to providence actually asserts an "authentic disinterestedness" that takes him "beyond love" and "beyond our touch" and "returns [him] fully to himself" with the knowledge that he "truly has no world except himself" (*Ruin the Sacred Truths* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989], 58-64). Bloom seems to have been motivated here to argue against "weak" theological readings that see the completion of Hamlet's moral development in his supposedly complete self-surrender in act 5, as exemplified in John W. Mahon's assertion that "Hamlet's development as a character" entails his recognizing "that Providence"--not he--"is the principal architect of human affairs." Such readings see an erasure of the "autonomous" Hamlet, though often to point to a kind of divine irony that enables the emergence of a more powerful, or at least "successful," self from its negation ("Providential Visitations in *Hamlet,*" 45, 51). Aligned with such theological readings, and thus further aligned against Bloom's, are political readings that also see self-effacement in act 5 but judge from an entirely different ideological angle. Karin Coddon, for instance, locates *Hamlet* within a political context in which madness, or "disordered subjectivity ... is identified as the site of potential transgression and the object of authority and control." Hence, the "series of maxims on authority and obedience to natural and divine order" invoked by Claudius participates in discursive strategies that work to induce Hamlet's "acquiescence to providential design" and "transform 'distracted' subjectivity into noble subjection." Though Coddon ends by suggesting that the play does not fully "contain" the unruly energies of madness, the political allegory and its fault lines are clear: a language that values the effort to achieve universality may seem to express spiritual need but is only a tool of coercive Power ("'Suche Strange Desygns': Madness, Subjectivity, and Treason in *Hamlet* and Elizabethan Culture," *Renaissance Drama* 20 [1989], 53, 62, 69, 70). Along similar lines, but towards a different conclusion, the cultural materialist Michael Bristol, in *Carnival and Theater,* begins his reading by suggesting a disturbingly subversive power in the carnival laughter of Hamlet that directs itself at death, for in grotesquely making light of bodies, including the King's, he also undermines and "reinterprets the basic distinctions of social life" (187); the end result for Hamlet, the argument continues, is that his meditative confrontation with mortality in act 5 effects a (desirable) "dissolution of individuality" because identity is recognized as a "mere surface artifact" (192-93). This recognition is seen to produce a crisis, however, that renders Hamlet essentially immobile and all too ready for death, so that the "authority" of carnival subversion passes to those apparently materialist communitarians, the gravediggers, who "teach indifference to all contingent manifestations of social individuality" (193). To conclude, if Bloom's reading sees the private world of the autonomous individual achieving transcendent status in *Hamlet,* theological and recent materialist-historicist readings discover the individual succumbing, for better and for worse, to larger external forces. I do not find that any of these readings fully encompasses the action of the play, especially in the final act. Hamlet's expressions of achieved faith surely argue against Bloom's deriding the importance of divinity to Hamlet, while his final self-regarding actions neither show the transcendent disinterestedness that is the final stage of Hamlet's self-authorship according to Bloom nor square with theological and historicist assertions of self-effacement.

4. Robert Weimann, "Mimesis in *Hamlet,*" in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory,* ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), 283.

5. Roy Battenhouse has made a similar point in "The Significance of Hamlet's Advice to the Players" (*The Drama of the Renaissance: Essays for Leicester Bradner,* ed. Elmer M. Blistein [Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1970]).

6. John Barton has made this point in arguing that "in a soliloquy a character reaches out to the audience" (*Playing Shakespeare,* 102).

7. Fyodor Mikhaylovich Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground, White Nights, The Dream of a Ridiculous Man,* trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Signet, 1961), 113-15.

8. See Introduction, n. 12.

9. Janet Adelman, in *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, "Hamlet" to "The Tempest"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), argues that Gertrude is not so much "an independent character" (27) as "preeminently mother as other" (30), who, failing as the "idealized" (34) madonna, becomes a fantasized fleshly whore who brings death and contamination to Hamlet and his world.

10. Margaret Clarke, *Gertrude and Ophelia,* printed in full in *Theatrum,* April/May 1993: S1-S15; S2.

11. Carol Thomas Neely, "Feminist modes of Shakespearean criticism: compensatory, justificatory, transformational," *Women's Studies* 9 (1981): 6-8. "Justificatory" criticism can be found most comprehensively perhaps in Linda Bamber's widely circulated argument that Shakespeare accords a Self in tragedies only to males (see her *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982]). Carolyn Heilbrun (in "The Character of Hamlet's Mother," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 8.2 [1957]) offers a classic example of "compensatory" criticism in her effort to give Gertrude "depth" and "the specific critical attention [she] deserves" (201) by rehabilitating her as a "strong-minded, intelligent, succinct, and ... sensible" (202) woman.

12. Here I am also agreeing with Linda Burnett (in "Margaret Clarke's *Gertrude and Ophelia*: Writing Revisionist Culture, Writing a Feminist "New Poetics," *Essays in Theatre/ Etudes Théâtrales* 16.1 (1997): 15-32) that Clarke's play represents transformational criticism better than Neely's own criticism does. I would note in this connection that *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women's Re-Visions in Literature and Performance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), an inspiring volume edited by Marianne Novy that takes up Neely's call for transformational criticism, is a set of critical essays about creative revisions or challenging re-stagings of Shakespeare.

13. Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 6.

14. According to the New Variorum *Hamlet,* vol. 1 (ed. Horace Howard Furness [Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1877], 333, n. 46), this question was asked as far back as 1848 in Sir Edward Strachey's *Shakespeare's Hamlet: An Attempt to Find the Key to a Great Moral Problem by Methodological Analysis of the Play* (London, 1848), 85.

15. A good place to begin surveying the history of this debate is Harold Jenkins's "Hamlet and Ophelia," British Academy Shakespeare Lecture, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 49 (1963): 135-51.

16. I am quoting Linda Bamber, who argues that "it does not matter that various clues" to "Ophelia's personality" happen to be "contradictory," because they are meant to go "unnoticed" within the play's dramatic design (*Comic Women, Tragic Men,* 78-79).

17. Quoted in Erik Rosenkranz Bruun, "'As your daughter may conceive': A Note on the Fair Ophelia," *Hamlet Studies* 15.1-2 (1993): 98.

18. Maynard Mack, "The World of Hamlet," *The Yale Review* (summer 1952), 504.

19. See the Long Note to the song in Harold Jenkins's Arden *Hamlet* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982).

20. Sandra K. Fischer, "Hearing Ophelia: Gender and Tragic Discourse in *Hamlet,*" *Renaissance and Reformation* 26.1 (1990): 8. See also Maurice Charney and Hanna Charney, "The Language of Madwomen in Shakespeare and His Fellow Dramatists," *Signs* 3.2 (1977). They suggest that Ophelia's madness "opens up her role ... [and] enables her to assert her being" (456).

21. Stephen Ratcliffe, "What Doesn't Happen in *Hamlet*: The Queen's Speech," *Exemplaria* 10.1 (1998): 123-44.

22. Ibid., 143. In this connection, Martha C. Ronk (in "Representations of *Ophelia,*" *Criticism* 36.1 [1994]: 21-43) discusses Gertrude's speech as a form of *ekphrasis* in a way that takes into account Gertrude's "eyewitness" position, and relates it to "the question of whether or not Gertrude is complicitous in the murder of Hamlet Sr." (30).

23. For classic, opposing views on Gertrude's complicity, see Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) esp. 252-53, and Richard Flatter, *Hamlet's Father* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), Chapter 3, "Gertrude's Share in the Crime."

24. Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 32.

25. Willard Farnham, in *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1936), writes: "These musings [on death] are legitimate secular descendants of the religious musings which produced the Dance of Death, the *memento mori,* and *De casibus* tragedy" (425). See also Theodore Spencer, *Death and Elizabethan Tragedy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936).

26. Watson, *The Rest Is Silence,* 6. See also Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), esp. 51-88.

27. Neill, *Issues of Death,* 75.

28. Edward Topsell, *The History of Four-footed Beasts, Serpents and Insects* (1607) (London: E. Cotes, 1658), 396-97. One note: the pits were not just holes in the ground, but rather vessels of some sort, presumably because mice could burrow out of holes.

29. Jigs did persist into the Jacobean period, though it is not clear whether they continued to be performed at The Globe after 1599. See Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage,* esp. 173-76.

30. For a text of this particular jig, see Charles Read Baskervill, *The Elizabethan Jig* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929), 444-49.

31. A facsimile of this broadside can be found in Farnham, *Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy,* 292.

32. Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 243-44.

33. The quoted word is from Stephen Booth, "On the value of *Hamlet,*" in *Reinterpretations of Elizabethan Drama,* Selected Papers from the English Institute, ed. Norman Rabkin (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1969), 146.

34. Watson, *The Rest Is Silence,* 93, 76, 77, 93.

35. All three of the primary critics I have been citing in this section--Robert Watson, Michael Neill, and Stephen Greenblatt--offer some variation on the idea that Renaissance revenge tragedy incarnates in its vengeful ghosts the voice of the dead lost in the Protestant dispensation.

36. *The Complete Works of Thomas More,* vol. 7, ed. Frank Manley, Germain Mac'hadour, Richard Marius, and Clarence Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 222, quoted in Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory,* 146.

37. T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," *The Sacred Wood* (1920; Reprint, London and New York: Methuen, 1983), 101.

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