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The Woman in Hamlet: An Interpersonal View

David Leverenz

> "John, I guess there are some people around here who think you have some little old lady in you." [JOHN DEAN, *Blind Ambition*]

"Who's there?" Bernardo's anxious shout, which begins Shakespeare's most problematic play, raises the fundamental question of Hamlet's identity. Various male authority figures advance simple answers. For the Ghost, Hamlet is a dutiful son who should sweep to his revenge and forget about his mother. For Claudius, Hamlet is a possible rebel who should be either made tractable or banished and killed. For Polonius, Hamlet is the heir gone mad through frustrated love of Ophelia, whom Polonius has denied him partly for reasons of state. But for Hamlet, the roles of dutiful son, ambitious rebel, or mad lovesick heir are just that: roles, to be played for others but not felt for himself. The "Who" remains unsettled within and without, "the heart of my mystery" (3.2.351).[1]

The mixed and contradictory expectations of these father figures reflect their own divided image of dutiful reason and bestial lust. At times their power seems to be defined by their ability to order women and children around. Hamlet sees Gertrude give way to Claudius, Ophelia give way to Polonius, and himself at last yield to the Ghost. But Hamlet also sees duplicity and falseness in all the fathers, except perhaps his own, and even there his famous delay may well indicate unconscious perception, rather than the unconscious guilt ascribed to him by a strict Freudian interpretation. Hamlet resists his father's commands to obey. Despite his illusory idealization of the senior Hamlet as pure and angelic, he senses the Ghost's complicity in the paternal double-speak that bends Gertrude and Ophelia, indeed bends feelings and the body itself, to

1. I am using the Pelican edition of *Hamlet*, ed. Willard Farnham (New York: Pelican Books, 1957). The 1605 edition's title is *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke.* The epigraph is taken from John Dean, *Blind Ambition: The White House Years* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), p. 47.

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self-falsifying Reason and filial loyalty. Hamlet is part hysteric, as Freud said, and part Puritan in his disgust at contamination and his idealization of his absent father. But he is also, as Goethe was the first to say, part woman. Goethe was wrong, as Freud was wrong, to assume that "woman" means weakness. To equate women with weak and tainted bodies, words, and feelings while men possess noble reason and ambitious purpose is to participate in Denmark's disease dividing mind from body, act from feeling, man from woman.

Hamlet's tragedy is the forced triumph of filial duty over sensitivity to his own heart. To fulfill various fathers' commands, he has to deny his self-awareness, just as Gertrude and Ophelia have done. That denial is equivalent to suicide, as the language of the last act shows. His puritanical cries about whoredom in himself and others, his hysterical outbursts to Ophelia about nunneries and painted women, are the outer shell of a horror at what the nurtured, loving, and well-loved soul has been corrupted to. From a more modern perspective than the play allows, we can sense that the destruction of good mothering is the real issue, at least from Hamlet's point of view.

Freudians, too many of whom have their own paternal answers to "Who's there," see Hamlet as an unconscious Claudius-Oedipus, or as a man baffled by pre-Oedipal ambivalences about his weak-willed, passionate, fickle mother.[2] While acknowledging Hamlet's parricidal and matricidal impulses, we should see these inchoate feelings as responses, not innate drives. Interpersonal expectations, more than self-contained desires, are what divide Hamlet from himself and conscript him to false social purposes. In this perspective, taken from Harry Stack Sullivan, R. D. Laing, and D. W. Winnicott, Hamlet's supposed delay is a natural reaction to overwhelming interpersonal confusion.[3] His self-

2. See Norman N. Holland, *Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare,* rev. ed. (1964; reprint ed., New York: Octagon Books, 1976), pp. 163–206, for various parricidal and matricidal interpretations. Erik Erikson discusses Hamlet's identity as delayed adolescent in "Youth: Fidelity and Diversity," *Daedalus* 91 (Winter 1962): 5–27; and Neil Friedman and Richard M. Jones develop further psychosocial perspectives, to which my essay is indebted, in "On the Mutuality of the Oedipus Complex: Notes on the Hamlet Case," *American Imago* 20 (Summer 1963): 107–31. More recent psychoanalytic studies include Theodore Lidz, *Hamlet's Enemy: Madness and Myth in Hamlet* (London: Vision Press, 1976); and Norman N. Holland, "*Hamlet*—My Greatest Creation," *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis* 3 (1975): 419–27. Avi Erlich's *Hamlet's Absent Father* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977) came to my attention after this essay was first drafted. It argues that Hamlet unconsciously fears his mother and needs his father, a conclusion directly opposed to mine. Though Erlich's book has many useful insights, psychoanalytic theory leads him to mistake a wishful male fantasy for interpersonal reality.

3. See Harry Stack Sullivan, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1953); R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Tavistock Press, 1960); D. W. Winnicott, "Mirror-Role of Mother and Family in Child Development," *The Predicament of the Family: A Psychoanalytic Symposium,* ed. P. Lomas (London: Hogarth Press, 1967), pp. 26–33; also D. W. Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes*

preoccupation is paradoxically grounded not so much in himself as in the extraordinary and unremitting array of "mixed signals" that separate role from self, reason from feeling, duty from love.

Hamlet has no way of unambiguously understanding what anyone says to him. The girl who supposedly loves him inexplicably refuses his attentions. His grieving mother suddenly marries. His dead father, suddenly alive, twice tells him to deny his anger at his mother's shocking change of heart. Two of his best friends "make love to this employment" of snooping against him (5.2.57). Polonius, Claudius, and the Ghost all manifest themselves as loving fathers, yet expect the worst from their sons and spy on their children, either directly or through messengers. Who is this "uncle-father" and "aunt-mother" (2.2.366), or this courtier-father, who preach the unity of being true to oneself and others yet are false to everyone, who can "smile, smile, and be a villain" (1.5.108)? Gertrude's inconstancy not only brings on disgust and incestuous feelings, it is also the sign of diseased doubleness in everyone who has accommodated to his or her social role. Usurping Claudius is the symbol of all those "pretenders," who are now trying to bring Hamlet into line. No wonder Hamlet weeps at the sight of a genuine actor—the irony reveals the problem—playing Hecuba's grief. The male expressing a woman's constancy once again mirrors Hamlet's need. And the role, though feigned, at least is openly played. The actor's tears are the play's one unambiguous reflection of the grief Hamlet thought his mother shared with him before the onset of so many multitudinous double-dealings.

To kill or not to kill cannot be entertained when one is not even sure of existing with any integrity. Being, not desiring or revenging, is the question. Freudians assume that everyone has strong desires blocked by stronger repressions, but contemporary work with schizophrenics reveals the tragic variety of people whose voices are only amalgams of other people's voices, with caustic self-observation or a still more terrifying vacuum as their incessant inward reality. This is Hamlet to a degree, as it is Ophelia completely. As Laing says of her in *The Divided Self,* "in her madness, there is no one there. She is not a person. There is no integral selfhood expressed through her actions or utterances. Incomprehensible statements are said by nothing. She has already died. There is now only a vacuum where there was once a person."[4] Laing

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and the Facilitating Environment (New York: International University Press, 1965). I recognize that the interpersonal approach is in some ways tangential to the major post-Freudian development in psychoanalysis, the British object-relations school. Nevertheless, I believe it is more useful for literary criticism. A quasi-Laingian study of Shakespeare is Terence Eagleton's *Shakespeare and Society: Critical Essays on Shakespearean Drama* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

4. Laing, p. 95. Laing's dismissal of Ophelia's statements as "incomprehensible" is odd, given his extraordinary sensitivity to the meanings in schizophrenic voices.

misrepresents her state only because there are many voices in Ophelia's madness speaking through her, all making sense, and none of them her own. She becomes the mirror for a madness-inducing world. Hamlet resists these pressures at the cost of a terrifying isolation. Once he thinks his mother has abandoned him, there is nothing and no one to "mirror" his feelings, as Winnicott puts it.[5] Hamlet is utterly alone, beyond the loving semi-understanding of reasonable Horatio or obedient Ophelia.

A world of fathers and sons, ambition and lust, considers grief "unmanly," as Claudius preaches (1.2.94). Hamlet seems to agree, at least to himself, citing his "whorish" doubts as the cause of his inability to take manly filial action. This female imagery, which reflects the play's male-centered world view, represents a covert homosexual fantasy, according to Freudian interpretation.[6] Certainly Hamlet's idealizations of his father and of Horatio's friendship show a hunger for male closeness. Poisoning in the ear may unconsciously evoke anal intercourse. And the climactic swordplay with Laertes does lead to a brotherly understanding. But these instances of covert homosexual desire are responses to a lack. Poisoning in the ear evokes conscious and unconscious perversity to intimate the perversion of communication, especially between men. The woman in Hamlet is the source of his most acute perceptions about the diseased, disordered patriarchal society that tries to "play upon this pipe" of Hamlet's soul (3.2.336), even as a ghost returning from the dead.

* * *

The separation of role from self is clear in the opening scene. Anxiety precipitates a genuine question, "Who's there?" It is answered not with "Francisco," the natural rejoinder, but with "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself" (1.1.2). Francisco restores public ritual by the prescribed challenge of a guard, not the response of a friend. To private uneasiness he responds with public norms. Bernardo's answer to the command to "unfold yourself" is equally self-avoiding. "Long live the king!" he cries (1.1.3). His identity, in the prescribed convention, is equivalent to respect for the king. Yet the not-so-long-lived king has just died, and the new king, who was to have been Hamlet the younger, has been displaced by the old king's brother. Who *is* the rightful king? Who is there? The question returns, under the formulaic phrase that denies any problems of loyalty or succession.

5. See Winnicott, "Mirror-Role of Mother and Family in Child Development."

6. Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (London: Victor Gollancz Press, 1949), pp. 86–87, sees "repulsion against woman" as coming from repressed sexual feelings and a "splitting of the mother image"; he connects Hamlet's diatribes against women to unconscious fear of incest wishes. Avi Erlich, in *Hamlet's Absent Father,* explores pre-Oedipal dynamics more thoroughly.

Francisco departs with an odd and disconcerting addition to a conventional farewell: "For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter cold, / And I am sick at heart" (1.1.8–9). Tensions between the head and the heart, noble reason and diseased emotion, center the play. Yet this first expression of heart-sick feelings has no explanation. The watch has been "quiet"—"Not a mouse stirring," Francisco gratuitously adds (1.1.10). By act 3 Hamlet will be devising a play he calls "The Mousetrap," which would make the new king a mouse and suggest that royal stability is corroded at its base. But for now these jagged interchanges, like the half-lines staggered on the page and the roles confused by the guards, seem simply "out of joint," with no clear perspective on who has been guarding what, why Bernardo seems scared, and why Francisco feels sick at heart. The darker questions recede into the comfortable self-definitions of Horatio and Marcellus, who respond to the next "Who is there?" with "Friends to this ground" (Horatio) "And liegemen to the Dane" (Marcellus, 1.1.15). Horatio, whose first word is "Friends," is the only one of this group to define himself both within and beyond conventional public deference. As yet we cannot sense the incompatibility between being friends and being liegemen. By act 5 the gap is so wide that Horatio declares himself "more an antique Roman than a Dane" (5.2.330) and tries to drink from the poisoned cup to follow his friend both from and to a poisoned state. All we know now, though, is that more seems afoot than simply the changing of a guard.[7]

Identity, in the first scene, is defined as role, specifically as loyalty among functionaries of a state. But feelings have been partly voiced that are curiously disconnected from roles. There is no coherent voice for more private feelings, in this case fear; rote is the norm. The polarity between mind and passions reflects larger polarities in the social order, or rather in a society pretending to be ordered along the father's lines. These polarities become more apparent in the contrast between Claudius's opening speech and Hamlet's first soliloquy. Claudius speaks in the language of public command, with phrases tailored and balanced, the royal "we" firmly affixed to his crown. Oxymorons prescribe a unity of opposites, and his balanced phrasing is only twice disrupted with the reality of seized power: "Taken to wife," and "So much for him" (1.2.14, 25). For Claudius, reason, nature, and submission are joined in a facile unity.

7. See Roy Walker, "*Hamlet:* The Opening Scene," in *The Time is Out of Joint* (Folcroft, Pa.: Folcroft Library Editions, 1948), reprinted in *Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism,* ed. Leonard F. Dean (New York: Peter Smith, Publisher, 1961), pp. 216–21. For broader commentaries on the play's "interrogative mood," see also Maynard Mack, "The World of Hamlet," *Yale Review* 41 (June 1952): 502–23, widely reprinted; Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); and Bernard McElroy, *Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 29–88.

> Fie, 'tis a fault to heaven,
> A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
> To reason most absurd, whose common theme
> Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried,
> From the first corse till he that died to-day,
> "This must be so."
>
> [1.2.101–6]

To personify an abstraction, reason, is characteristic of Claudius's perspective, in which abstract states are more real than persons. Unfortunately reality intrudes; in the rush of his logic he misrepresents "the first corse," who was obviously Abel, not a father but a brother killed by brother, as in Claudius's crime. The heart will intrude its guilt, no matter how speech tries to deny fact and feeling. The rhetoric of formal obedience avoids, while suggesting, the simple stark reality of a father's murder, a son's grief, and a murderer's guilt.

Claudius's speech reveals a second assumption already sensed in the personification of reason. When he speaks of "our whole kingdom . . . contracted in one brow of woe" (1.2.3–4), he presents his kingdom as a single person. He further connects the language of personal love with the language of public war, since making war among states has the same unity of opposites that he wants to prescribe for individuals, even for his wife. Gertrude, whom he defines only in her disjointed roles as "our sometime sister, now our queen," is thus "Th' imperial jointress to this warlike state" (1.2.9). Marriage is simply the prelude to aggression. The only arena for "joining" is the ordering of the state for war, not the expressing of desire in the marriage bed. Polonius continues the inversion of love and war more explicitly in his advice to Ophelia: "Set your entreatments at a higher rate / Than a command to parley" (1.3.122–23). Laertes also echoes the language of war in speaking of love to her: "keep you in the rear of your affection, / Out of the shot and danger of desire" (1.2.34–35). In this collusion of ambitious functionaries, the state is the only real person, whose war with other person-states can be told as love, while the loves and fears of persons can be expressed only as warlike obedience to the purposes of states.[8]

Hamlet's first private discourse opposes the dehumanizing unities of the king's public preaching point for point. Where Claudius assumes the oneness of reason and nature in filial subjection, Hamlet piles contrary on rebellious contrary, especially of mind and body. Indeed, Hamlet's soliloquy is obsessed with language of the body—sullied (or solid) flesh,

8. Laing defines "collusion" as a process by which members of an intimate group, such as the family, conspire knowingly or unknowingly to validate one member's "false self," that self which conforms to other people's expectations. Eagleton's *Shakespeare and Society* analyzes how various false unities in *Hamlet* force the hero's subjectivity into being manipulated as an object.

appetite, feeding, father's dead body, tears, incestuous sheets, "gallèd eyes" (1.2.155), and finally the heart and tongue: "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (1.2.159), an intuition that precisely describes his fate. Parts of the body, rank, gross, and unweeded, overwhelm any pretense at understanding.

Elsewhere Hamlet attempts to recast the language of public ritual as personal feeling. When his friends say farewell with the conventional "Our duty to your honor," Hamlet responds with a half-ironic inversion: "Your loves, as mine to you" (1.2.253–54). Duty and love still have something in common, he hopes. But his language in the first act more broadly participates in the most pervasive assumption of Claudius, that reason is what makes a man. Hamlet is disgusted at the thought of "some complexion . . . breaking down the pales and forts of reason" (1.4.27–28). Those "pales and forts" echo Claudius's equation between war and love. Here is the inward castle of the mind on which, metaphorically, Bernardo and Francisco stand guard, though against what is still uncertain. "Nobility" connotes the mind's royalty, as befits a prince's role. "Nature," on the other hand, is associated with the rabble, reveling in the bestial dregs of "swinish phrase" and scandal, "some vicious mole of nature in them" (1.4.19, 24) that cannot help but get out. Just as Claudius falsely conjoins nature and obedience into the smooth illusory primacy of reason, so Hamlet, searching for truth at the other extreme, lumps nature, feeling, beasts, and body together, all as negatives.

Hamlet is "unsocialized," a psychiatrist might say, hearing reports of his hostile puns, asides, and soliloquies. Unfortunately he is far more socialized than he can perceive. He still takes refuge in the shared assumptions of those around him, who locate the self in the mind's obedience to patriarchal order, the body's obedience to abstractions. Whether speaking as Polonius, who can talk so glibly of "wit" as having "soul" and "limbs" (2.2.90–91) and swear that "I hold my duty as I hold my soul" (2.2.44), or as Rosencrantz, who expounds so eloquently on how the "single and peculiar life" is only part of the "massy wheel" of majesty (3.3.11–23), or as Laertes, who takes such pains to instruct Ophelia that Hamlet is "circumscribed / Unto the voice and yielding of that body / Whereof he is the head" (1.3.22–24), this common public voice denies private feeling and private identity, while asserting the false union of all the parts of the social body in subjection to majesty. As Rosencrantz declares (3.3.12–13), this power is "much more" than "the strength and armor of the mind" itself. Again the warlike image is symptomatic.

The Ghost seems to be the one father who speaks straight, and Hamlet's encounter with him precipitates clarity about what has happened and what he must do. But while confirming Hamlet's perception of external wickedness, the Ghost invalidates Hamlet's feelings. He speaks to the mind's suspicions of Claudius while denying Hamlet's more profound heartsickness over Gertrude. Claudius's villainy is clear, and

clearly stated. But many other aspects of the Ghost's account are mixed signals denying simple feeling. After hearing of the "sulph'rous and tormenting flames" awaiting his father, Hamlet cries "Alas, poor ghost!"—a Gertrude-like response (1.5.4). "Pity me not," the Ghost rejoins (1.5.5), rejecting the empathy he has just solicited. He wants only "serious hearing" and revenge. Yet the Ghost then gratuitously describes "my prison house" and forces its horrors on Hamlet by suggesting that knowledge of the truth would shatter his son's body. This is already a Laingian "knot,"[9] designed to exaggerate the father's strength and the son's weakness. Feelings are frivolous; manly endurance is true fortitude. As he will do with Gertrude, the Ghost implies that his son is too frail to hear; so is anyone with "ears of flesh and blood" (1.5.22). Don't pity me, runs the message—but boy, what you *would* feel . . . Yet why is father in Purgatory? Not because of his heroic or virtuous strength but because of "the foul crimes done in my days of nature" (1.5.12). So in these first few lines the father has: (1) told his son not to pity, yet encouraged him to pity, (2) accentuated his son's earthly weakness and his own immortal strength, yet told Hamlet of "foul crimes," and (3) equated pity with frivolity and dutiful hearing with seriousness, while picturing Hamlet's feelings in language that dismembers the body in its exaggerated seriousness.

The mixed signals persist. We never learn what the "foul crimes" consist of, though they are apparently extensive enough to have the Ghost cry out "O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!" at the thought of his "account" for "my imperfections" (1.5.78–79). Yet the major burden of his discourse is to contrast his "dignity" and "virtue" with Claudius's crimes. We have already heard from others, notably Horatio, about King Hamlet's warlike "frown" and armor (1.1.60–62). There is very little in the Ghost's own speech, however, to support a sense of virtuous integrity. His surprisingly weak affirmation of his love's "dignity" states simply "That it went hand in hand even with the vow / I made to her in marriage," presumably to remain faithful (1.5.48–50). Even his love can be fully summarized not be feeling but by "vow" or public ritual. And as a king, his peacetime behavior seems to have been primarily sleeping on the job. Otherwise he would not have been killed as he was "Sleeping within my orchard, / My custom always of the afternoon" (1.5.59–60). He is also viciously uncharitable to his queen, while at the same time forbidding his son from having that same feeling.[10] Throughout his speech the

9. See R. D. Laing, *Knots* (London: Tavistock Press, 1970). This is an extension of Gregory Bateson's "double bind" theory; see G. Bateson, D. D. Jackson, J. Haley, and J. H. Weakland, "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia," *Behavioural Science* 1 (October 1956): 251–64.

10. Harold C. Goddard, in *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), vol. 1, develops an interpretation along parallel lines, with the Ghost as devil imposing a "divided mind" on Hamlet. Goddard's reading is finally a Christian one, argu-

Ghost is preoccupied with the body, and as with Hamlet, Gertrude is the focus for that concern. Her change from "seeming-virtuous" behavior to "lust" puts the Ghost into a paroxysm of disgust, not so much at the vile seducer as at the woman who could move from "a radiant angel" to a beast who preys "on garbage" (1.5.46, 55–57). The king of "foul crimes" presents himself as an angel now.

Hamlet's idealization of his father and disgust with Claudius reveals, as Freudians have rightly argued, a splitting of the son's ambivalence toward the father. But the various mixed signals in the Ghost's speech show how the father's communication, not the son's intrapsychic repressions, fosters ambivalence. Father is, in fact, more like Claudius than the Ghost can dare admit. They both speak with the arrogant abstractedness of majesty—"So the whole ear of Denmark / Is . . . / Rankly abused" (1.5.36–38)—yet they both show their particular bodies, in word or deed, subverting the false nobility of royal role. And the Ghost is particularly ambivalent about "nature" itself. Though he invokes his own "foul crimes done in my days of nature" (1.5.12), he concludes, "If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not" (1.5.81). From "Pity me not" to "Bear it not," the Ghost's commands falsify both the father's reality and the son's "nature." They exaggerate father's virtues, demean Hamlet's responses, and establish a confusing set of connections between nature, lust, feeling, and Gertrude, all of which must be resolutely disowned to follow the father's directives toward filial revenge, a "natural feeling" unnatural to Hamlet.[11] Even the minor father figures, like old Priam and Yorick, are vivid in their infirm bodies, not in their dignified precepts. Yet precepts are the "me" that Hamlet has to remember.

Through her impossible attempt to obey contradictory voices, Ophelia mirrors in her madness the tensions that Hamlet perceives. As

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ing that Art, or the play within the play, could have converted Claudius to repentance if Hamlet's uncontrollable vengefulness had not intervened. Another Christian reader sensitive to the Ghost's duplicity is Eleanor Prosser, in *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1967). Christian readings, like too many Freudian readings, tend to substitute the false answer of duty for the real question of identity.

11. The Ghost has occasioned immense controversy. Of those who see the Ghost as other than benign, see above, and also Richard Flatter, *Hamlet's Father* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1949); G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire,* 2d ed. (London: Methuen & Co., 1965); and J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967). Most critics see the Ghost as the good father to whom Hamlet should submit. In *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 80, Northrop Frye concludes that "God's main interest, in Elizabethan tragedy, is in promoting the revenge, and in making it as bloody as possible." For a Jungian view, which superficially resembles my own in its prescription for men to encounter the woman in themselves, see Alex Aronson, *Psyche and Symbol in Shakespeare* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972). In Aronson's view the Ghost is Hamlet's dramatized unconsciousness, as Hamlet tries to free himself from "his entanglement with a Hecate-like Magna Mater" (p. 235).

in Laing's *Sanity, Madness and the Family,* Ophelia's "madness" is a natural response to the unacknowledged interpersonal falsities of the group.[12] Her history is another instance of how someone can be driven mad by having her inner feelings misrepresented, not responded to, or acknowledged only through chastisement and repression. From her entrance on, Ophelia must continually respond to commands which imply distrust even as they compel obedience. "Do you doubt that?" she opens, after Laertes has told her, "do not sleep, / But let me hear from you" (1.3.3–4). The body's natural desire to sleep must yield to the role of always-attentive sister. Without responding, perhaps not even hearing her rejoinder to his demand, Laertes immediately tries to plunge her into a more severe doubt of Hamlet's affection, and therefore of her own. It is simply toying with lust, he says, "a fashion and a toy in blood" (1.3.6). Reflecting the division between mind and body forced on children by fathers themselves divided, Laertes speaks magisterially of how "nature crescent" in Hamlet must be "circumscribed" to the larger "body" of the state "Whereof he is the head" (1.3.11, 22–24). Hamlet's voice can go "no further / Than the main voice of Denmark goes withal" (1.3.27–28). A prince can express no feeling except as it furthers his social role; the rest is transient sensuality, "The perfume and suppliance of a minute, / No more." "No more but so?" Ophelia responds, questioning but trusting, and Laertes rejoins ambiguously, "Think it no more" (1.3.9–10). So the Ghost speaks to Hamlet and of Gertrude, emphasizing their weakness and his strength.

Ophelia accepts Laertes's commands as a "lesson" to "keep / As watchman to my heart . . . " (1.3.45–46). Yet her advice to him shows her awareness of his possible double self, the pastor and the libertine, the very division he used in describing Hamlet. Punning on "recks" and "reckless," she displays an independent wit, much like Hamlet's more constricted opening puns. But her sense of the necessity for a "watchman" over probable evils of the heart is as unquestioned as her acceptance of the military terminology. The fortress of the female heart needs its Bernardoes. She *will* doubt her feelings henceforth. When Polonius reinterprets what she calls Hamlet's "tenders / Of his affection to me" (1.3.99–100) as monetary transactions leading only to her father's exposure as "a fool," Ophelia hesitantly asserts the "honorable fashion" of Hamlet's loving speech to her (1.3.111). Yet she mutely accepts her father's assumption that to "Tender yourself more dearly" is essential for protecting father's self-image (1.3.107). Polonius is deliberately unconcerned with what his daughter feels. His command to refuse Hamlet any "words or talk" flies in the face of everything Ophelia has said (1.3.134). Yet she has no choice but to say, "I shall obey, my lord" (1.3.136).

12. R. D. Laing and Aaron Esterson, *Sanity, Madness and the Family* (London: Tavistock Press, 1964). Esterson expanded one chapter into *The Leaves of Spring: A Study in the Dialectics of Madness* (London: Tavistock Press, 1970).

For his part, Polonius is preoccupied only with how he looks. Always the fawning courtier, the man who can say "I hold my duty as I hold my soul" in return for being called "the father of good news" by his new king (2.2.42–44), his response to Claudius's questions about his daughter flagrantly reveals his unconcern for anything but his own position. "But how hath she / Received his love?" Claudius inquires. "What do you think of me?" is her father's answer; "What might you think?" he anxiously repeats (2.2.128–30, 139). For Polonius, his daughter is an animal whom he can "loose" (2.2.162) to catch Hamlet's motive. He cares for Claudius, for his role as "assistant for a state" (2.2.166), not for his daughter's feelings. The subplot makes clear what the main plot obfuscates: Fathers perceive children as they do their wives and bodies, as beasts to be controlled for the magnification of their self-images, or rather, for the expression of their divided selves, their reason and their lust. These divisions grow from their complicity in playing a leading role in a corrupt state. Polonius, putting the issue squarely, says to Ophelia, "You do not understand yourself so clearly / As it behooves my daughter and your honor" (1.3.96–97). Ophelia must accept the role of honorable possession and deny her love for Hamlet. This is not a question of repressed sexual desire, though certainly her anxieties, like Hamlet's, have to do with feelings denied. It is a question of what it means to understand oneself when the price is falseness to others.

Hamlet himself fosters Ophelia's crisis, to be sure. He sends her an ambiguous poem which can be read as "Never doubt that I love" or "Never suspect that I love" (2.2.119). He tells her he loved her; then, "I loved you not" (3.1.119). He seems to confirm Laertes's suspicions by warning her of his lust and ordering her to a nunnery, which of course—another mixed signal—could also be a whorehouse. His crude jokes about "country matters" (3.2.111) as he lies in her lap at the play toy with her role as honorable daughter, confirm his lust, yet contradict the piteous picture he makes of himself in her room, wordless, his clothes in disarray. His oscillating acts of need and aggression are Hamlet's nasty mirroring of what he perceives to be her mixed signals to him: her loving talks, then her inexplicable denial and silence. First he mirrors her silence, then he mirrors the self that Polonius and Laertes have warned her against. More profoundly, her behavior to him—since he has no knowledge of her obedience to Polonius's command—so evokes Gertrude's inconstancy that Hamlet's double messages to Ophelia take on a frenzied condemnation of all women. His soliloquies extend that condemnation to the woman in himself. This Laingian knot of miscommunications compounded, of false selves intensified, leads finally to self-mistrust, even to madness.

Not allowed to love and unable to be false, Ophelia breaks. She goes mad rather than gets mad. Even in her madness she has no voice of her own, only a discord of other voices and expectations, customs gone awry. Most obviously, she does what Hamlet preaches, or at least what he

feigns, in going mad. Thinking she is not loved by him, she becomes him, or at least what she conceives to be his "noble mind . . . o'erthrown" (3.1.150). Just as his absence in act 4 is reflected in the absence of her reason, so her suicide embodies what Hamlet ponders in his soliloquies. After all, Polonius has instructed her that love denied leads to madness (2.1.110–19), and Ophelia is forever faithful to her contradictory directives. She herself is a play within a play, or a player trying to respond to several imperious directors at once. Everyone has used her: Polonius, to gain favor; Laertes, to belittle Hamlet; Claudius, to spy on Hamlet; Hamlet, to express rage at Gertrude; and Hamlet again, to express his feigned madness with her as a decoy. She is only valued for the roles that further other people's plots. Treated as a helpless child, she finally becomes one, veiling her perceptions of falsehood and manipulation in her seemingly innocent ballads.

Ophelia's songs give back the contradictory voices lodged within her and expose the contradictions. "Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?" she asks of Gertrude as she enters (4.5.21)—a question Hamlet has often asked of the state, as well as of his mother. She then shifts to her first interchange with Polonius, expressed as his question and her answer:

> How should I your true-love know
> From another one?
> By his cockle hat and staff
> And his sandal shoon.
>
> [4.5.23–26]

Polonius has told her that men are all alike, and Ophelia replies that Hamlet has the constancy of a pilgrim. The first verse also expresses Hamlet's query to Gertrude about her switch in lovers, while the second says good-bye to all faithful true-loves, whether brothers, lovers, or fathers. "He is dead and gone, lady" could refer to Polonius, Prince Hamlet, Laertes, Hamlet the king, or the mythical pilgrim. Her next songs replace this faithful male with lusting lovers who deflower young maids, then depart without fulfilling their vows of marriage. "Young men will do't if they come to't. By Cock, they are to blame" (4.5.60–61). Most readings take this song for Ophelia's own sensual desires under her dutiful exterior—"For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy" (4.5.185), where Robin is a colloquial Elizabethan term for penis.[13] But "all" implies it is the only joy allowed her. The speaker is Gertrude's helpless, manipulated lust, veering suddenly to Polonius and Laertes telling her about the dangers of male desire, and back again to Hamlet's sense of loss. The

13. See Harry Morris, "Ophelia's 'Bonny Sweet Robin,' " *PMLA* 73 (December 1958): 601–3; also see Carroll Camden, "On Ophelia's Madness," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15 (Spring 1964): 247–55; and Maurice Charney, *Style in Hamlet* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 107–12.

songs mirror every level of the play, even Polonius's "flowery" speech; yet they do not express what Ophelia feels, except as sadness. Laertes is right to say, "Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself, / She turns to favor and to prettiness" (4.5.186–87). Merging with everyone, she speaks in a collage of voices about present sensuality and absent faithfulness, yet dies, as Gertrude says so empathetically, "incapable of her own distress" (4.7.177).

Ophelia's suicide becomes a little microcosm of the male world's banishment of the female, because "woman" represents everything denied by reasonable men. In responding to Ophelia's death, Laertes, patently the norm for filial behavior, is embarrassed by his womanly tears. He forbids himself to cry, "but yet / It is our trick; nature her custom holds, / Let shame say what it will." To be manly is to be ashamed of emotion and nature. Saying farewell to her, he says farewell to that part of himself: "When these [tears] are gone, / The woman will be out" (4.7.185–88). His genuine feeling cannot be told except as a wish to get rid of the feeling. Even Hamlet, so much more sensitive than others to "nature" and "heart," equates woman with "frailty" (1.2.146) or worse. "Whore" is his word for changeable feelings, whether those of Gertrude, of "strumpet" Fortune (2.2.233), or even of himself. Hamlet echoes his stepfather's association of painted woman and painted word (3.1.51–53) as he rails against himself for not being the dutiful son:

> Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
> That I, the son of a dear father murthered,
> Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
> Must like a whore unpack my heart with words
> And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
> A stallion!
>
> [2.2.568–73]

Words, feelings, beasts, and whoredom are as interchangeable as reason and obedience. That women, grief, words, and the heart should be confused with nature, guilt, and the body, while filial obedience is equated with noble reason in opposition, is what is rotten in Denmark. Linguistic disorders express social disorders. Ophelia's drowning signifies the necessity of drowning both words and feelings if Hamlet is to act the role prescribed for him. That he does so is the real tragedy in the play.

* * *

Hamlet's focus on ears that are abused stands as a metaphor for the violation of female receptivity. By that token, Hamlet in the end becomes his own violator. Far from being a catharsis or a resolute confrontation, or an integration of the underlying issues, the play's end is a study in

frustration and failure.[14] Hamlet retreats to filial duty, allowing the "machine" of his body (2.2.124) to accomplish the acts required of him. Coming back to a world of fathers and usurpers where ambition and lust have been defined as the only valid motives, he can speak that language without a qualm. "It is as easy as lying," he has told Rosencrantz and Guildenstern before (3.2.343). Surrounded by "Examples gross as earth" of sons "with divine ambition puffed," like Fortinbras, who can breezily risk everything "Even for an eggshell" (4.4.46, 49, 53), Hamlet at last resolves himself into a Do by obeying the dictates of his father and of "providence," an abstracted and semiidealized father. "I shall win at the odds," he tells Horatio (5.2.200). It is a world where winning is the only thing; all else is "foolery" for women. "But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart," he tells uncomprehending Horatio. "But it is no matter. . . . it is but foolery, but it is such a kind of gaingiving as would perhaps trouble a woman" (5.2.201–5). To Hamlet's four times repeated "but," Horatio lets the woman drop and responds only, "If your mind dislike anything, obey it." Concerns for mind and obedience are part of the male world, to which Hamlet's stifled heart now responds not with whorish "unpacking" but with silence.

Silence is really the theme of the last act, not the almost farcical excess of deeds and rhetoric. The graveyard scene shows the last perversion of reason, as clowns chop logic over the dead. These mini-Claudiuses at least have the merit of not pretending grief, and their wit calls a spade a spade by asserting the absoluteness of law and power, and of class distinctions even in death. Their jokes have to do with the strong and the weak: the gallows-maker or the grave-maker "builds stronger" (5.1.40, 55), because their social roles abet the permanence of death. "Has this fellow no feeling of his business, that 'a sings at grave-making?" Hamlet inquiries (5.1.62–63). "Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness," Horatio replies (5.1.64). Feeling and custom, as ever op-

14. There is near-unanimous critical agreement, except for Goddard, that the last act promotes integration. See Mack; McElroy; Harold Fisch, *Hamlet and the Word: The Covenant Pattern in Shakespeare* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1971); Irving Ribner, *Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy* (London: Methuen Press, 1960); Wilson; and Michael Goldman, *Shakespeare and the Energies of Drama* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972). Goldman goes so far as to say, "The play ends with a final unambiguous discharge of energy," and the gunshots prove that "The air has been cleared" (p. 90). Reuben Brower's more sensitive reading, in *Hero and Saint: Shakespeare and the Graeco-Roman Heroic Tradition* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), finds the tension between soldier hero and moral hero reduced to soldier in the end. For a stronger dissent from the consensus, see L. C. Knights, *Some Shakespearean Themes and an Approach to "Hamlet"* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1966), who finds Hamlet engulfed by evil and the cause of further evil. T. McAlindon, in *Shakespeare and Decorum* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973), p. 67, notes that Fortinbras is just "a crude strong-arm," and Frye (pp. 29–30) sees Hamlet as selfish to the end. Lidz's *Hamlet's Enemy* (see n. 2 above) reflects the characteristic adaptive bias of lesser Freudians by discussing the play as a ritual reestablishing appropriate social defenses; he sees Fortinbras as a "direct and uncomplicated hero" who "brings hope for the rebirth of the nation" (p. 112).

posed but now with greater clarity, cannot be reconciled. Those who are most at home with "wit" are also most at ease with custom, reasoning, and playing their roles. Words come as glibly to them as to Osric, in proportion as feelings are denied.

It is clear to Hamlet now that words are of no use. "Nay, an thou'lt mouth, / I'll rant as well as thou," he throws back at Laertes (5.1.270–71). This is the posturing of animals, nothing more:

> Let Hercules himself do what he may,
> The cat will mew, and dog will have his day.
> [5.1.278–79]

Like Ophelia, Hamlet can mirror how others talk, though with a savage irony that emphasizes the distance between his inward feelings and outward rhetoric. He mocks the foppish Osric, who "did comply, sir, with his dug before 'a sucked it" (5.2.179). He seems calm, controlled, at arm's length from what he says. Only Gertrude senses the truth:

> This is mere madness;
> And thus a while the fit will work on him.
> Anon, as patient as the female dove
> When that her golden couplets are disclosed,
> His silence will sit drooping.
> [5.1.271–75]

What seems like a manic-depressive "fit" to Gertrude (a better diagnosis than Freud's "hysteria") is actually Hamlet's response to "the fit" of a senseless society. He mouths its language and assumes its stance of male combat, while "the female dove" in him prepares for a final silence. Earlier he had berated himself for his dovelike gentleness: "But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall / To make oppression bitter" (2.2.562–63). Now, while he puts on the necessary gall, the unspoken woman in him outwardly obeys paternal commands ("my purposes . . . follow the king's pleasure" [5.2.190–91]), whether of Claudius, the Ghost, or Providence. Inwardly he has already left the world of fathers, roles, and mixed messages to rejoin Ophelia and Gertrude in death's constancy. Not until Gertrude dies does Hamlet, dying, fulfill the Ghost's instructions. To kill Claudius as an afterthought to the Queen's death is his last little "dig" at the "old mole" (1.5.162).

So much for Hamlet's "golden couplets," the fledgling poetry of the self he has tried to "disclose." Ending his drama as he begins it, with a play on words, he expires with "The rest is silence" (5.2.347). That gnomic phrase could mean that there is no afterlife, despite Hamlet's earlier scruples; that "rest" is equivalent to silence; that *my* rest is silence; or that the rest of my story is untold. All of these ambiguities are true, or at least more true in their ambiguity than the interpretations that so quickly falsify Hamlet's story. Horatio immediately invalidates the con-

nection between rest and silence by invoking singing angels: "And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest." The noise of war, the "warlike volley" of drums and guns, drives out the silence utterly. We are back in the male world of ambitious sons advancing to their fathers' footsteps.

The play ends in a mindless sequence of ritual male duties, roles without meaning. The Ambassador informs the court that the king's "commandment is fulfilled / That Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead." Staring at the dead bodies of the King, Queen, Hamlet, and Laertes, he can think only of saying, "Where should we have our thanks?" (5.2.359–61). Horatio responds not with the story of Hamlet's struggle to keep the integrity of his "noble heart" (5.2.348) but with the narrative of Claudius's villainy, and perhaps of Hamlet's as well:

> So shall you hear
> Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
> Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
> And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
> Fall'n on th'inventors' heads. All this can I
> Truly deliver.
>
> [5.2.369–75]

This is the public story of an unnatural world, not the private record of a heart unspoken. It is a tale of deeds, not feelings. Yet it may be the story Hamlet knows will be told. After all, Horatio himself, "As th'art a man" (5.2.331), is manfully following his duty to Hamlet's command, sacrificing his wish for suicide. A story born of duty must be a man's story.

All the women are dead, and there are no more womanly tears. Young "Strong-in-arm," who inherits an irrevocably corrupted world, is the arrogant, stupid, blundering finale to the theme of filial duty, to which both the Ghost and Claudius had demanded Hamlet's conformity. His tribute to Hamlet is cast in the rhetoric of a military command: "Let four captains / Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage" (5.2.384–85). Here Hamlet is finally "fit" to the alien mold of soldier in the stage world of the "captains." At the play's close, Fortinbras ludicrously undercuts Hamlet's final words:

> For he was likely, had he been put on,
> To have proved most royal; and for his passage
> The soldiers' music and the rites of war
> Speak loudly for him.
>
> [5.2.386–89]

How right for this man without a touch of the female in him to have such confidence in "the rites of war" as confirmation of Hamlet's identity! We are back in the world of the first act, with a more ironic consciousness of what it means for Fortinbras to say, "had he been put on." A body politic

cannot take off its clothes and venture, like Hamlet, "naked" and "alone" (4.7.50–51); it can only "put on" more roles. From the first anxious question of the guards to the last pointless order to "Go, bid the soldiers shoot," the military atmosphere pervades the language of the play.

Having learned how cruel one must be to be "kind" (1.2.65), Hamlet puts on a "most royal" corruptedness (5.2.387). He acts as the world does, speaks as the world speaks. Yet what a mockery it is, a self-mockery, to say of Fortinbras, "He has my dying voice" (5.2.345). The illegitimate succession instituted by Claudius concludes with the triumph of the son against whom these fathers were at war. It is final proof of the interchangeability, in language and body, of all those in authority, whether enemy or friend. It is also the concluding irony of Hamlet's struggle for speech. His last soliloquy is a voice dying into accord with the senseless ambition and mindless "honor" of Fortinbras: "O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (4.4.65–66). But now that the guns "Speak loudly for him" (5.2.389), Fortinbras pompously distinguishes between carnage in field and in court, as if Hamlet's death in battle would have been eminently acceptable. "Such a sight as this / Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss" (5.2.390–91). Hamlet is right; Fortinbras does inherit his "dying voice," while the rest *is* silence. Just as the hawkish voices of blood, honor, and ambition inherit the world of the fathers, with its false roles and false proprieties, so Hamlet the dove joins Gertrude and Ophelia as a much too ravished bride of quietness.

* * *

Hamlet is not so much a full-throated tragedy as an ironic stifling of a hero's identity by structures of rule that no longer have legitimacy. It is the most frustrating of Shakespeare's plays precisely because it is the one most specifically about frustration. Shakespeare uses the opposition between male and female to denote the impossibility of speaking truly in a public role without violating or being violated. Too aware of paternal duplicity, Hamlet remains wordlessly modern in his excess of words, unable to center himself in a society whose "offence is rank" (3.3.36) in every sense, and where the quest for self-knowledge is womanishly at odds with the manly roles he must put on. Even Ophelia only loved his mind. Hamlet's final assumption of a swordsman's identity is not a healthy solution to Oedipal conflicts but a mute submission to his father's command to "whet thy almost blunted purpose" (3.4.112). The manly identity is imposed, not grown into. Hamlet delays revenging his father's death because his real struggle is to restore his mother's validation of his feelings, though "whore" is the only word available to him for his heartsick disgust. For Freudians to call Hamlet a mini-Claudius, to accept his male world's perspectives of ambition and lust as sufficient motives, is to do what all the fathers want to do: explain Hamlet by their

own divided selves. Perhaps even incest fantasies, as Laing tells us, may be defenses against the dread of being alone.[15]

What T. S. Eliot took for *Hamlet*'s failure, Shakespeare took for theme, as I have tried to show.[16] It *is* a play "dealing with the effects of a mother's guilt upon her son," not as sexuality but as identity itself. Hamlet's self-doubt is joined to Gertrude's insufficiency. Her "negative and insignificant" character "arouses in Hamlet the feeling which she is incapable of representing," Eliot rightly says, while the demand of his father for revenge calls Hamlet to a clear though false role.[17] But these are not flaws in the drama. They are flaws in the patriarchal order, which has cracked all the mirrors for self-confirmation. *Hamlet* succeeds so well, and has lasted so long, because it speaks so keenly to the dissociation of sensibility Eliot elsewhere describes.[18] Whether we call it role and self, reason and nature, mind and body, manly and womanly, or the language of power and the language of feeling, we recognize these dichotomies in our world and in ourselves. How poisonous rule o'ercrows every person's spirit (5.2.342) is indeed the fundamental answer to "Who's there," as Eliot's critique implies. To pursue the question, Hamlet learns much too well, is not only to fail, but to participate in the collusion.

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15. Laing, *Divided Self,* p. 57. Laing's system suffers from its romanticization of "true self" as aloneness rather than the positive interdependence taught by Winnicott. For a psychoanalytic critique of Laing, see David Holbrook, "R. D. Laing and the Death Circuit," *Encounter* 31 (July 1968): 35–45. In *Shakespeare and Society* Eagleton offers a similar critique of Hamlet himself: "Hamlet's insistence on not being a puppet leads, finally, to a delight in resisting any kind of definition; it becomes, in fact, socially irresponsible, a merely negative response" (p. 61). My own sense is that Hamlet looks to women rather than to men for self-definition and that structures of male rule induce his negation.

16. T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet" (1919), reprinted in *Selected Essays,* 3d ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), pp. 141–46. In *The Tiger's Heart: Eight Essays on Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 76, Herbert Howarth finds Eliot mistaken because the play is about "the helplessness of what is gentle before the onrush of what is rank," a nice formulation. Richard A. Lanham's *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976) concludes that *Hamlet* is two plays with "two kinds of self," revenger and self-conscious actor looking for the "big scene" (pp. 129–43). Charney's *Style in Hamlet* says Hamlet responds to his world with four styles: self-consciously parodic, witty, passionate, and simple. In my interpretation the clash Lanham sees between the role-playing "rhetoric" self and the "serious" revenger self mirrors Hamlet's role-inducing world, with no mirror for the real self. In some respects Eliot is right to question Gertrude as an "objective correlative"; she is so much more constant in Hamlet's hopes than in her weak, sensual actuality that she raises the question of whether the woman in *Hamlet* is only in Hamlet.

17. Eliot, p. 146.

18. T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), reprinted in *Selected Essays,* pp. 281–91.