THE NATURE OF DENMARK AND THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION, IN HAMLET.

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ABSTRACT

Hamlet suggests that two kinds of knowledge are available to man. One kind is a knowledge based on the evidence of the senses, and the operation of human reason upon this data. This is "natural knowledge", "natural" because Hamlet implies that the essence of this knowledge is analagous with the laws governing physical matter, or Nature, and because it is "natural", or "customary", within Denmark. The other type of knowledge is based upon the principles of religious thought, figured in Hamlet by terms such as the "canon" of the "Everlasting", and the "direction" of "Heaven". Hamlet's role vis-a-vis these types of knowledge is to test their validity as bases for action. His problem is epistemological in that he originally discards religious knowledge, adopting natural knowledge as the basis for his thought and action. That thought and that action are seen to be corrupt and morally impotent, by being likened to the thought and action of Claudius and Polonius, and to the corrupt nature of Denmark. Finally, Hamlet "re-converts" his knowledge in Act V, discarding natural knowledge in favor of Heaven's direction. He is now able to act (commit revenge). Hamlet's tragedy is that the kind of knowledge which enables him to act does so at his personal loss. There is an irreconcilability between the two types of knowledge. Yet the play implies that man contains both, as exemplified by Hamlet. This contradictory epistemology is a figure for the dual nature of man, part beast, part angel. It also reflects the duality of existence, which is comprised of matter and immateriality. Hamlet seems to see this as tragic.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This essay is really descriptive as well as interpretive. It attempts to explain what Hamlet means, in part, by examining what the play proffers as "knowledge". One critic has described the play as "preëminently in the interrogative mood. It reverberates with questions, anguished, meditative, alarmed."* This is true, and the essay concentrates on the epistemological problems within that universe of questions. What kinds of knowledge are available to a man? What relation do these have to action? These are some of the questions asked by the play, and Hamlet's problems are very closely connected with them. So too is Hamlet largely devoted to the workings-out of these essentially metaphysical questions within the local conditions of the plot. The first chapter examines the nature of Denmark on the assumption that this will bear some connection with the meaning of the entire play. In fact, Denmark is the key to an understanding of Hamlet, no matter what "approach" conditions that understanding. Denmark is a very special place, taking its vitality from its metaphorical nature. For this essay, the nature of Denmark - what it means to be "of" the country - defines and shapes the knowledge and actions of its inhabitants. What is that nature? Denmark exists as a metaphor for physicality itself. The country represents more than the physical plenum that any stage setting implies. Hamlet implies that Denmark represents the processes of Nature, as well. That is, there is a certain dynamic to Denmark which is figured in the processes whereby the physical world decays. In Hamlet, the word "corruption" takes its moral connotations directly from the physical sense. As Caroline Spurgeon pointed out concerning Hamlet, "...to

*Maynard Mack "The World of Hamlet", pp. 237-57 in Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), Leonard F. Dean, ed.

Shakespeare's imagination sin and evil deeds always smell foully" (my emphasis).*

In itself, the linking of materiality and immateriality (physical and moral corruption) is not unusual, for Shakespeare or for drama. What is unusual is the link that this technique has with the epistemology of Hamlet. Inasmuch as knowledge is derived from Denmark, or as knowledge exists of Denmark, that knowledge is seen to be corrupt in exactly the manner of Denmark. This knowledge's dynamic, manifested in rational processes which use it, is identical with the dynamic of the physical nature of Denmark. Moreover, the action that results from this knowledge also displays a like similarity of form and process. The analogies between Denmark, knowledge, and action hold right down the line. The environment shapes its inhabitants, rather than vice-versa. Sociologically, Hamlet is a study of a peculiar kind of ghetto.

Chapter II focuses on Claudius and Polonius, in order to illuminate and demonstrate the truth of this analysis. Their knowledge, and the action that results from that knowledge, seem to reflect the processes, and ultimately, the corruption, of Denmark. As administrators of Denmark, their action links the epistemology of Hamlet with political thought. Chapter II analyses the forms of Claudius and Polonius' knowledge, in particular their rational processes of thought. Their action is examined from the point of view of their supposed functions within Denmark. Thus, Claudius' kingliness and Polonius' sagacity as court counsel are looked at. Mirroring the corruption of Chapter I, their rational processes and their functions are found to be similarly distorted. This distortion again takes the forms of corruption associated in Hamlet with decaying.

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*Caroline F.E. Spurgeon Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us (University of Cambridge Press, 1966), p. 79.

materiality, or, the nature of Denmark itself.

Chapter Three concludes the essay by trying to show how Hamlet's actions are related to the problem of knowledge in Denmark. Hamlet's problem, that of committing revenge is partly epistemological: the Ghost does not give Hamlet specific direction as to either the mode of revenge, or the nature of that revenge. This leaves a stumbling-block in Hamlet's way, to which his actions at first direct themselves. The puzzling nature of the Ghost - is it a devil, or is it honest? - is another problem prefatory to the committing of revenge. Hamlet has to know whether the Ghost is telling the truth or not. In order to determine this, he attempts to verify Claudius' guilt by means of the "mousetrap". This playlet is really an attempt at experimental verification, an attempt to objectively determine truth. After Hamlet has decided that his trap has caught the rat, and that the Ghost was therefore "honest", he then attempts to determine the nature of revenge, by rational analysis. Again, Hamlet seems to think that he has been successful in this. At this point, off he goes on the sea voyage, and on his return, discards all that he has so painfully worked to discover. All of Hamlet's verification of knowledge, whether experimentally or analytical, is seen to be ultimately of no use to him. This implies that Hamlet's "problem" may be more closely connected with his attempts to validate his knowledge, than with the actual revenge. Chapter Three examines Hamlet's arduous struggles in this direction, and concludes that Hamlet's "knowledge" is indeed his main problem, one which dooms him to impotence, or to action that is as good as impotent. The reason lies in the nature of the knowledge Hamlet uses as a basis for thought and action. Chapter Three demonstrates

that this knowledge is again identical to that previously discussed in connection with Claudius and Polonius, with Denmark itself. The chapter also discusses an alternative to the knowledge which Hamlet offers. Part of Hamlet's personal tragedy lies in his rejection of this alternative, as a basis for action, after his interview with the Ghost. Hamlet suggests that part of the tragedy of mankind is the contradictory nature of the corrupt knowledge of Denmark and this alternate knowledge, both of which are available to man, as exemplified by the duality of knowledge existing within Hamlet at the beginning of the play. Both types of knowledge co-exist within man, and they are irreconcilable. The moral standard of the play is the "canon" of the Everlasting. Unfortunately, this canon is geared to the next world, rather than the one men exist in, materially. The paradoxical situation of this irreconcilability suggests the contradictory natures of matter and idea. Shakespeare seems less than Platonic in his resolution of this conflict, if Hamlet is any indication of his feelings on the subject. Hamlet implies, ultimately, that a limited corruption is the best that can be hoped for, in this world.

I have assumed the reader to be familiar with the most fully developed patterns of imagery in Hamlet, those of disease and corruption. I take this imagery to denote a condition of being. This is in accord with the best-known work in this area, for example, that of Caroline Spurgeon. In her book, Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us (Cambridge University Press, 1966), she says (p.318): "To Shakespeare's pictorial imagination, the problem in Hamlet is not predominantly that of will and reason, of a mind too philosophic or a nature tempermentally unfitted to act quickly; he sees it pictorially not as the problem of an individual at all, but as something greater and even more mysterious, as a condition for which the individual himself is apparently not responsible...."

Miss Spurgeon does not identify this "condition" beyond saying that the main imagerial patterns of Hamlet call it into being (p. 133): "...in Hamlet, we find in the "sickness" images a feeling of horror, disgust, and even helplessness... and the general sense of inward and unseen corruption...." Again (p.318), "In Hamlet... anguish is not the dominating thought, but rottenness, disease, corruptions, the result of dirt...the state of things in Denmark which shocks, paralyses and finally overwhelms Hamlet, is as the foul tumour breaking inwardly and poisoning the whole body, while showing

no cause without
Why the man dies.

This image pictures and reflects not only the outward conditions which causes Hamlet's spiritual illness, but also his own state."

I am not sure what Miss Spurgeon means by the words "will" and "reason", but I ascribe to the imagery the same qualities of denotation that she does.* This essay, however, tries to get beyond describing the meaning of the imagery as a "condition", and attempts to link the imagery, in a coherent fashion, to the action.

The essay does not have much of the usual scholarly apparatus, especially footnoting. This is not spoken defiantly; it is due firstly to the nature of the investigestion, which necessitated close analysis of the text. Secondly, I have not been able to find many works bearing directly upon the subject matter of this paper. At the same time, one cannot, of course, claim total originality. Many works touch upon many of the points discussed in the argument. However, a

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* For a similar view of this kind of imagery in Hamlet, see W.H. Clemen, "The Imagery of Hamlet", in Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism (New York; Oxford University Press, 1961), Leonard F. Dean, ed., pp.222-23.

different focus and direction makes quoting even relevant works a problem. I have chosen to restrict footnotes, referring to other works only in corroborating points I do not myself discuss in detail. It should not be inferred from this that no attention has been paid to the most imaginative and well-argued works of the Hamlet critical canon. The Bibliography lists many books and articles which are indispensable to the study of the play, and which the writer has found indispensable to this present essay. One last assumption should be noted here; the essay takes the moral standards of the play to be those of Sixteenth-Century English Christianity. Catholicism, Anglicanism, and Puritanism, did not differ greatly in the broad areas of moral conduct.* It is not the intention of this essay to enter into the dispute between a "saved" Hamlet or a "lost" Hamlet. Neither do I wish to discuss the tragic dimension of the play in terms of any completely religious vision. At the same time, it seems obvious that references in Hamlet to desirable moral behaviour would have been understood by the audience to refer to the Christian code of behaviour. The play, in my opinion, is inclusively rather than exclusively Christian. However, the references to Heaven, etc., I take as if referring to the Christian conception of these terms. Finally, all quotations from Hamlet have been taken from The Arden Shakespeare (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1917), edited by E.K. Chambers and revised by Walter Morris Hart.

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* See John F.H. New Anglican and Puritan: The Basis of Their Opposition 1558-1640 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964); although his book is devoted to examining the differences between the faiths, he does not disclose any great issues in ethical behaviour. See pps. 103-104.

CHAPTER I

DENMARK'S NATURE - THE COMMON THEME

Horatio's remark on the appearance of The Ghost ("this bodes some strange eruption to our State."), has the effect on an audience of Hamlet of bringing together the image of a state threatened with upheaval with that of an erupting abcess.

His words thus define Denmark as a country under the threat of invasion from within as well as from without. Denmark is already "infected" before The Ghost arrives. Marcellus asks

> Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task
> Does not divide the Sunday from the week;
> What might be toward, that this sweaty haste
> Doth make the night joint-labourer with the day:
> Who is't that can inform me ?
>
> (I,i,75)

The lines describe the State of Denmark at war. The "sore" task of the shipwrights, which is to prepare for war, brings in the corollary notion that this war-like state is diseased. But the ideas of war and disease are subsumed under the irony of the passage. The picture is that of a country feverishly united for the purpose of self-defense; strict watches are being kept, workers have been conscripted, there is constant toil. The construction of the sentences reflects this apparent "unity" : Sunday is united with the week, the night is "joint-labourer"

with the day. But the combinations within the passage are unnatural. Usually discrete concepts are yoked together: "Sunday" - "week", and "night" - "day". Images are given of things coming together to form a whole, but these apparent "unifications" reflect an unwholesome state, an unhealthy environment. It is a "sore task" that joins Sunday to the week, and a "sweaty haste" that compacts night and day. What is more, the ancient duel between King Hamlet and Old Fortinbras which the characters believe to be the historical source of the present unrest contains a similar irony. The description of the duel is couched in words which seem to validate the event in legalistic retrospective. The agreement to fight was a "sealed compact/ Well ratified by law and heraldry". Had Fortinbras won, he would have gained King Hamlet's lands by virtue of the "...comart/ And carriage of the article designed". This account again pictures the coming together of entities; Old Fortinbras and King Hamlet "compact" to fight. Their article is a "comart" or "joint-bargain".* As well, equal moieties of land are matched to form a prize. Yet all of these combinations obscure a murder, and the outcomes of this murder "well ratified by law" are the "lawless resolutes" of Young Fortinbras and the unwholesome condition of Denmark at the present. The apparent unities in Horatio's description of the duel and in Marcellus' account of Denmark mask a "disjointedness" figured by the imagerys of war and disease.

So far, we have been given a static view of Denmark's condition. But the idea of invasion, whether military or pathological, adds a dynamic dimension to this condition. Hamlet's first soliloquy defines the condition of Denmark, as did the terms of Marcellus'

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*The reading of the Ff. is "covenant", which literally means a "coming together".

question about the current "sweaty haste":

> O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
> Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!
> Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!
> How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable,
> Seem to me all the uses of this world!
> Fie on't! ah, fie! 't is an unweeded garden,
> That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
> Possess it merely.
>
> (I,ii,129)

Denmark, like an unweeded garden, has decayed and so its "uses" are "stale" and "flat". But when Hamlet says that it "grows to seed" he is describing a process as well as a condition, a process of deterioration. These words take us back to the first two lines of the soliloquy, where the wish for death is described in terms of a like process. The world growing to seed is somehow like flesh corrupting into a "dew". The link between the two are the words "stale" and "flat", which Hamlet uses in reference to Denmark and which can also apply to rotting matter. The correspondence between the two processes lends an ambiguity to "Things rank and gross in nature/ Possess it merely". The things in nature that are rank and gross are the weeds inhabiting the garden at the present, the implication being that conditions may have been better previously, and may be better later. The death of Hamlet's father may be part of a regenerative process, in which the stagnation of Claudius' generation is to be replaced by the vitality of Hamlet's. "Grows to seed" would suggest this regeneration and give some inherent value to the "unweeded garden". On the other hand, the world may be possessed (like an infected organism) by things which are rank and gross "in

nature", comprehending nothing of value, or the implication could be that Denmark itself is inherently rank or corrupt. Denmark is either occupied by something inherently corrupt or is itself that occupation. In the first case, Hamlet would be describing a pathological condition; in the second, the condition of Denmark would become the nature of Denmark. This would be a serious state of affairs, since in it the local problems of the country would be but manifestations of the much larger, the entirely radical problem of the condition of Nature itself. The passage suggests that this is indeed the case. As well, the emphasis on the word "merely" implies a complete possession of the land by things "rank and gross in nature". In Hamlet's soliloquy, Denmark becomes an avatar for the decaying processes of physical reality. To put it more generally, the nature of Denmark seems to be connected with the nature of physical matter.

Hamlet's remarks might be merely the opinion of a malcontent, and therefore unreliable, were it not for the fact that everything in Denmark, even abstractions, is given a corporeality and a dynamic similar to that described above. The characters continually describe such qualities as Love, Honour, and Virtue in corporeal terms. Laertes' "advice" to Ophelia is an instance of this:

Laertes. For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favour,
Hold it ...
The perfume and suppliance of a minute;
No more.

Ophelia. No more but so?

Laertes. Think it no more;
For nature, crescent, does not grow alone
In thews and bulk, but, as this temple waxes,
The inward service of the mind and soul
Grows wide withal.
(I,iii,5)

Laertes' latinate diction is designed to give the impression that serious and meaningful information is being set forth, but his statement is a tautology. It does not advance "Think it no more" in the slightest. What it does reveal is a curious affinity between "body" and "mind", in terms of growth. Laertes implies that "mind and soul", like "nature crescent", has its own "thews and bulk". By his speaking in this way, "mind" is given a corporeal nature; functionally, it follows or parallels the body and thus loses its traditional position of governance. This unnatural inversion is repeated in the lines that follow:

(Hamlet) may not, as unvalued persons do,
Carve for himself; for on his choice depends
The safety and health of this whole state;
And therefore must his choice be circumscribed
Unto the voice and yielding of that body
Whereof he is the head....
(I,iii,19)

Laertes' words reinforce the identification being made in the play between the state and the human body. Furthermore, the upset or unhealthy condition of that state is reflected in the relationship between the head and body that Laertes posits: here, the body has the voice and the powers of persuasion while the head is mute and follows orders. Ironically, the circle, a symbol of wholeness and perfection in Platonic thought, is used by Laertes in referring to both the "whole" state and Hamlet's "circumscribed" or imperfect, will.

Laertes had previously (1.17) mentioned Hamlet's "greatness" as something which could be "weighed". He repeats this notion again in connection with his sister's honour:

> Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain,
> If with too credent ear you list his songs,
> Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
> To his unmaster'd importunity.
>
> (I,iii,29)

Ophelia's "honour", like Hamlet's "greatness", becomes something which can be handled and used. The implied progression of her love affair is framed between "weigh" and "treasure". Laertes is making the abstract considerations of Ophelia's love into material objects because that forms expresses what he feels to be the essential characteristic of Hamlet's affection, corruption. Laertes then implies that this corruption is analogous with the condition of Denmark itself, by putting Ophelia's "virtue" into another physical context, that of Hamlet's "unweeded garden":

> Virtue itself 'scapes not calumnious strokes:
> The canker galls the infants of the spring,
> Too oft before their buttons be disclosed,
> And in the morn and liquid dew of youth
> Contagious blastments are most imminent....
> Youth to itself rebels, though none else near.
>
> (I,iii,38)

"Virtue" is likened to a tender flower, vulnerable to "contagious blastments". The first line looks ahead to a parallel construction used by Hamlet to describe the general corruption of mankind: "use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?". The "growth" of "mind and soul", previously linked to the material growth of the body, is made specifically visible here as a blight.

Laertes' metaphor does not offer Ophelia a valid reason to spurn Hamlet. Instead, it leads to a monstrous declaration: "Youth to itself rebels, though none else near". Laertes' speech implies that abstract qualities which exist in Denmark, such as "honour", "greatness", "chastity", "Virtue itself", and "youth", partake of material nature. Because of this, they share the characteristics of that nature and are seen to be inherently corrupt. This is expressed in the same types of imagery used to describe Denmark. As Denmark is in a state of war, so youth "rebels". Denmark is unhealthy and diseased and so "Virtue itself" suffers "contagious blastments". The unhealthiness of the country, which at one time seemed to have a local cause and therefore a local solution, becomes a universal malaise. This sickness permeates even abstract concepts, which are made material in the play's imagery. Laertes' remark is monstrous because it attributes to an immaterial conception like "yough" an inherent corruptibility like that of pure matter. Youth rebels "though none else near". The general pattern of imagery which describes the "conditions" of both matter and abstractions has a perverse and unnatural logic about it. Denmark is an "unweeded garden", that is, it has a purely physical nature. The essence of this nature is that it rots and corrupts, "grows to seed". Whereas abstractions such as "Virtue" should be immune from this sort of fate, apparently they share the same nature as that of Denmark itself. Thus the imagery which describes the physical condition of Denmark is also used to describe its spiritual condition. In Denmark, the Spirit is synonymous with the Letter.

Polonius voices the same idea of inherent corruptibility in describing Hamlet's passion for Ophelia:

> This is the very ecstasy of love,
> Whose violent property fordoes itself....
>
> (II,i,102)

Love's"property" is not fully explained by Polonius. He leaves it as violent and self-destructive, combining the ideas of war and that of a debilitating process. Claudius describes the natures of love and virtue similarly:

> There lives within the very flame of love
> A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it;
> And nothing is at a like goodness still;
> For goodness, growing to a pleurisy,
> Dies in his own too-much....
>
> (IV,vii,115)

"Love" and "goodness" are not constants in Denmark. They are likened to corrupting organisms, befouling themselves with their own poisons. The king also suggests that death is the inevitable outcome of this type of progession. The principle of inherent corruption is stated here, echoing the remarks of Laertes and Polonius, as does the imagery of growth and disease. This principle rests on the identification made between the "state" of Denmark - warlike, rotten, and disjoint - and everything within that state, including the abstract notions of its inhabitants, whereby its inhabitants formulate action. The disjointedness of Denmark is expressed by Hamlet when he says "The time is out of joint...." He also likens the "time" to a corpulent body within which unnatural action becomes the rule:

For in the fatness of these pursy times
Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg,
Yea, curb and woo for leave to do him good.

(III,iv,153)

This horrible conjunction of virtue and vice is the direct product of a time fat and pursy, a corpulent environment which forces monstrous oppositions. Abstract qualities are personified as corrupt individuals, with Virtue here being a fawning courtier.

Hamlet contains an elaborate network of correspondences between the ideas of "nature", "custom", and "habit". The nature of Denmark is that it is diseased and corrupt, representing the nature of physical material itself. In Hamlet, the habits and customs of individuals are intimately bound up with the nature of the State. The peculiar situation of the play is that Denmark defines its individuals and institutions, rather than the other way around. The "way of the world" is inseparable from the way of its inhabitants, whose habitual mode of being is described with the same types of imagery already seen. Hamlet's "dram of eale" speech links the custom and habit of the individual to the nature of Denmark:

Hamlet. The king doth wake to-night and takes his rouse,
Keeps wassail, and the swaggering upspring reels;
And as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down,
The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out
The triumph of his pledge.

Horatio. Is it a custom?

Hamlet. Ay, marry, is't:
But to my mind, though I am native here
And to the manner born, it is a custom
More honour'd in the breach than the observance.

(I,iv,8)

The custom of the king's rouse is introduced in terms of disharmony and rude noise. The kettledrum and trumpet bray out, lending to the custom an aura of animality which is in keeping with the "grossness" of Denmark. The noise produced by the braying may be intended to represent a flatus (which would point to a possible pun involving the word "breach"). The king's rouse then becomes a perverse distortion of a sacramental event. The ceremonial wine is corrupted into "draughts of Rhenish", and a divine afflatus likewise into an animalistic noise. This distortion makes Claudius' divine mandate as a ruler suspect, and places the legitimacy of Denmark as a political entity into a context of corruption and bestiality.

This custom produces an effect on the body of Denmark like that of an infectious agent. It eats out "the pith and marrow of our attribute". The imagery here is synonymous in meaning with Hamlet's later remark, concerning his mother's sensuality:

> ...Rebellious hell,
> If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
> To flaming youth let virtue be as wax,
> And melt in her own fire....
>
> (III,iv,82)

In both cases, the custom of drunkenness and the habit of lust are pictured as infections penetrating the very skeleton of the body.

Hamlet, in the earlier speech, turns his attention from the "custom" of the State to the "habit" of the individual. The link between the two stems from the imagery Hamlet uses, which is that of infection and pathological growth. "Particular men" take

corruption in the "general censure" from a "particular fault". That fault is described by Hamlet as either "some vicious mole of nature" or the "o'ergrowth of some complexion". Both are instances comparable to the growth of some organic disease. Both are inherent in men ("As, in their birth"). The third type of fault is "some habit that too much o'er-leavens/ The form of plausive manners." Yet this last imperfection is similar to the first two "natural" faults. Habit "o'er-leavens" plausive manners, as yeast does dough, a process which involves both the infection of the dough by the yeast, and the resultant growth of the bread. Custom, habit and "nature" are linked together by Hamlet in terms of physical disease. Just as Denmark is being assaulted by Young Fortinbras, so does the "o'ergrowth of some complexion" attack the individual by "breaking down the pales and forts of reason." The violence of this imagery itself reflects the state of Denmark at large. Again, the inherency of Denmark's corruption is reflected in the processes of its inhabitants, which are called "custom" and "habit". The "custom" of Denmark is analogous to the "habit" of the individual, and the imagery is connected to previous patterns describing the condition of Denmark. The speech has the effect of making the king's drunkenness a particular instance of a general law. Custom and habit, inasmuch as they parallel in their operations upon the individual the course of a degenerative disease, are reflections of a similar process operating in the State.

There is also a play on the words "custom" - "costume", and "habit" - "dress". Hamlet refers to the particular faults that men bear as "nature's livery", and these "faults" are connected very closely with both "custom" and "habit" in the passage. Claudius uses the same imagery in comparing the custom of youth and old age:

> ....for youth no less becomes
> The light and careless livery that it wears
> Than settled age his sables and his weeds,
> Importing health and graveness....
>
> (IV,vii,79)

Claudius' remarks are ironically revealing. "Light and careless livery" is the "costume" - "custom" of Youth, and this is analogous to the "sables" and "weeds" of "settled age". But "weeds" return us to the garden imagery of Hamlet's first soliloquy, where they represented disruption and decay. Although the custom of old age is taken by Claudius to import "health" and "graveness", the pun on "graveness" contradicts the direction of "health". In the process whereby youth becomes age, a deterioration in condition takes place. Instead of a normal maturation, the play offers a corruption, the "maturation" of matter. The reason for this is clear: reflecting the nature of Denmark itself, youth and age are presented in their physical aspects only. Hamlet's description of old men with wrinkled faces and their eyes "purging thick amber and plum-tree gum", like suppurations, is typical of the play's general focus. The light livery of youth becomes the weeds of old age. The end result of this process is "customary" to Denmark - death.

The imagery of food and of the process of digestion adds to the picture of Denmark already given. Horatio introduces the idea of food when he says that Young Fortinbras has:

> Shark'd up a list of lawless resolutes,
> For food and diet, to some enterprise
> That hath a stomach in't...
> (I,i,98)

Horatio's implication is that this "food" may indirectly make the body of Denmark ill, and upset. Moreover, the institutions of Denmark seem to function in terms of a digestive process. Here is how the king protests his serviceability to Polonius:

> The head is not more native to the heart,
> The hand more instrumental to the mouth,
> Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father.
> What wouldst thou have, Laertes?
> (I,ii,47)

Claudius is here promoting the very unkingly idea of making the greater serve the lesser, and he does so in terms of feeding. The ceremonial events which mark the changing fortunes of the kingdom are also illuminated by this kind of imagery:

> Thrift, thrift, Horatio! The funeral baked meats
> Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.
> (I,ii,180)

The State achieves a corporeality here in terms of "baked meats". These lines describe an unnatural condition where funeral and marriage "meats" are indiscriminately the same. The corruptness of this condition is implied in the image of the deteriorating "meats". The "food" of the State is rank. The progression of the State from funeral to marriage is also likened to a process of digestion, the result of which is indeed "rank and gross".

Later, Hamlet speaks of his mother's corruption in the same terms:

> Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,
> And batten on this moor?
>
> (III,iv,66)

Gertrude has stepped down from her "mountain", or former husband, to the "moor", a "flat" and "unprofitable" feeding ground, like the kingdom that the "moor" represents. Denmark is a body that is sick, as if it had been infected by some disease or had eaten poisonous food. Everything within that kingdom shares the same nature, even abstract ideas. The processes involved are those of decay,seen either as rotting matter of the world or the decay of food within the human body. Moral and physical corruption are equated. In the context of Denmark, these corruptions are taken to be inherent in whatever substances are undergoing deterioration, whether they be physical or mental. This is the nature of life in Denmark.

What is natural to Denmark in the deepest meaning of that word, is summed up by the King and Queen when Hamlet first appears before them:

> Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,
> And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
> Do not for ever with thy vailed lids
> Seek for thy noble father in the dust:
> Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die,
> Passing through nature to eternity.
>
> (I,ii,68)

King Hamlet is spoken of in terms of "dust". But dust is the end of all life in Denmark - "All that lives must die" - this is "common", or the "custom" of things in Denmark. This materialistic conclusion is in itself not exceptional, but the Queen takes

it to be the sine qua non of reasoning, and the basis for action. The process of life-into-death which the Queen describes parallels the process of digestion referred to above. "All that lives must die,/ Passing through nature to eternity." In the Queen's expression, life becomes a substance which nature feeds on, excreting the "dust" of death. There is a contrast here between the "eternity" of which the Queen speaks, and the unendingness of material processes implicit in her words. Her piety is traditional; however, she does not live it. If the natural progress of life itself is analogous to human digestion, this "dust" is of a decidedly base composition, as Hamlet discovers:

Hamlet. Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' the earth?

Horatio. E'en so.

Hamlet. And smelt so? Pah!

(V,i,217)

When Hamlet puts what he considers to be Gertrude's corruption and sickness in terms of feeding - "Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,/ And batten on this moor?" - he is making her into a paradigm of sensual nature. Life passes "through" her as she "feeds" off one king and then another, on its way to Death. In the present passage, the Queen describes the process of life as akin to the process of digestion, a process which is endlessly repetitious, finally culminating in oblivion. Ironically, this process displays a circularity which makes it seem "whole". In reality, it is an unvarying series of corruptions. The nature of life in Denmark

is to imitate this seeming "wholeness" which masks a real corruption.

The theme of the Queen's speech is taken up by Claudius:

> For what we know must be and is as common
> As any the most vulgar thing to sense,
> Why should we in our peevish opposition
> Take it to heart? Fie! 't is 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."...
>
> (I,ii,98)

For Claudius, what we know and what is, is pure physicality, "the most vulgar thing to sense". This physicality is the essence of Nature, whose "common theme" is "death of fathers". This is also the common theme of Denmark, where political institutions, practical events, and ideals are all within the context of decay and death. All the processes of the kingdom lead to death, and it is to the inevitability of death that the king's reason bends.

The remarks of the King and Queen concerning the "common theme" of Denmark sum up the radical situation of the inhabitants. They exist in a country which is not only a metaphor for a diseased condition, but for the pathological process itself. The condition of Denmark is a result of its own nature, and not something which admits of a local remedy. This condition is figured in the present state of war, the murder of a king, an incestuous marriage on the throne, and an unseated heir apparent to whom it never occurs that he should occupy the throne. These phenomena are described in terms of disequilibrium, irregularity, disease, and corruption, which themselves reflect an underlying pathological process. This process,

which is the real nature of Denmark, is identical with the process whereby the physical plenum corrupts. The nature of Denmark is the nature of Nature.

With Denmark as the given universe of the play, a graceless universe which possibly is meant to stand for the universe of the audience (as it would seem to them without the help of revelation supernatural and divine), the characters have difficult problems to solve. What kind of knowledge does such a world offer, and what kinds of action are possible based on this knowledge? Finally, what are the effects of such action? The Queen says in regard to the "nature" of life in Denmark, "Thou know'st 'tis common", and the King echoes this: "For what we know must be and is as common/ As any the most vulgar thing to sense." These statements presuppose a peculiar knowledge of Denmark, of life itself. We will now turn to an examination of these problems by seeing how the characters function within Denmark, keeping in mind the kind of universe that they present to themselves.

CHAPTER II

KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION IN DENMARK

As king of Denmark, Claudius is the head of the body that is the state. He is the organizing principle of the country, keeping the state "whole", together as a unity, and in the related sense of the word, healthy. His premier speech before the administration of Denmark is an inaugural address which seems to assert that he is doing so, confidently and efficiently. He begins the speech with the subject of King Hamlet's death, which runs smoothly into the news of his own marriage, in a perfectly balanced couplet:

> That we with wisest sorrow think on him,
> Together with remembrance of ourselves.
>
> (I,ii,6)

"We" and "him" revolve around the words "wisest sorrow", a phrase which seems to combine the polarities of death and life in a judicial resolution. Claudius is apparently "combining" the diverse fortunes of the state in a sober and sapient perspective. However, the second line of the couplet contains a curious ambiguity. "Remembrance" suggests the duties paid to the dead, as well as the simpler meaning of "remembering". In that sense, remembrance belongs to the dead, not the living. Claudius' sentence implies a pre-emption of the dead king's due; ironically, this is what Claudius has done in marrying Gertrude and what he wishes to conceal. The apparently balanced structure of the speech aims to give the effect of wholeness and unity, but has only the shape of these qualities. Its content

remains unmasked. The king is skilled at making disruption seem to be order. King Hamlet's death is described as if it had a unifying effect on the kingdom:

> ....that it us befitted
> To bear our hearts in grief and our whole kingdom
> To be contracted in one brow of woe...
>
> (I,ii,2)

He tries the same technique with his incestuous marriage:

> Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
> The imperial jointress to this warlike state,
> Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy, -
> With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
> With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
> In equal scale weighing delight and dole, -
> Taken to wife...

It takes Claudius a long time to complete "Have we...taken to wife", which reflects his unwillingness to present the unnatural fact of his marriage undisguisedly. The gap between the two parts of the sentence is filled with a series of oxymorons which juggle together irreconcilable concepts. The rhetorical effect is to produce a "balance" which attempts to override the disjointed nature of his information. There is an internal tension in the lines, a clashing of concepts which works against the order that is apparently being formulated by Claudius. The king is combining ideas, rather fitting together unlike ideas to make a "whole". The paradox which gives him the most trouble is "...our sometime sister, now our queen." This combination is far from natural, and so Claudius stresses its value as a unifying principle; Gertrude now becomes the imperial "jointress" to the state of Denmark.

The speech reveals the distortions of Claudius' actions as head of state. His rhetoric is a mass of "combinations" which attempts to obscure an underlying corruption. This corruption is figured in the disjointedness of the concepts he yokes together. Claudius calls this manipulation "weighing" ("In equal scale weighing delight and dole"), imputing to his reign by the image of Justicia a virtue it does not really have. He takes qualities as if they had mass, and the result is an obliteration of their essential values. The system of "weighing" concepts such as "sister" and "wife" and finding a nice "balance" between them can work only when the terms lose their moral significance in relation to one another. Again, Claudius' rhetoric attempts to substitute a quantitative balance for moral rectitude. The king dismisses the subject of his "most valiant brother" by saying "...So much for him./ Now for ourself...." The king is condoning his past murder and present incest by implying that he has weighed out the requisite amount of words, an amount which neatly balances his present situation. This is why he cannot repent when he prays. He assumes that what is necessary to penitence is the surrender of "...those effects for which I did the murder,/ My crown, mine own ambition and my queen" (III,iii,54). But penitence is of the heart and not connected with materiality in any way. Even if Claudius had given up his material gain, he would not have been absolved without a spiritual contrition, which he never considers.

Claudius also distorts his function as the representative of Law within the state. He practices a corrupt relativism in this regard.

On the one hand, Fortinbras is castigated for trying to retake lands that his father lost "with all bands of law." Here Fortinbras offends against what Claudius upholds as the impartial and international code of justice. On the other hand, Claudius "legalizes" his incest by referring it to a consensus of his immediate followers: "...nor have we herein barr'd/ Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone/ With this affair along." Claudius is a perverse king who makes the kingdom less wholesome with every combination he effects. He also perverts ideals of morality by converting them into physical terms, a physicality which reflects the nature of Denmark. His kingly functions are ironic distortions of the ideal. Claudius also subverts the notion of duty, equating it with contractual obligation. This in itself is not particularly perverse. But Claudius again places the definition in a relativistic context:

> But your must know your father lost a father;
> That father lost, lost his, and the survivor bound
> In filial obligation for some term
> To do obsequious sorrow...
> (I,ii,89)

Claudius is putting the legitimate duty owed a father into purgatorial terms which prefigure the Ghost's punishment:

> Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
> And for the day confined to fast in fires
> Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
> Are burnt and purged away.
> (I,v,10)

Moreover, "some term" is a matter of personal interpretation. Claudius interprets Hamlet's perserverance in this regard as "obstinate condolement" and a "course" of "impious stubbornness". The possible pun on "course" - "corse" - would reveal Claudius' true motive for

wishing Hamlet to discontinue his "mourning duties". While Hamlet prolongs his memory by mourning for him, King Hamlet is indeed a "corpse of impious stubbornness", refusing to vanish from sight. Ironically, Hamlet's "filial obligation" will be renewed with disastrous consequences for Claudius.

Claudius' remarks stem from a knowledge which is based on the "evidence of the senses":

> For what we know must be and is as common
> As any the most vulgar thing to sense...
>
> (I,ii,98)

Opposition to this, Claudius says, is to "reason most absurd". What Claudius practices is an accommodation with an essentially corrupt world which takes acceptance of this corruption as the sine qua non of the proper use of "reason". The effect of this is a reasoning natural to Denmark, a corrupt mentality. Inasmuch as corruption is seen as a process operating within Denmark, it is manifested in Claudius' thought as circuitous reasoning and tautological logic. The terms of its operation are those of paradox and opposition, "combinations" which apparently form the unity of the state, but mask the disease of Denmark, a disjointedness.

Claudius' epistemology is, after all, grounded in the paradoxical reality of Denmark. The sense-data of nature are "senseless" to any of the nuances of spirit. The world that Claudius knows is corrupt, and his action must be "fitted" to it, jammed forcibly, by repeated exertions of will. The result of this is an apparent smoothness and calm which is only a seemingness. This has the effect of turning the

King into something of a non-person. He wishes to spy on Hamlet:

> Her father and myself, lawful espials,
> Will so bestow ourselves that, seeing,unseen,
> We may of their encounter frankly judge...
>
> (III,i,32)

Claudius again james opposing terms, "lawful espials" into an unharmonious unit. He desires to be "seeing,unseen", like a phantom. This spectre-like quality is reinforced by a conversation that Claudius has with Laertes concerning the French swordsman, Lamord:[1]

> ...he grew unto his seat;
> And to such wondrous doing brought his horse,
> As he had been incorpsed and demi-natured
> With the brave beast: so far he topp'd my thought,
> That I, in forgery of shapes and tricks,
> Come short of what he did.
>
> (IV,vii,86)

Claudius describes Lamord fusing with his horse, a transformation of a man into a centaur. As a centaur, Lamord stands for the passional side of Man, and this image recalls Hamlet's description of Claudius (I,ii,140) as a "satyr". Lamord is a demonic "combination" which represents the essence of the King's character. This man-beast also reflects the nature of Denmark itself. If "Lamord" is intended to stand for "Death", it would corroborate what we already know of Denmark and Claudius. Claudius' actions imitate the natural processes of Denmark which lead to death, since they are based on "the most vulgar thing to sense", or pure materiality. As the final end of physical nature is death, so the King's actions tend to that objective. Lamord is the death at the heart of physical nature; Claudius tries to imitate this "in forgery of tricks and shapes".

This reinforces the idea of the insubstantiality of the King's actions and of the King himself. His actions are "forgeries", lies, like the seemingness of Denmark. The knowledge which leads to his action is inadequate, based upon appearance and empty form, "tricks and shapes". This abounds in his speech, which has only the appearance of "wholeness", an appearance based on rhetorical balance. The effects of Claudius' actions are circuitous processes, plots which rebound. Their inevitable failure makes them phantom-like, as death makes phantoms out of living entities, or a Truth exposes the idola which fallen Reason creates for the lifeless illusions they are. Claudius' "combinations" and plans fade away, to be replaced with their like, and so on. Claudius is insubstantial because his actions reflect the essence of his being, which is identical with the "seeming" nature of Denmark. In other terms, Claudius does not merely fail, he is failure to succeed.

Claudius cannot keep his speech free of the paradoxical processes he represents:

> ...You are the most immediate to our throne,
> And with no less nobility of love
> Than that which dearest father bears his son,
> Do I impart toward you. For your intent
> In going back to school in Wittenberg,
> It is most retrograde to our desire:
> And we beseech you, bend you to remain
> Here, in the cheer and comfort of our eye...
>
> (I,ii,109)

A noble speech; but omitting for the present the irony which surrounds Claudius' juxtaposition of the words "love" and "desire", his terminology reflects the ebb and flow of natural process in Denmark. Claudius shuffles the physical coordinates of himself and Hamlet: Hamlet is

firstly "most immediate" to the throne. Claudius then imports his love "toward" Hamlet. Hamlet's intent in "going back" to Wittenberg is "retrograde" to Claudius' desire (later, the retrograde motion of Hamlet in respect to Claudius will become an actuality, when Claudius sends Hamlet to England, only to have Hamlet return). Finally, this "going back" is countered by "remain here", the contrary directions hinged about the word "bend". The circling, back-and-forth movement of the speech is a paradigm for the cyclic and repetitive action of growth and decay in Denmark. The contrariety of this process wherein growth is countered by a simultaneous decay, is manifested in the paradoxes of the king's speech. It also forms the irony inherent in the king's actions, which work simultaneously in the directions of completion and failure. While plotting revenge with Laertes, Claudius says:

> Revenge should have no bounds. But, good Laertes,
> Will you do this, keep close within your chamber...
>
> (IV,vii,129)

The second statement is nothing less than amazingly ironic, in the light of what precedes it. Laertes must be bound up, must "keep close" within his chamber, and this immediately following the image of a "boundless" revenge. The infinitude of the first sentence is countered by the delimitation of the second. This is the best indication that their plans will boomerang, carom back on them.

Further evidence that the king's action simply reflects the nature of his knowledge and the nature of Denmark can be found in Claudius' use of the food metaphor. When Laertes bursts into the

castle, after hearing of his father's death, the first words between himself and Claudius take this form:

Laertes. Where is my father?

King. Dead.

Queen. But not by him.

King. Let him demand his fill.

(IV,v,127)

There is an ominous prophecy here. Laertes, "hungry" for information, will be fed a particularly poisonous "food", persuasive information which will make Laertes ill, or corrupted. Claudius had previously alluded to the pestilent effect on [Laertes] of certain information:

> Laertes is in secret come from France:
> Feeds on his wonder, keeps himself in clouds,
> And wants not buzzers to infect his ear
> With pestilent speeches of his father's death...
>
> (IV,v,88)

Claudius soon has Laertes feeding from his hand:

King. Now must your conscience my acquittance seal,
And you must put me in your heart for friend,
Sith you have heard, and with a knowing ear,
That he which hath your noble father slain
Pursued my life.

Laertes. It well appears...

(IV,vii,1)

The words "heard" and "ear" reflect a process which the audience knows is essentially corrupt. The outcome of all this feeding and hearing is another corruption, Claudius' device to kill Hamlet. The persuasion of the king was unwittingly referred to by Laertes as an appearance ("It well appears..."). The final irony of the king's plan of revenge is that he speaks of it as if he too considered it

an "appearance", something intrinsically rotten and in need of shoring:

> ...if this should fail,
> And that our drift look through our bad performance,
> 'Twere better not assay'd: therefore this project
> Should have a back or second, that might hold,
> If this should blast in proof....
>
> (IV,vii,151)

The king's "project", or murderous thrust, is built upon "seemingness". It therefore needs a "back" to give it substance. This substance is pure corruption; the device will indeed "blast in proof", like a broken blister, revealing the matter inside. The "matter" of the king's action is to be understood in a medical sense as corrupt material, which also reflects the moral essence of his nature. It also reflects the corruption of the physical world from which Claudius takes his cues for knowledge and action.

Another function of the king is to make the state "whole" in the sense of "healthy". The king is the doctor of the state, the good physician who heals the state's ills. Things are going wrong, but Claudius is unable to recognize the true nature of Denmark's trouble, which lies in the essence of his own being. He localizes the "disease" in Hamlet, entreating [Rosencrantz and Guildenstern] to

> ...to gather,
> So much as from occasion you may glean,
> Whether aught, to us unknown, afflects him thus,
> That, open'd, lies within our remedy.
>
> (II,ii,15)

Hamlet is "afflicted" and Claudius wishes to remedy the condition. After spying on Hamlet and Ophelia, the king prescribes a sea voyage:

> Haply the seas and countries different
> With variable objects shall expel
> This something-settled matter in his heart...
>
> (III,i,179)

The terms of the king's medicine are physical. "Variable objects" will "expel" the "something-settled matter" from Hamlet's heart. This is a process suggestive of a purge. Claudius has not yet conceived of using the sea voyage as an instrument of Hamlet's death. Hamlet's sea voyage will act as a beneficial purge, expelling the "matter" from his heart, as we shall see. Claudius' present concern for Hamlet's well-being is reflected in the veracity of the cure he prescribes. However, Claudius soon replaces concern for Hamlet with the sense of his own well-being. This has the effect of misleading Claudius as to the nature of Denmark's illness. Claudius sees himself as the "owner of a foul disease". This is true; but Hamlet is not that disease, which lies within the very nature of Denmark. Claudius thus makes a wrong diagnosis, although the ambiguity of his phrase points to the truth. This bad diagnosis leads Claudius to change the meaning of his prescription. The sea voyage is to effect Hamlet's death. Claudius' "medicine" is now identical with the matter of Denmark, mirroring the corruption of physical phenomena and so predicating death. Again, Claudius refers to his cure in terms of a "seemingness":

> ...To bear all smooth and even,
> This sudden sending him away must seem
> Deliberate pause...
>
> (IV,iii,7)

Claudius' function as "doctor" becomes perversely ironic: he prescribes a voyage of death as a "cure" for Hamlet, who returns bringing death for Claudius. Although Claudius ultimately refers to Hamlet as a disease which afflicts his own person ("Do it, England;/ For like the hectic in my blood he rages,/ And thou must cure me"), he is wilfully unable to recognize the consequences and meaning of the "medicine" he prescribes. His knowledge of the "customs" of Denmark paradoxically leads to an ignorance of their meaning. He maintains this ignorance in the face of the "natural" end to which he must come:

> Oh, yet defend me,friends; I am but hurt.
>
> (V,ii,335)

It is his own "medicine", death, which Claudius is here refusing to take.

The knowledge and actions of Claudius are perfectly compatible with his environment. They arise out of the "matter" of Denmark, and indicate what is the matter <u>with</u> Denmark. His actions have a "seeming ness" about them, an appearance of wholeness. That wholeness is figured by the circularity of his actions, which is an ironic distortion of a shape supposed to signify unity and health.

Even Claudius' kingship has a circularity to it. It is likened to a:

> ...massy wheel,
> Fix'd on the summit of the highest mount,
> To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
> Are mortised and adjoin'd; which, when it falls,
> Each small annexment, petty consequence,
> Attends the boisterous ruin.
>
> (III,iii,17)

Rosencrantz's image is that of a "massy" wheel, which suggests the corporeality of Denmark. The speech repeats a image occurring earlier, at the end of the Player's speech:

> "Out, out, thou strumpet Fortune! All you gods,
> In general synod take away her power:
> Break all the spokes and fellies from her wheel,
> And bowl the round nave down the hill of heaven,
> As low as to the fiends!"
> (II,ii,515)

The Player's speech fixes in the play the idea of Fortune's representation as a wheel, making Rosencrantz's wheel seem a like embodiment. Moreover, the idea of bowling the "round (K) nave down the hill of heaven/ As low as to the fiends" seems similar to what Hamlet plans for Claudius. The implications of these passages are that Claudius' actions are akin to the traditional movements of Fortune's wheel, signifying impending disaster and discord. As well, Denmark itself is under the "rule" of Fortune. Claudius embodies the significance of Fortune's wheel in his tenure as king. The "wholeness" of Claudius' kingship is the "wholeness" of the wheel of Fortune.

Just as the nature of Denmark defines Claudius, so his knowledge and action are representative of that nature. Futility, death, and corruption are reflected in the distortions of the king's functions. He should be unifying the kingdom, but his actions in this regard are in practice ineffectual. He should be healing the kingdom, but his "medicines" lead only to further corruption and death. His actions mimic in their effect the destructive processes of natural law which corrupt and decompose matter.

The actions of Polonius, like those of the King, are based upon the data of "sense". He acts according to what he sees and hears. This sense-data methodology is natural to Polonius. He projects it onto situations to give them a sensual colouring, as in his first words to Ophelia:

Polonius. What is't, Ophelia, he hath said to you?

Ophelia. So please you, something touching the Lord Hamlet.

Polonius. Marry, well bethought....
(I,iii,88)

Polonius appreciates Ophelia's unwitting, and crude, innuendo in the word "touching". This reading may be making too much of the word "touching", but Polonius is an expert at this kind of pornographic subtlety:

Polonius. Do you believe his tenders, as you call them?

Ophelia. I do not know, my lord, what I should think.

Polonius. Marry, I will teach you....Tender yourself more dearly;
Or...you'll tender me a fool.
(I,iii,103)

Like Claudius, Polonius converts categories of thought into physical terms. While Polonius' puns are "refined", the morality behind his concern for Ophelia is fleshly, "gross":

...From this time
Be something scanter of your maiden presence;
Set your entreatments at a higher rate
Than a command to parley....
(I,iii,120)

Ophelia must withhold her maiden "presents", and set her "entreatments" at a higher "rate". Polonius is speaking to Ophelia as if he were her procurer. His rhetoric is formulated of puns which reveal his true

nature, like the apparently "balanced" speech of Claudius. Polonius' puns mask an inner corruption. The indirectness of his speech matches the methodology he adopts in his efforts to gain knowledge: this becomes clear in Polonius' instructions to Reynaldo:

> Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth:
> And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
> With windlasses and with assays of bias,
> By indirections find directions out....
>
> (II,i,63)

As a "fisher" of truth, Polonius uses as bait the lie. The images, that of casting a line and reeling it back, and that of the "windlass", indicate the kind of circularity associated in Hamlet with corruption. Polonius' credo "By indirections find directions out" is ironically undercut by what does not happen: Reynaldo never returns to report on Laertes' behaviour. The hook is cast out and remains, showing the disjointedness underneath the images of circles. Polonius cannot keep from constructing circles, based on the premise that the road to truth is indirect. He couches his own proficiency at truth-seeking to the king in these terms:

> If circumstances lead me, I will find
> Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed
> Within the centre.
>
> (II,ii,157)

Polonius will be "lead", as if he were blind, by "circumstances", a word allied etymologically to "circle". Following circles, Polonius will circle after truth. The labyrinthine confusion implied in Polonius' image contradicts the picture he is trying to present, that of a meticulous and precise searcher after truth.

Polonius' speeches contain repeated references to himself functioning as a doctor. The maxims that he bestows on Laertes are "precepts", or prescriptions, from which results will follow "as the night the day". This statement reverses the conventional redemptive image of daybreak to become both an ominous portent, and an indication of the perverted nature of Polonius' advice. The distortion of his function as physician becomes apparent through his handling of Ophelia's affair with Hamlet. After reporting his discovery of this "hot love on the wing", Polonius describes the prophylactic measures he has taken, and records with a practitioner's precision their results:

> No, I went round to work...
> ...and then I prescripts gave her...
> Which done, she took the fruits of my advice;
> And he repulsed - a short tale to make -
> Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
> Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,
> Thence to a lightness, and by this declension,
> Into the madness wherein now he raves...
>
> (II,ii,138)

Polonius went "round" to work, giving Ophelia "prescriptions" for her lovesickness. This medicine was supposed to cure Hamlet and Ophelia of their love for each other. Yet the result of Polonius' "cure" is not an abatement but a worsening. The "declension" of Hamlet's "madness" is a humorous reminder of Polonius' inability to prescribe the right advice.

The practice of working by "round" methods defines Polonius' actions. It reflects, like the actions of Claudius, the corrupt and futile cycle of life in Denmark, "passing through nature to eternity".

Polonius' final pun comes when he decides to repeat the already-failed ploy of having someone draw Hamlet out while he spies on them. This time, the decoy is to be Gertrude. "Let her", he says to Claudius, "be round with him." Polonius means that Gertrude should be "direct" with Hamlet, but his own plans contradict this meaning. The literal word and his own intention are at variance again. The pun on "round", i.e., "circuitous", reveals the essence of Polonius' thought. However, there is one last circle to be completed by Polonius. His counseling is "bad medicine", making the patient sicker, leading to further disease. The irony of Polonius' life is that it too follows a similar course. His advice rebounds on him and the result is death, the end product of natural processes in Denmark. His life and death in the play is a series of repetitive, circular thoughts and actions which mirror the environment around him.

It is Polonius' rationality which is his most striking characteristic, striking because in its operation, it exactly reflects the "natural" corruption of Denmark. Here is his analysis of Hamlet's madness:

> ...your noble son is mad:
> Mad call I it; for, to define true madness,
> What is't but to be nothing else but mad?...
> Mad let us grant him, then: and now remains
> That we find out the cause: of this effect,
> Or rather say, the cause of this defect,
> For this effect defective comes by cause.
> Thus it remains, and the remainder thus.
> Perpend.
>
> (II,ii,92)

He ends his speech with the instruction "Perpend", or "weigh". The form of his sentences enables us to do just that. First comes "Your noble son is mad", and this is followed by two sentences perfectly "balanced":

> Mad - - -, for ,- - - madness
> What is't but - - - - - but mad?

The words are perfectly balanced, as if they had mass. Their meaning, however, is restricted. Logically they form a tautology; as information, they have no value. Polonius' words are put into a circular pattern, implying the circle's "perfection", but in reality signifying a zero, an emptiness of content. The form of the words reflects Polonius' rational processes. These processes mimic circular patterns found in the natural world of Denmark. This tautological and circuitous reasoning, which comes from treating words as if they were physical matter, is repeated in the lines that follow:

> Mad let us grant him, and now remains
>
> - - - - cause of this effect,
> - - - - cause of this defect,
> - - effect defective comes by cause.
>
> Thus it remains, and the remainder thus.

The fourth line of this logical unit is simply the addition of the previous two. Taken together, they form a pseudo-syllogism devoid of any real meaning. If the two lines which frame this inane verbal arithmetic are also taken together, they make up an expression whose seeming function is to repeat the same phrase ad infinitum. Polonius conducts the argument as if he were measuring flour, adding words here, balancing others there. Polonius' reasoning process is itself

a metaphor for the seeming "balance" of Denmark, the growth and decay of materiality.

The knowledge of Claudius and Polonius is similar. They arise from the nature of Denmark itself. In this sense, their actions are autochthonic. When they encounter phenomena that cannot be fitted to their knowledge, they either ignore its real implications (as Claudius does the fact of his impending death), or translate it into their own terms in order to deal with it (as Polonius' "explanation" transforms Hamlet's "madness" into units of mass). In either case, the result is circuitous and futile action, action which propagates the conditions it seeks to alleviate or resolve. The King is the "head" of the country. He has to keep the kingdom "whole", unified and healthy. His attempts to function in the former role are disastrous, leading ultimately to a shattered kingdom. As a physician, his actions are perverse. His cure for the disease of Denmark, which he mistakenly associates solely with Hamlet, is death. But this "medicine" is also the "custom", "habit", and "nature" of Denmark. This being the case, Claudius and Polonius operate as embodiments of physical nature in the realms of political, intellectual, and ethical existence. The implication of their existences in Hamlet is that the kind of knowledge they possess does not transcend their material environment. This leads to identical action. Their knowledge is only sufficient for maintaining the natural order of Denmark temporarily. Eventually, their actions turn full circle and destroy them. This circularity signifies the impotency of their efforts; and, as the King is linked to

the wheel of Fortune, also suggests the ruin implicit in their administration of the state's affairs. This circularity is paradoxical, showing a perfect shape while in reality being a "disjointedness" similar to that of decaying matter. It is finally the corruption of death.

CHAPTER III

H A M L E T

The knowledge of Claudius and Polonius was seen to be consanguineous with the nature of Denmark. Built up from sense-data only, it bred action again analogous with the natural processes of the land. Hamlet's first soliloquy refers to this type of knowledge and also hints at a second:

> O, that this too too solid[1] flesh would melt,
> Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!
> Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! O God!
> How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of this world!
>
> (I,ii,129)

Hamlet knows the nature of the physical world to be "stale" and "flat". Its processes are reflected in his wish for death, imaged as flesh dissolving into a "dew". There is another meaning for the word "resolve", which is "to answer" (a question). Hamlet pictures death "resolving" the question of life itself. Suicide works in the direction of this "answer", and is simply an active equivalent to the inevitable end of intransitive existence in Denmark. Working against this solution, and thus against the nature of Denmark, is another kind of knowledge, the "canon" of the Everlasting.

This knowledge manifests itself as a "canon" or "law". It is significant that instead of "God", Hamlet chooses the euphemism

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[1] This is the reading of F1. Q_2 has too too sullied and Q_1, too much griev'd and sallied. Solid seems preferable to me, fitting in nicely with the idea of death as a purge. It reinforces the analogy between a bodily condition which must be purged of its poisonous "matter" and the unhealthy nature of life in Denmark which to Hamlet is "stale" and "flat".

"Everlasting", which contrasts strongly with the transitoriness of natural "law" exemplified by Denmark. The two kinds of knowledge, that of the fading flesh, and that of the "Everlasting", comprise a duality which defines Hamlet's character.

His situation at the beginning of the play is an example of this. Although he is "native" to Denmark, and "to the manner born", Hamlet is something of a tourist, only recently returned from Wittenberg. As in the case of Horatio, this sets him apart from the others. Hamlet is in a unique position - being of Denmark and being not of Denmark. Keeping in mind the parallels between Denmark and the human body suggested by the play, his situation seems like a metaphor for the condition of man as the Elizabethans like to conceive of him. The part of Hamlet that is not "native" to Denmark, his stay in Wittenberg, would suggest a certain kind of non-sensual knowledge, figured by God's "canon". This suggests a problem and a paradox. The problem is that the two kinds of knowledge appear to be irreconcilable. Natural life in Denmark is a process of rotting to which Death is an ironic "answer". On the other hand, God's canon forbids suicide. The paradox is contained in a conception of Man embodying these two conceptions, which reflect his dual nature. The practical result, in Hamlet's case, is that the two tend to cancel each other out, resulting in a stasis instead of a movement toward a true solution to the problem that confronts him. Unfortunately, this stasis is not a tranquillity, but a paralysis. Moreover, it is like the apparent equilibrium of a piece of string being pulled in opposing directions, the result of which is a tearing apart. Hamlet's stasis masks a "disjointedness", just as do the

actions of Claudius and Polonius. The paradoxical nature of existence in Denmark is evident here. Action is similar to the non-action of decaying material. If one "acts" according to the custom of the land, one merely repeats the "action" of nature itself, a corruption akin to the vegetation of material. After the first soliloquy, we should be prepared to see Hamlet's action reflecting the disjointed nature of his knowledge and thus the nature of Denmark itself.

Unlike Claudius and the other administrators of the state, Hamlet does not have any specific function within Denmark. This changes when he meets the Ghost, who provides him with instructions that presumably define his role in the play. The Ghost punctuates these instructions with a specific kind of request:

> Mark me...lend they serious hearing
> ...So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear
> ...List, list, O list...Now, Hamlet, hear.

The Ghost's insistence that Hamlet "hear" it is undermined by its own story, which involves a poisoning through the ear. The description of that poisoning is built with the imagery of infection and disease, patterns reflecting the corrupt nature of Denmark. The concept of 'hearing' had already been associated by Horatio with the potential loss of reason, in the context of the Ghost's visit:

> What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
> Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
> That beetles o'er his base into the sea,
> And there assume some other horrible form,
> Which might deprive your sovereighty of reason
> And draw you into madness? think of it:
> The very place puts toys of desperation,
> Without more motive, into every brain
> That looks so many fathoms to the sea
> And hears it roar beneath.
>
> (I,iv,69)

Horatio's picture of the possible danger that awaits Hamlet has a relevance to both Christian and Pagan mythology. Hamlet may "fall" into the sea that "roars" beneath, a word descriptive of the sound of fire, as well as surf. This "fall" could then be understood in Christian terms, from grace into sin. More specifically, Hamlet's reason is threatened. As with Ulysses, the very act of hearing may in this case be dangerous, drawing Hamlet into madness. It is Hamlet's "brain" that may be affected, and so Horatio warns Hamlet to "think of it". Horatio's next and final plea implies that Hamlet's "sovereignty" has in fact been affected: "be ruled" indicated Hamlet's new position as a man without the guide of reason, suggesting the conventional image of the hawk deprived of the falconer. This image is reinforced by Hamlet's own words:

> Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift
> As meditation or the thoughts of love,
> May sweep to my revenge.
>
> (I,v,29)

Hamlet's construction is "disjoint". "Revenge" is coupled with "love" and "meditation". The disjointedness of the combinations is again reflected in the image of the unruled hawk circling in the sky. Hamlet has been unleashed by the Ghost's words. This circling movement is similar to the actions of Claudius and Polonius in that it shapes a perfection of a wholeness, while masking a radical disjointedness. The emphasis in the speech is on "knowing" and "thinking", again stressing the disjointedness of Hamlet's knowledge and emphasizing the dualities of his situation at the beginning of the play.

The Ghost prefixed the essential part of his revelation - that the murderer was Claudius - with the words, "but know, thou noble youth..." (L. 38). His last words to Hamlet here are "Remember me". Hamlet then commits the Ghost completely to his memory and rationality:

> Remember thee!
> Yea, from the table of my memory
> I'll wipe away all trivial fond records...
> And thy commandment all alone shall live
> Within the book and volume of my brain...
>
> (I,v,97)

Hamlet's transformation of which Claudius will later speak is one which has affected his memory and brain, repeating the terms of Horatio's warning. It also repeats a previous situation, Ophelia's willingness to heed Laertes:

Laertes. Farewell, Ophelia; and remember well
What I have said to you.

Ophelia. 'T is in my memory lock'd,
And you yourself shall keep the key of it. (I,iii,84)

What Laertes said was poisonous and corrupt, beginning a chain of events culminating in Ophelia's death. Hamlet's readiness to "hear" the Ghost promises to initiate a similar pattern.

The dialogue that follows Hamlet's interview with the Ghost confirms the suggestions of the previous imagery. Marcellus calls Hamlet back to earth, as one would a straying hawk: "Illo, ho, ho, my lord." Hamlet's first "explanation", like the explanations of Polonius, takes the form of a tautology: "There's never a villain dwelling in all Denmark/ But he's an arrant knave." Finally, Hamlet proposes to "put on" an antic disposition. This contradicts something

he said earlier:

> Seems, madam! nay, it is; I know not "seems."
>
> (I,ii,76)

Hamlet "knew" not "seems". He has now put on the knowledge of seemingness. Ironically, Hamlet's new disposition is "put on" only to cover up a true madness. This madness is an unhealthiness or a disjointedness of intellect; his "sovereignty" has been made disjoint, its reason separated from itself. Before citing evidence which indicates a literal "split" in Hamlet, there is another kind of "disjointedness" to consider.

This is the process whereby an inhabitant of Denmark becomes insubstantial, where the essence of his being is expressed in terms of altered shape, like Claudius' "forgery of tricks and shapes". The character takes on a seemingness which reflects the nature of his environment. In the case of Hamlet, this develops from the metaphors used to describe his "nature", as well as from the implications of his pretended madness.

Hamlet already considers himself a "hawk" of revenge. The Ghost suggests another metaphor:

> I find thee apt;
> And <u>duller</u> shouldst thou be than the fat weed
> That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,
> Wouldst thou not stir in this...
>
> (I,v,31)

As the instrument of revenge, Hamlet is to be a sword which will excise Claudius. Hamlet's "mousetrap" has the nature of a scalpel, as applied to an abscess:

> ...I'll have these players
> Play something like the murder of my father
> Before mine uncle: I'll observe his looks;
> I'll tent him to the quick...
>
> (II,ii,623)

Ophelia feels the "edge" of Hamlet's sensibility during the mousetrap's performance:

Ophelia. You are as good as a chorus, my lord.

Hamlet. I could interpret between you and your love, if I could see the puppets dallying.

Ophelia. You are keen, my lord,you are keen.

(III,ii,255)

So too does Gertrude, in the bedroom scene:

> O, speak to me no more;
> These words, like daggers, enter in mine ears...
>
> (III,iv,91)
>
> O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.
>
> (III,iv,156)

Hamlet thus appears in the guises of hawk and sword. These are not merely "facets" of his character. They betoken a "transformation" which enables him to appear as a hawk, a sword, a madman, a sane prince. These doppelgangers signify an ability like that of the "devil" who has the power "T' assume a pleasing shape...", as Hamlet says (II,ii,585). This condition is also akin to the "seemingness" of Claudius and Polonius.

The most telling "shape" is that of the sword, which is associated with both Hamlet's intellect, and his revenge. In Act II, Hamlet refers to himself as a "dull and muddy-mettled rascal" (II,ii,594). His revenge is also "blunt", as the Ghost implies:

> Do not forget: This visitation
> Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.
>
> (III,iv,111)

Hamlet's "mettle" is "muddy", and he is "dull"; he refers to what he considers to be his slow-thinking. By the same token, his "metal", or sword of revenge, is "muddy" and "dull", blunt from disuse. These remarks associate the ideas of reasoning and revenge. For Hamlet, rationality is intimately bound with revenge. As one goes, so goes the other. But the kind of reasoning thus upheld is corrupt in itself. It is in the service of death, and so is like the "reason" of Claudius. As we shall see, Hamlet's rationality operates as if it were a sword, cleaving whatever it contemplates into disjointed moities.

In terms of the imagery of the play, a long series of analogues has been constructed, with Hamlet, the Ghost, and the idea of revenge at the center. Two kinds of knowledge are shown to co-exist within Hamlet at the beginning of the play. Firstly, there is "natural knowledge". This is based on the senses and is rooted in physicality. It comprises all that there is to be known about the physical world. By expressing the nature of that physical world in terms of disease, disjointedness, and death, the play implies that these images also define the limits of this kind of knowledge. When this knowledge is utilized as the basis for action, the result is an action which is likewise limited. This action takes the forms of physical reality - it is circular, corrupt, repetitious - and its final end is death, the end of all physical processes. The lives of Claudius and Polonius embody this type of knowledge and action. The other kind of knowledge

is associated in the play with "God's canon". It works against death, as shown by its stricture against suicide, and its nature is antithetical to that of the other knowledge. With both knowledges co-existing within him separately, Hamlet's intellect is "disjoint" or divided. He has several alternatives within this situation. He can somehow "combine" these knowledges to produce a unified intellect, a "whole" which in the imagery of the play is by definition unified and healthy. He can also discard one and rely totally on the other, which is another kind of disjointedness. Formerly, the two knowledges were uncombined; now, they are split further apart. This second case contains a paradox, for by relying on one knowledge only, one's actions are "regular" in the sense of being consistent. Claudius and Polonius never act out of character. But the knowledge they rely on is "natural" knowledge which is itself corrupt and "disjoint". The unity of action that they fashion is really a disharmonious whole. Therein lies the "seemingness" of their thought and action. When Hamlet chooses to become a sword, he chooses to be an instrument which is symbolic of "natural" knowledge and action. It is an instrument of death, and its typical action is to cleave or render disjoint what was whole. It is also symbolic of revenge in Hamlet. The sword is a reminder of the other type of knowledge; its blade and handle form the shape of a cross. It is therefore representative of the same duality or disjointedness existing within Hamlet's intellect. At the same time, its function as an instrument of revenge emphasizes the "natural" knowledge which would choose it as a mode of action. Hamlet's "fall" is therefore one of intellect.

His judgement chooses to initiate action by means of the "natural" knowledge embodied in the sword and in the concept of revenge to which the sword is linked. Hamlet has moved from one disjointedness to another; but his present condition is even less satisfactory than his earlier one. By discarding one type of knowledge, Hamlet no longer has the opportunity to effect a wholesome "combination" within his intellect.

Hamlet has in a sense become separated from himself. The "Hamlet" that is now the sword of revenge is associated with "natural" knowledge and is not the same "Hamlet" that knew both this and God's canon. This is indicated in the play by remarks which seem to suggest the existence of <u>two</u> "Hamlets". Hamlet indicates as much in his parting words to Horatio and Marcellus, at the close of Act I:

> ...So, gentlemen,
> With all my love I do commend me to you:
> And what so poor a man as Hamlet is
> May do, to express his love and friending to you,
> God willing, shall not lack. Let us go in together;
> And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
> The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right!
> Nay, come, let's go together.
> (I,v,184)

The speech is valedictory in tone. Hamlet is taking final leave of his friends. On the other hand, he mentions being "born" in the penultimate line. The diction suggests the existence of an "I" and a "me": "I do commend me to you." The subject of the sentence, "I", commends the object "me", to Horatio and Marcellus. Hamlet then goes on to refer to himself in the third person, as the "Hamlet" which is capable of expressing charitable thought, "love and

friending". The man who speaks the words of the passage is the new Hamlet, the one associated with the present out-of-joint time. The passage moves from valediction to birth, reflecting the change that has come over Hamlet. Hamlet simultaneously takes leave of his friends and of his "old" character. The construction of Hamlet's speech mirrors the transformation of his intellect. Hamlet's earlier exchange of greetings with Horatio presages this schism :

Horatio. Hail to your lordship!

Hamlet. I am glad to see you well,
Horatio, or I do forget myself.*

(I,ii,160)

Hamlet implies that he would not be "himself" if he were not glad to see Horatio well. This Hamlet is concerned for his friend's well-being, but the suggestion is that there may be another "Hamlet" who does not feel so benignly toward his fellow man. This is the person that would be a result of Hamlet's "forgetting" himself. How could this possibly

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*There is a textual crux here, not helped by the various punctuation of the early manuscripts, and the emendations of the later editions. Hamlet's response is generally punctuated (Arden, Variorum, and Cambridge editions) as follows:

I am glad to see you well:
Horatio, -or I do forget myself.

With this punctuation, the line suggests that "Hamlet is full of thought when he first greets the newcomer, then he looks up, and recognizes his friend." I have adopted the punctuation of the First Quarto, which to me seems to make sense, in the general context of the play. However, I am not suggesting that the conventional punctuation is incorrect. Hamlet is full of aural puns and ambiguities and I see no reason why both readings may not be held simultaneously. My interpretation makes Hamlet's words a premonition of the madness he is to feign, not an unusual device with Shakespeare. Moreover, it points to Hamlet's role as "doctor", which he indeed assumes very shortly after.

happen? Hamlet would "forget" himself if his memory or knowledge of himself were occluded, perhaps erased, in some fashion. This is exactly what his words indicated following the Ghost's ordinance to "remember me". At that time, Hamlet wipes clean his memory of "all pressures past" and the Ghost's commandment lives "all alone" within his brain.

The Ghost's commandment is vague, and yet paradoxical:

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

"This act" is murder, which necessarily involves a "tainting" of the mind. The two cannot be reconciled, at least not under the kind of knowledge represented by God's canon. So Hamlet has to repudiate this kind of knowledge. This leaves only the knowledge "natural" to Denmark, within which one can make "combinations" of contradictories, as does Claudius. Hamlet reacts to the meaning of the Ghost's commandment accordingly:

> O all you host of Heaven! O earth! What else?
> And shall I couple hell?
> (I,v,92)

By leaving the mode of revenge up to Hamlet, ("But, howsoever thou pursuest this act"), the Ghost apparently leaves him a freedom of choice. But the paradoxical nature of his instructions foreordains this choice: when Hamlet commits the Ghost's commandment to his brain, he commits his intellect to disjointedness. Action stemming from the kind of knowledge Hamlet has chosen will necessarily be corrupt. Even the mere information offered by the Ghost is set in a context of disease and infection. The Ghost's story embodies corruption, his commandment

is corrupt, and Hamlet chooses a corrupt mode of being in order to fulfill that commandment. This corruption of being is figured in dissociation, in Hamlet's split personality. Hamlet's apology to Laertes prior to their duel makes this dissociation abundantly clear:

> Give me your pardon, sir: I've done you wrong;
> But pardon't, as you are a gentleman.
> This presence knows,
> And you must needs have heard, how I am punish'd
> With sore distraction. What I have done,
> ...I here proclaim was madness.
> Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet:
> If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
> And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
> Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
> Who does it, then? His madness: if't be so,
> Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd;
> His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.
> (V,ii,237)

The inherent corruption of Hamlet's "distraction" is indicated by the adjective "sore", which carries with it the implication of disease. This "sore distraction" is like the "sore task" of the shipwrights in Act I, which does not divide the Sunday from the week. Their "task" has combined contraries to make up an unwholesome unity. Hamlet's distraction "couples" Hell with Heaven and Earth in an analogous operation. Hamlet here disowns his "madness", but personifies it and gives it being. Hamlet had been taken away from "himself". Who remained behind? "His madness", which becomes "poor Hamlet's" enemy. "Poor Hamlet" is the Hamlet "commended" to Horatio and Marcellus earlier:

> With all my love I do commend me to you:
> And what so poor a man as Hamlet is
> May do, to express his love and friending to you,
> God willing, shall not lack...
> (I,v,183)

Horatio and Marcellus are to remember "poor" Hamlet, the Hamlet capable of expressing "love and friending". The diction disociates Hamlet into an "I" and a "me". This earlier speech is mirrored by the present passage where Hamlet again discusses himself as if he had a dual being. The difference between the speeches is that in the earlier passage "poor Hamlet" leaves the play, to be replaced by the "new" Hamlet, the Hamlet of revenge. In the later speech the reverse is indicated. "What I have done", Hamlet says "was madness." "Poor Hamlet" has returned.

The intellectual dissociation which Hamlet has suffered and which leaves him "disjoint" is figured in a corrupt rationality and a resultant action similarly diseased. Hamlet's covenant with the Ghost is embodied in the sword to which his friends are forced to swear fealty. Hamlet's intellect then itself becomes sword-like. His words are like "daggers", but more importantly, his reason operates on phenomena by cleaving them into irreconcilable polarities. Claudius is to King Hamlet as "Hyperion to a satyr"; they are no more alike than "I to Hercules" (ironic in this context since Hercules is a figure for the performance of impossible tasks). The universe is both a "majestical roof fretted with golden fire" and a "foul and pestilent congregation of vapours". As well, Man is "infinite in faculty", the "paragon of animals", like a god, and yet is also the "quintessence of dust." There is also the fact of his perception, which is so keen as to border on the unnatural. He "sees through" the trap laid for him by Claudius and Polonius, which used Ophelia as a decoy. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are sent out to

"glean" information from Hamlet, reaping the harvest of their supposed friendship; but the image of the scythe is turned back on them. Hamlet again immediately penetrates their mission, perceiving it for what it is. His perceptive being operates in a sword-like fashion. So does his pretended madness. After toying with Polonius on the subject of a cloud, Hamlet says "They fool me to the top of my bent." This metaphor pictures Hamlet as a drawn bow, and his feigned madness as an arrow. In addition to this, his analyses of the questions that face him demonstrate the paradoxical nature of an intellect which "cleaves". They also demonstrate the nature of the knowledge which powers Hamlet's thought.

"To be or not to be" does not necessarily present a lone choice - that of life or death. King Claudius had already said to Hamlet, in his inaugural address, "Be as ourself in Denmark," and this ominous phrase used the word "be" in a specific context. The ironic implication of the phrase is that Hamlet should act as Claudius does, that he should "be" the same kind of person. This meaning is also an ironic undercurrent of the soliloquy, since it makes synonymous the apparent alternatives of life or death: "Being" in the manner of Claudius is to be associated with death. We have already seen how Claudius' actions all tend to that objective. Moreover, the knowledge which prompts that action is based on "death of fathers", a process which has an analogue, the cycles of decay and death of physical material. In fact, the analysis which follows "To be or not to be" blurs the apparently clear-cut distinction between "being" and "not-being":

> Whether't is nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them...
>
> (III,i,57)

The form of the first line is retained, and equivalences are drawn. "To be..." is "to suffer..." and "Or to take arms..." follows "or not to..." "Being" is therefore to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune while "not-being" is equivalent to taking arms against a sea of troubles. The first indistinction occurs here: the active principle of the first sentence is associated with the passivity of "suffering", while the paralysis of death is likened to vigorous action. Moreover, "by opposing end them" could mean a completion not of life but of the "troubles" which oppose life. This is at the same time set within a context of utter futility suggested by the picture of a lone man taking arms against a "sea" of troubles. "End them" seems to imply success and failure, life and death, all in the same breath. The line that follows distorts a seemingly clear apposition:

> To die, to sleep-
> No more- ...

"To die" and "to sleep" are apposite; six lines later come the words "For in that sleep of death..." which reinforce this contiguity. But what we <u>hear</u> is "To die, -to sleep no more" which no amount of vocal emphasis can totally erase. "Life" then becomes defined in terms of "sleeping" which at the same time is apparently being used to refer to death. Hamlet's rationality, which is here pondering the "question" of being or not-being, seems to operate in typically analytic fashion, splitting the subject into categories, and then

examining each category in turn. But as the analysis proceeds, the line of demarcation between the rational cleavages of thought becomes indistinct. Hamlet wonders "what dreams may come" When we have "shuffled off this mortal coil." "Shuffling off" a "mortal coil" is a good image for the release of the soul from the body at death. But it also calls up the image of a reptile moulting, a regenerative process which is creative rather than completive. The form of the passage seems to indicate a logical progression of thought, orderly and analytic. Each new section of the passage reintroduces some former movement. "To be, or not to be" is immediately followed by "to suffer...Or to take arms...". This leads into "To die, to sleep..", repeated four lines later in "To die, to sleep-/ To sleep- perchance to dream...". The repeated phrase is identical to its predecessor and is metrically identical with it, being in the same position in the line. Sounds are repeated to give the illusion of re-statement but these repetitions simultaneously confuse the mind that hears them. In the example just quoted, although the sound of the word "bear" is repeated several times within a few lines, the meaning of the sound varies: "For who would <u>bear</u> the whips and scorns of time... When he himself might his quietus make/ With a <u>bare</u> bodkin? Who would fardels <u>bear</u>..." The same sound is repeated but the meanings differ. Hamlet's rationality embodies the paradoxical nature of his disjointed intellect. In debating the question of "To be or not to be", Hamlet's mind takes on an apparently analytic character. The problem is divided into its seeming antitheses, which are then examined, and a conclusion reached. But the analysis has only an apparent logic.

In reality, distinctions are blurred and an essential paradox is outlined. The paradox lies in the equivocal distinctions between "being" and "not-being", and in the mind which presents these distinctions as truths. If "being" is to "suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" then it is to exist in the same continuum in which are found Claudius and Polonius. The words "slings and arrows" and "fortune" point to the motifs which denote the essence of Denmark, a war-like, disjointed state under the sway of the strumpet Fortune. If Claudius embodies the thralldom of Denmark to Fortune, then "being" also means to be "ruled" by Claudius. At the point when Hamlet seems determined to expose himself to the contagion of the Ghost, Horatio cries "Be ruled; you shall not go." Horatio is talking about a "rule which is antithetical to the "rule" of Denmark. It is the rule of a reason which is embodied in Horatio's later comment about the outcome of Hamlet's interview with the Ghost, "Heaven will direct it." The "direction" or "rule" of Heaven is not like that of Claudius or Polonius. They too "direct events; Polonius carefully sets the stage in order to trap Hamlet, positioning Ophelia where she will intercept Hamlet, and providing her with a book of devotions for a prop. This last detail ironically reveals the corruption behind his mise-en-scène, giving the audience a standard against which to measure ethicality of his plan. The contrasting natures of the two "rules" are made evident in this way. To "be" under the "rule" of Claudius is to "be" like Laertes.

Laertes' corrupted nature and inevitable death were intimated by the context of "hearing" which went along with his acceptance of Claudius' reasoning:

> Now must your conscience my acquittance seal,
> And you must put me in your heart for friend,
> Sith you have heard, and with a knowing ear...
>
> (IV,vii,1)

The word "conscience" has in this context the meanings of "the sense of what is right and wrong" and "consciousness", or awareness. Laertes' "conscience" has been corrupted through a process of "hearing", which throughout the play has the character of a poisoning or infection. That being the case, Laertes' being is now under the "rule" of Claudius. This rule "directs" being toward not-being. A few lines later, Claudius puts Laertes' impending death under his direction:

King. If it be so, Laertes - ...
Will you be ruled by me?

Laertes. Ay, my lord;
So you will not o'errule me to a peace.

King. To thine own peace.

(IV,vii,58)

Claudius' rule will indeed end in Laertes' "own peace." Laertes' conscience has sealed Claudius' acquittal; simultaneously it has sealed Laertes' fate, signalled by his final acceptance of Claudius' way of being:

> My lord, I will be ruled...
>
> (IV,vii,69)

Claudius' directive, "Be as ourself in Denmark" is thus relevant to Hamlet's consideration of "To be or not to be." The king's "being" involves a certain kind of "conscience" or knowledge.

Hamlet's soliloquy also puts the question of "being" in terms of "knowing". Hamlet decides that a lack of knowledge, the "dread of something after death", "puzzles the will" and prevents us from acting. His formal conclusion is "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all...", but that "conscience" has paradoxical implications in the passage; in Hamlet's analysis, "knowing" is an ignorance which forestalls our action. However, the kind of "conscience" that enables men to act, in Denmark, is the kind of conscience that Laertes and Claudius have, and that conscience is itself an ignorance, an unconsciousness of God: it ignores the divine canon.

Hamlet displays this ignorance at his very bravest moment, when he decides to follow the Ghost despite the warnings of his friends:

> Why, what should be the fear?
> I do not set my life at a pin's fee;
> And for my soul, what can it do to that,
> Being a thing immortal as itself?
> (I,iv,64)

This kind of reasoning ignores the "direction" of Heaven, which should have provided Hamlet with an answer to the question about his soul, as it did earlier with the question of suicide. Hamlet's reasoning in this soliloquy, which apparently cleaves the subject into distinct categories in a sword-like action, but which in fact blurs those distinctions, produces paradoxical and disjointed effects. Ironically, this merging of being and non-being resumbles a "unification", and so approaches the meaning of existence in Denmark. That existence also confuses being with non-being, since "to be" is "to be corrupt", decayed, and heading toward death. Denmark's "unifications" are in

the direction of death rather than life. Hamlet cleaves categories only to combine death and life, and the end result is an amalgam leaning heavily towards the native corruption of Denmark. Hamlet indicated the composition of his state of knowledge when he referred to the Ghost's commandment living all alone within his brain, "Unmixed with baser matter".

The paradoxical effects of Hamlet's reasoning are again implicit in a later soliloquy:

> How all occasions do inform against me
> And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,
> If his chief good and market of his time
> Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.
> Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
> Looking before and after, gave us not
> That capability and godlike reason
> To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be
> Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
> Of thinking too precisely on the event,
> A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
> And ever three parts coward, I do not know
> Why yet I live to say "This thing's to do";
> Sith I have cause and will and strength and means
> To do't.
>
> (IV,iv,32)

Previously, "sleep" was apposite to "death". Here, "sleep" is associated with "feeding", and both of these make up Hamlet's definition of 'a beast". "Sleeping" is also understood as the condition of existence lacking the use of reason, wherein reason "fusts", or decays. But "sleep" is brought back into contiguity with "death" in the phrase "bestial oblivion", which is both a forgetting, and a death. "Death" is therefore connected with "existence" of a peculiar kind. This existence, by being figured in the imagery of "feeding", and "fusting", is the "being" peculiar to Denmark which

is always expressed in these patterns of imagery. Hamlet has split the nature of man into two categories. One of these categories is characterized by the non-use of reason, and this is called "bestial oblivion". This is associated with animality and pure physicality, "feeding" and "fusting". Its opposite pole should be associated with immateriality and thought, and this should (logically) be a desirable condition. Hamlet then invokes these polarities:

> ...Now, whether it be
> Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
> Of thinking too precisely on the event...

Both poles turn out to be undesirable; animality is connected with "oblivion", and thought takes the form of "thinking too precisely." But the paradoxical distortion of these categories follows immediately: "thinking too precisely" is "A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom/ And ever three parts coward." Thought takes on a materiality which allows it to be partitioned; and this materiality is expressed in terms of an animality connected previously with "lack of thought". "Thought" can be quartered, as if it were the carcass of a dead beast. Moreover, after putting the negative character of "thinking too precisely" in the form of a quaternity, Hamlet then goes on to "quarter" his own being: "I do not know/ Why yet I live to say "This thing's to do";/ Sith I have cause and will and strength and means/ To do't." Hamlet holds up "cause", "will", "strength", and "means" as the attributes of his being which should prompt him to revenge, and which therefore oppose both "bestial oblivion" and "thinking too precisely." But the effect of his speech is to link all of these - bestial oblivion, thinking too precisely, and his quartered thought - into one complex

held together by their lowest common denominator, death.

The form of this soliloquy mirrors the earlier one; the same paradoxes attend:

> ...To die: to sleep;
> No more;
> (III,i,60)

> ...but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
> (IV,iv,35)

The first quotation creates an ambiguity about the relationship between "death" and "sleep". "To die" is either "no more than a sleep" or "to sleep no more." The second quote mimics this effect. Is "to sleep and feed" to be "no more than a beast", or to be "a beast no more"? Another construction common to both soliloquies presents an even more complex system of ambiguities and paradox:

(A)
> Whether't is nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them?
> (III,i,57)

(B)
> Now, whether it be
> Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
> Of thinking too precisely on the event...
> (IV,iv,39)

Quote (B) reverses the order of (A): "thinking" follows "oblivion", while "in the mind" precedes the implicit death of "by opposing end them." However, (B) also follows the order of (A): "Bestial oblivion" was connected with the passivity of "sleeping and feeding", so like that of "to suffer." "Thinking too precisely" is how Hamlet describes the process of splitting a thought into a multiplicity of conceptions which then become obstacles to action. This mirrors the proliferation

of "a sea of troubles." At the same time, "thinking too precisely" infers a selective process, or a narrowing of focus. This opposes the idea of infinitude contained in a "sea" of troubles. As well, the word "nobler" (A), is in opposition to the word "Bestial" (B). Taking the two quotations comparatively, they present a dizzying series of parallels and contrasts which are again found within each individual quotation. However, their similar form seems to suggest that there should be a like similarity of thought. The structure of the later soliloquy invites the audience to recall "To be or not to be." When they do so, their efforts to link the two speeches into some comprehensible whole are frustrated. The second speech is not like the first, but neither is it different. It does not advance the earlier argument, but neither does it restate it in detail. The second speech redefines some of the constants of the first, such as "sleep", and "death", although it appears to be using these terms in relation to issues common to both soliloquies. The final outcomes of both passages are identical. "Being" is something like "non-being", and "bestiality" is something like "thought." At the end, neither Hamlet nor the audience can rationally distinguish between these contradictions. Hamlet's analyses are fakes which try to mask a corrupted rationality, in the manner of Claudius' first speech. The reason for the paradoxical nature of Hamlet's thought is contained in his "new" knowledge. He now conceives of "being" in terms "common" to Denmark. To "be" is to be corrupt, and to be part of a process whose meaning is figured in all of the imagery relating to Denmark - imagery of rotting matter, of decay, disease, war, and disjointedness. The different types of imagery have one feature in

common. They are all processes which inevitable lead to death. Death is in that sense inherent to their natures. As the Queen explained, life in Denmark is a transition period between birth and death. This means that the "life" of a man is like the "life" of a stone. The outcome of this viewpoint is to regard man as mere matter. This is the kind of knowledge that Hamlet possesses at the moment, and this explains the tendency to blur the distinction between life and death, and between matter and immateriality. This is also why Laertes, Polonius, and Claudius speak of conceptions such as "honour" and "love" as if they were material objects. This is why Polonius conducts an argument by creating formal "balances" which have no inner content. It is to the shape of the argument that Polonius devotes his attention. Hamlet, too, gives his thoughts a "balance" by framing them between like shapes. He begins his argument by saying "How all occasions do inform against me", and he ends it with "Examples gross as earth exhort me." The two sentences have similar shapes. "me" is the object of both verbs, whose subjects are nouns similar in meaning. The two phrases are perched like bookends at either side of Hamlet's argument, giving it an apparent symmetry and order. All the same, this order is simultaneously destroyed by the imagery within the sentences. The metaphor of the first phrase likens "occasions" to a sharp sword or needle which "spurs" Hamlet's "dull" revenge. Keenness and bluntness are opposed within the same line. But these sword-like occasions also contrast with the "examples" of the later phrase which are as "gross as earth". In Hamlet, "gross" has the connotations of "dull" and "vulgar", especially when associated with "earth". Hamlet calls himself "muddy-mettled" to indicate a

dullness of thought. If "gross" is taken in its literal sense of "large", it still opposes the ensiform quality attributed to "occasions." The contradictions of the imagery confute the apparent balance given to the argument by this framing device.

In their form, and in the distortion and paradox of their arguments, these soliloquies mirror Hamlet's intellect. His mind has become disjoint, maintaining paradoxical contraries which it holds up in an apparently unified balance.

What has happened to Hamlet, and what does it signify? The problems of the play are epistemological wherever action is linked to some kind of knowledge. Hamlet is disgusted with the "uses" of the world, and would perhaps like to remove himself from it. He does not, because the "canon" of the Everlasting forbids suicide. Suicide returns as an alternative to being in "To be or not to be", but it is again a "question" that depends on knowledge. In this case, it is the lack of knowledge, the dread of something after death, that hinders action. Hamlet presents two main types of "knowing". There is the knowledge "customary" and "natural" to Denmark. Claudius and Polonius embody this kind of knowledge. The meaning and essence of this knowledge is contained in the physical environment of Denmark. As the physical environment means nothing more than a corruptive process ending in death, so the knowledge of Claudius and Polonius carries similar connotations. The actions they carry out are the effects of their knowledge, and display the same characteristics. The corruption of physicality is translated into ethical corruption when it takes the form of thought and action. This is demonstrated by the play's imagery, which carries over from

the physical environment to the characters. The same kinds of images are descriptive of both the natural processes of Denmark, and the thoughts and actions of Claudius and Polonius. These thoughts and actions take repetitive and cyclic forms which figure the physical cycles of Denmark. All of these elements are metaphorical for one another and indicate an identicality of essence.

The other kind of knowledge, as previously mentioned, is God's canon. The effects of this kind of knowledge are not readily discernible in the early stages of the play, rather, this knowlege is presented intermittently as an alternative to what is happening on the stage. Horatio's "Heaven will direct it" is an example of this, contrasting Horatio's reliance on heavenly rule with Hamlet's decision to take his fate into his own hands. Hamlet's oath upon the sword is similarly contrasted with Horatio's and Marcellus' swearing "in faith". Again, the book of devotions carried by Ophelia points to a knowledge which is contradicted by her role as a decoy.

Hamlet's first soliloquy shows him aware of both types of knowledge. Now, he meets the Ghost. The Ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius is a murderer, and that Hamlet must revenge this murder, but leaves the mode of revenge an open question. This links the action of revenge to the question of knowledge, and Hamlet's revenge becomes an epistemological problem. Before he can do, he must know; before he can commit revenge, he must decide what revenge consists of. These questions take on a metaphysical nature in the play, and the question of revenge becomes synonymous with the question of action itself. In

addition to this, the ambiguous nature of the Ghost creates further problems of knowledge. The Ghost may be a devil, sent to trap Hamlet. He therefore has to decide whether the Ghost is "honest", and its story true. If the Ghost's information is correct, this leads to a further question: what does revenge consist of, and by analogy, what is the nature of action? When Hamlet chooses the follow the Ghost, he simultaneously discards or lays aside his knowledge of God's canon. From this point onwards, Hamlet has to act with only the "natural" knowledge of Denmark as his guide. Hamlet's analyses of "questions" such as "To be or not to be", or "What is a man..." are indications of the type of action that can be carried out with this knowledge. The analyses hide a disjointed reason. Because of what we know of Claudius and Polonius, we can expect Hamlet's actions to reflect his rationality and knowledge. We can expect him to act as Claudius does.

One symptom of Claudius' corrupted being was the perversion of his function as "healer". His medicine extenuated the illness it sought to alleviate. Moreover, his cures took the form of death, reproducing the malignancy of disease itself. So too does Hamlet begin to appear in the guise of a "doctor" after accepting the Ghost's ordinances. As in the case of Claudius, Hamlet's medicines are malignant. Hamlet begins by telling Horatio "I am glad to see you well" (I,ii,160). This reflects a benignity of impulse on Hamlet's part toward Horatio as an individual. After he leaves the Ghost, his remarks indicate that he has taken on a remedial function concerning the state:

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

One of the implications of "out of joint" is that of "disease". Hamlet has therefore willed himself to be the "doctor" of Denmark, and his earlier concern for Horatio's well-being would seem to imply a mode of healing antithetical to the ironic distortions of Claudius' similar function. But Hamlet does not choose a benign mode. The first indication of the kind of doctor Hamlet has become is to be found in a remark made to Rosencrantz:

> But let me <u>conjure</u> you...be even and direct with
> me, whether you were sent for, or no?
> (II,ii,293)

The word "conjure", besides its literal meaning of "adjure", also has the connotation of "influence by magic or incantation." Hamlet takes on the aspect of a witch-doctor, with diabolical powers. This aspect of Hamlet is reinforced by the words of Lucianus, whom Hamlet calls "nephew to the king", in the play-within-the-play:

> Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs it, and time
> agreeing;
> Confederate season, else no creature seeing;
> Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
> With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,
> Thy natural magic and dire property,
> On wholesome life usurps immediately.
> (III,ii,266)

There is no need to assume that Hamlet has erred in calling Lucianus "nephew to the king" rather than "brother to the king". Lucianus' words echo the Ghost's description of Claudius' murderous action, so the audience will assume that Lucianus is supposed to represent the king. At the same time, Hamlet's words link Lucianus with himself. Lucianus

thus becomes a surrogate for both Hamlet and Claudius, revealing the essential similarity of their beings. Lucianus speaks like a warlock dispensing a murderous poison. But much of the speech bears a similarity in thought and structure to Hamlet's own words. The structure of the first line reminds us of Hamlet's remarks on the quartering of a thought. The phrase "time agreeing" looks back to Hamlet's "The time is out of joint." Ironically, the time is no longer "out of joint", but it now assists a murder; and since death is associated very strongly with the words "out of joint" in the rest of the play, the two phrases are essentially identical. Lucianus promises to deliver a medication which operates an infection, usurping wholesome life immediately. Hamlet proposes the same prescription to Ophelia:

> If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny.
>
> (III,i,139)

Hamlet's words to Ophelia take the form of a diab lical incantation which promises a "plague" exactly as do the words of Lucianus. The malevolence of the intentions in both cases is emphasized by the form of the words. Lucianus' speech discloses the similarity between Hamlet and Claudius in terms of the function of healing, here distorted into a malignant conjuration promising death. The speech is really a microcosm of the entire play-within-the-play. Just as Lucianus prepares a poison to be fed to the figure of King Hamlet, so the play-within-the-play is a poison which Hamlet intends to feed to Claudius. The germination of the play-within-the-play stems from the Player's speech of Aeneas' tale to Dido. Discussing that speech, whose subject is the bloody

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nature of Pyrrhic revenge, Hamlet repeatedly refers to it in terms of food:

> I heard thee speak me a speech once, but it was never acted; or if it was, no above once; for the play...'twas caviare to the general... an excellent play, well digested in the scenes...
>
> I remember, one said there were no sallets in the lines to make the matter savory, nor no matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affectation; but called it an honest method, as wholesome as sweet...
>
> (II,ii,454)

If there are no "sallets" to make the "matter savory", then the matter of the speech is by implication not as "sweet" as Hamlet calls it. Hamlet's words are extremely ironic, considering the nature of the play that is born from this discussion. Hamlet accurately describes the quality of the play-within-the-play's "sweetness" during its performance:

> Wormwood, wormwood.
>
> (III,ii,191)

The same double-entendre which appears before and after the performance amplifies the notion of the play as a "food" to be given to the king. Before the performance begins, the king remarks to Hamlet:

> How fares our cousin Hamlet?
>
> (III,ii,97)

Hamlet takes this in its literal sense, replying to the king as if he had been asked his diet:

> Excellent, i'faith; of the chameleon's dish...

When the king rises and leaves, concluding the performance, the Queen asks:

> How fares my lord?
>
> (III,ii,288)

The question retains its ambiguous nature because of what occurred previously; but now we know that the "fare" which has made the king ill was Hamlet's play. Hamlet already described the performance as "wormwood", a bitter purgative. In that sense, we might accept Hamlet's intention as somewhat beneficial. The play is to purge the king by bringing his murder into the open, restoring due process and valid justice to the kingdom. The play would then also be purging Denmark of its malignancy, and Hamlet would be fulfilling his function as healer of the kingdom. But Hamlet does not have in mind a mere purgation:

King. Have you heard the argument? Is there no offense in't?

Hamlet. No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest; no offense i' the world.

(III,ii,242)

Hamlet tells the king "poison in jest", implying that the play does not reflect the reality of his intentions. But what the audience hears is "poison ingest," a murderous directive and prescription which is echoed a few lines later by Lucianus.

In his elaborate and apparently justifiable attempts to carry out his function of making the time "whole", Hamlet duplicates the actions of Claudius. The play-within-the-play is supposed to bring truth to light, but the truth it presents is not that of Claudius' malignancy and corruption, which we are already aware of. The play reveals the truth about Hamlet's actions. The images of infection, poison, and feeding used to present this truth fall within the array of imagery which connotes the corrupted state of Denmark. Hamlet is now truly "native" to the state. Hamlet's corrupted reason has produced this kind of action. Final confirmation of the above immediately follows the play-within-the-play, when Hamlet comes across the king at prayer.

When Hamlet comes across an unregenerate Claudius at prayer, he utters the speech that so horrified Samuel Johnson. Hamlet's apparently satanic malevolence repelled Johnson, but the desire to damn an enemy's soul seems to have been fairly common in Shakespeare, even among his "pure" characters.* Hamlet's desire to damn Claudius' soul is significant in that it reinforces a diabolical aspect of character that Hamlet had displayed in the play-within-the-play. But the speech is even more significant because in it Hamlet decides to act as if he were Claudius. This speech establishes the final limits to which Hamlet's action, based on the natural knowledge of Denmark, can take him. Those limits are actions typical of Claudius or Polonius.

Hamlet perceives Claudius kneeling and chooses to ignore the significance of that posture; at the very first it means only an unprotected back:

> Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;
> And now I'll do't.
> (III,iii,73)

Hamlet then realizes the meaning of what he observes, and this brings him to the crux of his problem:

> And so he goes to heaven:
> And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd...

The Ghost had said "But howsomever thou pursues this act", forcing Hamlet to decide exactly what "this act" should be. Of necessity, this knowledge had to precede the carrying out of any appropriate action. Now, Hamlet has both opportunities presented to him: ostensibly, he can decide what "this act" is, and perform it on

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*See Hamlet, edited by George Lyman Kittredge (Waltham, Massachusetts, 1967), Introduction, p. xviii: Hamlet's "infernal sentiments" accord "with an old established convention with regard to adequate revenge. With this convention, the Elizabethan audience was familiar."

Claudius who is at the moment defenseless. With "That would be scann'd", Hamlet indicates that he is going to decide what it means to be "revenged". Hamlet finally decides that "revenge" is an act identical with the murder of King Hamlet. As the dead king was taken "grossly, full of bread", with his crimes "broad blown, as flush as May", so shall Hamlet wait to catch Claudius at some act that "has no relish of salvation in't." Hamlet's revenge is defined in terms of the original crime and thus is a purely repetitive act. Hamlet aspires to a type of being embodied by Claudius. This is emphasized by Hamlet's last words:

> This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.

Hamlet is prescribing a "relief" that is intended to have the opposite effect. Like Claudius, Hamlet gives medicines which "prolong" sickness instead of curing them. The play-within-the-play was a poison concocted by Hamlet for Claudius. His decision to spare Claudius is again put into these terms and linked to Claudius' murderous act, in order to demonstrate an ironic similarity between this charity and that murder. There is a double irony here, when Hamlet leaves before hearing the words which reveal the inefficacy of Claudius' prayer. Had Hamlet killed Claudius immediately, he would have achieved the very revenge he decides to wait for. He did not do so because he was not aware of the true situation. The knowledge of revenge that Hamlet has brought himself to in this scene is countered and rendered impotent by a concomitant ignorance. This parallels the unreliability of the apparent knowledge concerning Claudius that the play-within-the-play brings to Hamlet. Although we know Claudius

is guilty, it is not clear whether the device of the play makes an effective public demonstration of that guilt. Horatio's remarks after the play are noncommital, and fall far short of Hamlet's enthusiasm.* When Hamlet now overhears Claudius at prayer, he does not arrive at the conclusion that Claudius is praying because he has something to repent for, a conclusion which would corroborate his certainty about Claudius' guilt. Instead, Hamlet incorrectly assumes that Claudius is being purged of guilt. At the same time, this ignorance is providential; because of it, Hamlet spares Claudius, thinking to do him further evil but really saving his own soul from damnation. Revenge is finally seen to be an act which is no different from other actions within Denmark. The manner in which Hamlet distorts the functions he has taken on - those of "doctor" and "unifier" of Denmark - is identical with the corruption exhibited by Claudius. The decision to "revenge" by replicating the original murder of King Hamlet completes a circularity which defines Hamlet's action up until this point. Hamlet's rationality has been shown to be one which is stifled by contradictories. This reflects the "disjointedness" of Denmark. This disjointed knowledge which ends up in the intellectual impasses of the soliloquies is again mirrored in Hamlet's ironically contradictory decision to hurt Claudius by sparing him. This decision leads to non-action. It results in a continuance of the conditions it was supposed to alleviate, like the "medicines" of Claudius and Polonius. This kind of action is as far as his present system of thought can take him, and ultimately it is no different from the "customary" action of Denmark. This

* Several critics have concluded that the play-within-the-play does not demonstrate Claudius' guilt. See W.W. Lawrence, "Hamlet and the Mousetrap", PMLA, LIV (1939), pp. 709-35, and W.W. Greg, "The Mousetrap - A Postscript", MR XXXV (1940), pp. 8-10.

customary action is manifested, in its most potent form, as murder. So Hamlet's action reaches a peak with the murder of Polonius in the Fourth Act. At this point, he leaves on his sea voyage, and when he returns, he has undergone what may be called a "conversion", for want of a better word. Hamlet's "conversion" cannot be measured quantitatively, but its effects can be noticed in terms of the understanding to which he comes regarding "natural" knowledge, and in light of the kind of knowledge he espouses. The knowledge which is "natural" to Denmark is "natural" in that it mirrors the processes of the physical universe. Abstractions in Hamlet are made material, in terms of some concrete physical phenomenon. This is why the Queen sums up "life" in terms of the process of digestion: "All that lives must die,/ Passing through nature to eternity." The play implies that since this kind of thought does not transcend the nature of physicality, it therefore shares that nature and is corrupt, decaying. This "natural" thinking, when it concerns itself with the phenomenon of man and the relationships between men, assumes that "man" is just so much material. Hamlet may be in a depressed state of mind when he conceives of man as the "quintessence of dust", but that kind of thought in Hamlet suggests a corrupted mind, a mind which places all phenomena into the category of the physical. Politically, this kind of thought is manifested as a manipulative and Machiavellian mode of action. Ethically, it appears as a selfish subjectivism. Philosophically, it is expressed as the materialisms of Gertrude, Claudius, and Polonius. All of these "isms" have common characteristics. They lead to actions that are

monotonously repetitive, circular, self-defeating, finally impotent. Their regularity and circularity make them seem like "whole" actions, but they are "disjointed" and unhealthy. They are disjointed because they do not take into account the knowledge based on religious thought, the "canon" of the Everlasting. When action does take this knowledge into account, impotence becomes a potency and potential becomes actuality, morally.

Hamlet's disjointed knowledge has led him to a materialistic viewpoint which marks him as corrupt, as another version of the kind of being represented by Claudius. Hamlet's materialism, when expressed as a philosophy, operates by converting all values into matter, a transformation that obliterates essential distinctions. When Claudius questions Hamlet concerning the whereabouts of Polonius' body, the answers reduce conceptual distinctions into terms of food, a terminology which in the play is a figure for corruption itself:

King. Now Hamlet, where's Polonius?

Hamlet. At supper.

King. At supper? where?

Hamlet. Not where he eats, but where he is eaten....your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table: that's the end.

King. Alas, alas!

Hamlet. A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of the worm.

King. What dost thou mean by this?

Hamlet. Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.

(IV,iii,17)

By talking of "fat" kings and "lean" beggars as if they were merely lumps of flesh, Hamlet destroys the value of each. They are "variable service", and as they are meant for one table - death - they become another perverse "combination", matter for death only. Hamlet

thus places the whole range of life, implied by the sweep from "king" to "beggar", in the dominion of death, itself figured by the "progress" Hamlet speaks of. This is exactly the state of things in Denmark, and Hamlet's philosophy may be taken here to be a shrewd assessment of reality. Unfortunately, that assessment cannot be used as a basis for action. There is one essential fact about this reality that vitiates all action based upon it. Hamlet hints at this fact in the above discussion with Claudius, but does not state it clearly until Act V, scene i.

The imagery of the play which expressed all phenomena in terms of decay, disease, and corruption; the metaphor which likened life itself to the process of digestion and elimination; and the plot, which progresses remorsely from one murder to another; all of these elements suggested that death is the "meaning" of Denmark, a meaning which underlies the thoughts and actions of its inhabitants. The fact of death is the one certainty within Hamlet, and this fact is figured in nearly everything the characters think and do. Act V, scene i, examines the meaning that the fact of death gives to life. Hamlet's first appearance on stage following his sea voyage sees him wandering with Horatio through a graveyard. The subject of the scene can hardly be mistaken, with the dialogue of the gravediggers preceding Hamlet's entrance, and with human skeletal remains being tossed about the stage. Hamlet remarks constitute an extended ubi sunt, which supposedly is to tell us that he has come to realize the absolute ineluctability of death, and the insignificance of man's efforts in the face of this "favor" to which he "must come".

This position is one of the basic points of orthodox Christian belief. However, it also could form the basis of a non-religious fatalism. What distinguishes the two? The latter position must contain the assumption that the world is only material, and no more than that. Hamlet then exposes this viewpoint as ultimately absurdist:

Hamlet. To what base uses may we return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till he find it stopping a bung-hole?

Horatio. 'T were to consider too curiously, to consider so.

Hamlet. No, faith, not a jot; but to follow him thither with modesty enough, and likelihood to lead it: as thus: Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that loam, whereto he was converted, might they not stop a beer-barrel?
Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away:
O, that that earth, which kept the world in awe
Should patch a wall to expel the winter's flaw!

(V,i,223)

The "imagination" that is to trace Alexander from death onwards must first conceive of its subject as "dust", and only so. It is only as material that Alexander's fate can be manipulated in this fashion. Horatio says that Hamlet is considering "too curiously", reminding us of something that Hamlet had said earlier about thinking "too precisely" on events. Hamlet's reply to Horatio, "No, faith, not a jot" puts the word "faith" between two negations. The implication may be that there will not be a jot of "faith" in what follows, a materialistic declension of Alexander's "dust". The absurdity of Hamlet's logic lies in its truth. If man is only matter, and his destiny simply to return to the earth as dust, it is conceivable

that this dust could be used for loam, and that loam used to stop a beer barrel. This is a "use" which takes us back to Hamlet's first soliloquy, where all the "uses" of the world seemed "stale" and "flat". The effect of this reasoning is to make the achievements of a Caesar or an Alexander seem meaningless. Why bother, the speech implies. The greatest of lives seems ludicrous when its final end is to become a bung in a beer barrel or a brick in a wall. If the being of a man is wholly comprised of his material existence, then that being is doomed to a life rendered absurd by the fact of death. Moreover, action within such an existence is meaningless and impotent. All action becomes repetitious, everything "variable service" but "to one table". "That's the end", as Hamlet says. Life, as in the Queen's philosophy, is but food for death. This idea is behind the image used by Fortinbras to picture the carnage on stage at the end of the play:

> O proud death,
> What feast is toward in thine eternal cell,
> That thou so many princes at a shot
> So bloodily hast struck?
> (V,ii,375)

The rationality that is built upon this materialist assumption is itself "material" in the sense that it is corruptible, decaying, and diseased. Hamlet's rationality concocts the play-within-the-play, thinking to acquire experimental verification of what it considers to be true. But this play, as we have shown, is nothing other than a tribute to Hamlet's own disjointed intellect. It is a poison which makes of Hamlet a perversely diabolical "doctor" and an imitator of Claudius. Hamlet sums up his intellectual condition when he replies

to Guildenstern's request for a "wholesome answer" to his questions:

Hamlet. Sir, I cannot.

Rosencrantz. What, my lord?

Hamlet. Make you a wholesome answer; my wit's diseased....

(III,ii,331)

Hamlet's wit is "diseased" in the sense that life is "diseased". This occurs when both are based on material considerations only. In the case of Hamlet's "wit", those considerations are of revenge. Natural knowledge which does not transcend the barriers of physical existence leads to the materialist viewpoint of life, shown by Hamlet to be an absurdity, and is inherently corrupt: this is Hamlet's "diseased" wit.

The alternative is the knowledge suggested by "faith", and "the canon of the Everlasting". In Act V, while grappling with Laertes in Ophelia's grave, Hamlet indicates a return to the norms of orthodoxy:

Laertes. The devil take thy soul!

Hamlet. Thou pray'st not well.

(V,i,281)

Hamlet's rejoinder is significant because it negates a pattern - the conscious attempt to damn a soul - common to the actions of Claudius, the Ghost, and Hamlet himself. In Act V, scene ii, he then indicates his awareness of the alternatives to natural action, talking about the operative function of Heaven:

> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will,-
>
> (V,ii,10)

Hamlet indicates that "heaven" has made potent his action to escape

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: Heaven "sealed", or made complete, the means of Hamlet's return to Denmark. There is also "Not a whit, we defy augery. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow.... The readiness is all." Immediately following these words comes Hamlet's apology to Laertes in which Hamlet suggests that the "old" Hamlet has returned as an existing reality. What do Hamlet's words, which take into account the workings of supra-physical agencies, portend? The audience would certainly have interpreted Hamlet's words as a sign of a radical change, perhaps one indicating a complete reformation of essence. That Hamlet's words refer to religious categories would have reinforced this impression. But Hamlet has spoken of Christian charity before the sea voyage. At his worst moment, before he commits himself completely to the Claudius - like device of the play-within-the-play, he is able to call upon religious knowledge. In pleading with Polonius to use the players well, he enunciates a version of the Golden Rule:

> Use them
> after your own honour and dignity: the less they
> deserve, the more merit is in your bounty.
>
> (II,ii,556)

Now,Hamlet returns to that kind of terminology with unambiguous references to divinity and providence. There should be some definite indication that Hamlet has put his former rationality aside in favor of this latest acquisition. The duel which completes Hamlet's revenge contains this implication. The Queen drinks from the poisoned cup, following which Hamlet and Laertes are fatally injured.

King. Part them; they are incensed.
Hamlet. Nay, come, again. (The Queen falls.
Osric. Look to the Queen there, ho!
Horatio. They bleed on both sides. How is it, my lord?
Osric. How is't, Laertes?
Laertes. Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe, Osric:
I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery.
Hamlet. How does the Queen?
King. She swounds to see them bleed.
Queen. No. no, the drink, the drink, -O my dear Hamlet, -
The drink, the drink! I am poison'd. (Dies.
Hamlet. O villany! Ho! let the door be lock'd :
Treachery! Seek it out.

(V,ii,313)

That Hamlet should cry "seek it out", as if the poisoner's identity were a mystery to anyone, is somewhat incredible. This effect is heightened by what we have seen to be Hamlet's knowledge of Claudius' methods, and by his and Horatio's misgivings about the duel. Laertes has to supply an obvious solution:

It is here, Hamlet....

At the very crucial moment of the play, Hamlet seems to be without the use of his former perspicacity, which was well-suited to penetrate the devices of others. In effect, this is a return to a naiveté which places the responsibility for the ensuing death of Claudius in the hands of Providence, and thus creates a felicitous "combination", the incorporation of divinity with human action. The knowledge which Hamlet associates with treachery and "springes" is here preëmpted by an ignorance which proves to be fortuitous, like the accidental events on board ship

which took Hamlet out of Claudius' trap. The finality which is given to the revenge-plot by Hamlet's killing of Claudius completes the form of the play. In this sense, Hamlet's new knowledge of providential intervention "informs" the plot in the sense of completing its content, of giving it its final shape. Hamlet's words - "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will" - suggest this informing principle. Divinity is pictured as a craftsman giving final shape to man's destiny. Laertes used the same image in conversation with Ophelia to refer to Hamlet's actions:

> He may not, as unvalued persons do,
> Carve for himself; for on his choice depends
> The safety and health of this whole state;
> And therefore must his choice be circumscribed
> Unto the voice and yielding of that body
> Whereof he is the head. (I,iii,19)

Laertes words indicate that the scope of Hamlet's action was subsidiary to the interests of the state; the state "circumscribed" Hamlet's will, thus giving it a "shape", but that shape was one which suggested limitation rather than fulfillment. Divinity informs or gives a fulfilled shape to the seemingness of the material world. In terms of Man's actions, divinity manifests itself as providence. When Hamlet places his fate in the hands of this providence, he is acknowledging the existence of the supra-physical and thus transcending the limits of simple materiality. His actions thus acquire their completed shape; the killing of Claudius can then take place.

Hamlet's intellect changes in Act V. Not only is he now fully conscious of the absurdity of purely physical existence, but he gives up the piercing perceptiveness that had earlier characterized him. His intellect no longer operates in a "sword-like" fashion.

Hamlet is not now willing to indulge in the analyses of his former soliloquies. "To be or not to be" was framed as a "question" which Hamlet tried to resolve, with no success. His failure to do so sprang from the mode of rationality he applied, a divisive, cleaving analysis which was itself symbolic of his disjointed being. Horatio gives Hamlet the opportunity for yet another debate on a questionable phenomenon when he says, concerning Hamlet's forthcoming duel:

Horatio. If your mind dislike anything, obey it: I will forestal their repair hither, and say you are not fit.

Hamlet. Not a whit, we defy augery....Let be.
(V,ii,227)

"To be or not to be" becomes the simple "Let be". This conversation mirrors an earlier, just before Hamlet's interview with the Ghost. At that time, Horatio had warned Hamlet to "Be ruled" by the reason which would shun such a diabolical figure as the Ghost. Hamlet had replied that his "fate cries out", and rushed off with the Ghost. Hamlet's "fate" is not his any longer. In the present speech, Hamlet assigns his fate to providence. Just as significantly, Hamlet assigns his former intellect a subsidiary role to that of divine guidance. He defies "augery", the willful attempt to puzzle out the unknown by relying solely on "native" wit and reason. This is akin to Polonius' "circling" after truth. Hamlet refuses to indulge in the futile analyses that characterized his mind earlier. "Let be" is repeated by Hamlet later, at the point of death:

> Had I but time- as this fell sergeant, death,
> Is strict in his arrest- O, I could tell you-
> But let it be.
> (V,ii,348)

The tale that Hamlet would have been able to tell is summed up by Horatio:

> So shall you hear
> Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
> Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
> And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
> Fall'n on the inventors' heads....
>
> (V,ii,391)

Significantly, Horatio calls those who participated in the natural reason of Denmark "inventors". Their imaginations are enlisted in a futile and fundamentally unimaginative cause: death. However, Hamlet's "new" knowledge also results in death. What alternative is there to death, in Denmark? The play seems to be simple-minded, even banal, in this point: the death that is a result of Hamlet's reliance on divine instruction is part of a turning-over of the old order, the only regenerative transformation in the play. Fortinbras, who represents the new government, and Horatio, who is the link between the old and the new, seems to be what Hamlet offers as the alternatives to Claudius and even Hamlet. Fortinbras' action displays a circuitousness of a kind; he arrives in Denmark via Poland, the back door. However, he restores order, or at least proposes to restore order. Horatio has at all times been in possession of the knowledge that Hamlet gives up so readily, and comes so sluggishly to accept. Horatio replies to Hamlet's revelation - "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will" - by simply reasserting what he already knows: "that is most certain." The play suggests that a limited kind of corruption

is all that can be hoped for in the world, especially a world which relies so heavily on natural knowledge. Fortinbras and Horatio are the principles of public and private strength which assert themselves at the end of the play, simply by surviving. Hamlet exists in Hamlet as the person in whom both kinds of knowledge - natural and divine - receive their most potent expression. The outcome is conventional. Divine knowledge is simply superior. However, the play has a tragic dimension. Divine knowledge is of little use for ordering the necessities of existence in a corrupt world. Fortinbras is "puffed with divine ambition", but that is not a compliment. In the end, he is the best the play can offer. Natural knowledge is fatal; but it is customary to the world in which men live. The right combination of both divine and natural knowledge is presumed to exist in Horatio, by Hamlet. But Hamlet does not dwell on Horatio, nor does it test his capabilities. Horatio is a curious standard, ideal because half-base. This duality is part of the implied tragedy of the play. It is reflected most prominently in the kinds of knowledge that Hamlet must choose between, and act upon. Man must act in the world, and he must be saved. However, the two seem incompatible in Hamlet. Moreover, this duality is reflected everywhere in the universe: in man, part beast and part angel, and in the world, part matter and part spirit. Hamlet ends by reasserting the conventional norms of morality, knowledge, and action. The play makes a final "combination", in order to have a resolution at all. But that resolution, like Hamlet's dual knowledge, is only temporarily stable: the implications are that sooner or later the circle of

stability will become the wheel of Fortune, and the movement of Hamlet will begin again. This is implicit in a device used by Shakespeare to frame the action of the play, consisting of two near-identical speeches by the King:

> Be as ourself in Denmark. Madam, come;
> This gentle and unforced accord of Hamlet
> Sits smiling to my heart: in grace whereof,
> No jocund health that Denmark drinks to-day,
> But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell,
> And the king's rouse the heavens shall bruit again,
> Re-speaking earthly thunder. Come away.
>
> [Exeunt all but Hamlet.
>
> (I,ii,122)

> ....Give me the cups;
> And let the kettle to the trumpet speak,
> The trumpet to the cannoneer without,
> The cannons to the heavens, the heavens to earth,
> "Now the king drinks to Hamlet." Come, begin:
> And you, the judges, bear a wary eye.
>
> (V,ii,285)

Both speeches consecrate perverse rituals; in the first the king really drinks to the imperial directive "Be as ourself in Denmark." He drinks to Hamlet's "being" but that being is death itself. In the later speech, he again drinks, this time to Hamlet's death; again, the truth is ironic, since the duel will release Hamlet simultaneously from his obligation to King Hamlet and the concommitant death-in-life of Denmark. The tragic circularity of life itself is implied in the King's words: "come away" begins the action; "come, begin" should end it, but the word "begin" implies a renewal of the process that ostensibly will soon end. Both speeches connect the action on stage with Heaven, but that action on stage is "directed" by Claudius, not the Everlasting.

Claudius' remark "And you, the judges, bear a wary eye" seems parenthetical, directed to us, informing us that what we think is ending is only a temporary cessation of a cyclic movement inherently and tragically corrupt.

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