The Uses of Interpretation in *Hamlet*

Leslie Croxford

T. S. Eliot called *Hamlet* "the 'Mona Lisa' of literature." It is true. No other work has presented more uncertain meanings. Interpretation has thrived. Hamlet is quite simply "the most problematic play ever written by Shakespeare or any other playwright."[1] Inconsistencies and difficulties derive from the dramatist's need to integrate his medieval and Renaissance sources. The various printed versions of the author's text have to be reconciled, but sometimes resist this. A host of deeper questions arise. Among the most celebrated are: what is the reason for the Prince's delay in revenging his father's murder; is his madness genuine or feigned; what is the true status of his feelings for Ophelia?

Most of these questions do not admit of definitive solutions. Nor will there be a search here for possible answers to the second and third. For in the case of the thematic and psychological issues there is a seemingly impenetrable ambiguity. Ambiguity is, in fact, a striking characteristic of Shakespeare's work. Hence William Empson's continuous resort to him for examples in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Indeed he once wrote that a given sonnet, rather than having a single meaning, is more like a musical instrument on which the critic may play a variety of tunes.

As it happens, Empson's image of the musical instrument is also used in *Hamlet*, by the Prince. It occurs on two occasions. Hamlet greets Horatio admiringly, saying what a well-balanced man he is. Those who combine passion and judgment harmoniously ". . . are not a pipe for Fortune's finger/To sound what stop she please" (III, ii, 70-71).[2] The image recurs soon after, once Claudius has burst out of the play within the play. Hamlet orders music. Then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive to ask the Prince to visit his mother, distressed at his behavior. Taking one of the recorders, Hamlet says to them:

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you

> make of me. You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you fret me, you cannot play upon me. (III, ii, 354-63)

In each case, Hamlet rejects the idea of being used as a mere instrument for the advancement of another's designs. But he concedes, reluctantly, that Fortune does play him in contrast to the better-adjusted Horatio. Moreover, there is an alleged mystery–the Prince–to be recognized, even though Rosencrantz and Guildenstern use inadequate means to "pluck" it out. So Prince Hamlet is like a pipe, a recorder, an organ, to be played to better or worse effect. Interpretation of him is inescapable.

Interpretation is apparently not simply a matter for scholars and critics of the play. It is a theme that the play itself employs. It does so, moreover, frequently, if not exclusively, through the agency of the Prince. Interpretation is something in which other characters indulge, as Hamlet recognizes. He too constantly interprets. The theme of interpreting is, I will suggest, a predominant one (although I acknowledge Empson's point that more than one melody can be played on Shakespeare's instrument). The role of interpretation in *Hamlet* may, therefore, act as a cue to those wishing to interpret it. Furthermore, since Shakespeare, in giving the subject this significance, had to develop previous versions of his story, we shall, in considering the issue of interpretation in the play, also be examining a prime example of how texts undergo alteration from period to period. We will find two specific influences on the metamorphosis of *Hamlet*: the intellectual climate in which it was written, as well as the nature of the Tudor political world. Together, they put at Shakespeare's disposal transformations of his inherited versions which are highly revealing of his creative processes.

*

Interpretation only becomes relevant where there are phenomena requiring explanation. These *Hamlet* has in plenty, thereby raising a plethora of questions. "Hamlet's world," Maynard Mack says, "is

pre-eminently in the interrogative mood." Harry Levin quotes this, going on to say: ". . . the word 'question' occurs in *Hamlet* no less than seventeen times, much more frequently than in any of Shakespeare's other plays. Recalling that it comes as the final word in Hamlet's most famous line," ["To be, or not to be, that is the question," (III, i, 56)] "we may well regard it as the key-word of the play . . . Furthermore, besides direct inquiry, there are other modes of questioning, notably doubt and irony . . . ." [3]

Now, we may wonder whether a play of *Hamlet's* complexity and stature can be reduced to a single key-word. "Corruption" also recurs frequently. Nevertheless, so much of the play derives from the act of questioning, not only linguistically, but also, as we shall see, in terms of dramatic organization, that here we have not merely one of several repeated words. Questioning constitutes a primary structural feature of the work.

Much of the questioning is Hamlet's. Much is the other characters'. Much simply does not admit of answers. But there is a notable question that *is* settled. Let us stop to consider it since it both sets in motion and illuminates the whole theme of interpretation. It is Hamlet's, embedded in his reaction to the Ghost in the first Act.

> Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd.
> Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
> Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
> That I will speak to thee. (I, iv, 40-44)

Although these first words on seeing the Ghost highlight his "questionable shape," the Prince, impulsively, without further ado, calls him ". . . Hamlet,/King, father, royal Dane" (I, iv, 44-45). Yet the question of who or what the Ghost is cannot be permanently ignored, given the burden he imposes on his son Hamlet. He commands him to kill Claudius.

> GHOST: Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.
> HAMLET: Murder! (I, v, 25-26)

Is there not an ambiguity here? Does "Murder!" simply apply, as it initially and obviously appears to do, to Claudius's act? Might it not also describe what the Prince is required to do if the Ghost is not who he

claims to be? Hamlet therefore soon goes on to bring his question fully into mind:

> The spirit that I have seen
> May be a devil, and the devil hath power
> T'assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
> As he is very potent with such spirits,
> Abuses me to damn me. (II, ii, 594-99)

How, then, is the urgent question of the Ghost's identity to be resolved? The answer is through the play within the play, acting out a near parallel to Claudius's alleged murder of Hamlet's father. For:

> The play's the thing
> Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King. (II, ii, 600-01)

It takes over two thirds of the play for Hamlet fully to acknowledge his question, devise a strategy for answering it and receive that answer unequivocally. Shakespeare could have saved himself the trouble. There is no ghost in *Hamlet's* medieval and Renaissance sources, Saxo Grammaticus and François Belleforest. Their protagonists wreak revenge without having first, elaborately, to establish the need for it. Nevertheless, given that Shakespeare did decide to use a ghost as a means of requiring Hamlet's vengeance, he could have done so much more simply. There was, after all, a precedent for such a ghost, with a white visor, in a now lost Elizabethan play, known as the *Ur-Hamlet*. Lodge refers to it in *Wit's Miserie* (1596), speaking of "the ghost which cried so miserably at the Theator, like an oyster wife, 'Hamlet, reuenge'."[4] Ghosts of this kind dated from Seneca, a collection of whose tragedies were published in 1581 to significant acclaim. But Shakespeare brilliantly undermined Elizabethan theatre-goers' expectations with his own specter. What Hamlet comes upon is no crude, bellowing apparition. He has a natural, if dramatically sepulchral, voice. It is dignified, not straining to be sensationalist. He does not provide the kind of horrific, extended report of existence in the underworld that Don Andrea's ghost offers in Kyd's earlier *The Spanish Tragedy*. Hamlet's Ghost says: ". . . I am forbid/To tell the secrets of my prison-house . . ." (I, v, 13-14). Furthermore, he is neither prologue, merely setting up the action, nor epilogue, neatly providing the

meaning of the play, in the Senecan tradition. He is fully integrated into the plot, the psychology of the drama–so much so that he preserves the naturalness of his appearance in life. He wears " . . . the very armour he had on/When he th'ambitious Norway combated" (I, i, 63-64). While in the chamber of his sometime wife he comes ". . . in his habit as he liv'd!" (III, iv, 137). Yet Shakespeare's greatest advance is in the ambiguity with which he presents the Ghost. So much is clear when we compare the Ghost with that which appears to Brutus in Julius Caesar, written only a year or so before:

> BRUTUS: Art thou some God, some Angell, or some Devill . . .
> GHOST: Thy evil spirit Brutus. (IV, iii, 279, 282)[5]

There is no doubt as to the diabolic nature of this ghost. In *Hamlet*, however, the uncertainty is fundamental. It haunts the Prince, forcing him to interpret what manner of thing the Ghost might be.[6]

Hamlet is quite right to be dubious, according to some twentieth-century critics. L. C. Knights says: "If this ghost turns out to be one who clamours for revenge, then we have every reason to suppose that Shakespeare entertained some grave doubts about him." This is, moreover, a "Ghost whose command had been for a sterile concentration on death and evil." [7] As if to emphasize the ambiguity about the Ghost's provenance, Shakespeare has him order Hamlet to "Swear" that he will revenge him, from that hell-like "cellarage" under the stage (I, v, 163). True, revenge keeps slipping from Hamlet's mind, in favor of remembering.

> GHOST: Remember me
> . . .
> HAMLET: . . . Remember thee?
> Yea, from the table of my memory
> I'll wipe away all trivial fond records
> . . .
> And thy commandment all alone shall live . . . .
> (I, v, 91, 97-99, 102)

Revenge even slips to the margin of the Ghost's concerns when he visits his adulterous wife's chamber. He tells their son to leave her to her own conscience:

Do not forget. This visitation
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.
But look, amazement on thy mother sits.
O step between her and her fighting soul. (III, iv, 110-13)

This is not the only occasion on which the Ghost urges restraint in punishing Gertrude:

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

Such exhortation to avoid sinning, unexpected perhaps from one simultaneously urging homicide, reminds us, parenthetically, that the question of the Ghost's provenance is but one of the ambiguities surrounding him, albeit, surely, the central one. Be that as it may, it temporarily distracts him from the idea of revenge, just as Hamlet's own attention is diverted from it. And when the Prince's revenge on Claudius does finally come, it is quite unplanned. It is the impulsive result of accident and rage.

Despite all of which, the injunction to revenge can never finally be forgotten. It is even given a thematic place in the play by the parallelism of Laertes's burning desire to avenge his own father's death. The Ghost's original injunction to revenge Claudius's "foul and most unnatural murder" (I, v, 25), is simply too disconcerting in a context far remote from the primitive society of Shakespeare's source, with its talion concept of blood debt. For the Prince comes out of a Christian world in which, as he tells Laertes, "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (V, ii, 215-16). In fact we can gauge how far *Hamlet* has travelled from its original by recalling that every Elizabethan parish church was required by law to put the Ten Commandments on its walls, including "Thou shalt not kill."

It is inescapable that Hamlet should—regardless of the vexed question of whether he does, or does not, have a temperamental aversion to action—establish the authority of the command he receives. It brings him back to his original dilemma: is the Ghost "a spirit of health or goblin damn'd?" Not that the Ghost himself is in any doubt. He claims, with whatever degree of veracity:

I am thy father's spirit,
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confin'd to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purg'd away. (I, v, 9-13)

Why so? Because he was murdered, hence being denied the Church's last rites. It is a claim accepted by the Prince, at least at first: "Touching this vision here,/It is an honest ghost" (I, v. 143-44). Hamlet swears it "by Saint Patrick" (I, v, 142). This is appropriate since Saint Patrick's Purgatory was a cave in Ireland where pilgrims went to be purged of their sins and receive visions of the afterlife. In other words the Ghost alleges, and Hamlet initially accepts, that he is in purgatory. Yet inevitably the Prince soon has his doubts. *Is* the Ghost in purgatory? The question raises others. Does purgatory exist? On what basis can one know? And so, bringing the questioning full circle, how might Hamlet be sure that the Ghost is there?

Purgatory is a Catholic, not Protestant doctrine. Despite the official Protestantism of Elizabethan England, it has, however, been contended that Shakespeare's social milieu encouraged a continued belief in purgatory:

> Such an assimilation of Catholic belief in a purgatory denied by the Protestant faith would come easily to Shakespeare's neighbors in Warwickshire, where Catholics were thick on the ground, occupying many of the great manor houses and country estates just north and west of Stratford. It might come easily too to Shakespeare's family, where his father was or at the very least had been a practicing Catholic and the Jesuit Robert Southwell, martyred in 1595, was a distant cousin on his mother's side.[8]

What is at issue, though, is not whether the author might have been a crypto-Catholic believer in purgatory. It is, rather, by what means his protagonist can determine whether the Ghost is in such a place or not.

Hamlet, the student, intends to go "back to school in Wittenberg," (I, ii, 113). Wittenberg might seem to one critic merely to have been a favorite university for Danes studying abroad,[9] but its reputation in the sixteenth century surely rested far more on its famous sons, Luther and Melanchthon. This doubtless identifies one of its students with its brand of reformed religion. Not that Shakespeare explicitly delineates Hamlet

as a Protestant. For reasons that will become apparent, the play sketches the Prince's link with Protestantism only lightly, for no other purpose than to bring out Protestant silence on the subject of purgatory.

Shakespeare therefore not only creates doubt about whether the Ghost is "a spirit of health or goblin damn'd," namely an angel or devil. He quite deliberately complicates the issue by adding the further possibility of purgatory. He does so, moreover, in an ideological context lacking the traditionally authoritative means of validating its existence and thus of ghosts claiming to hail from it. Well might Hamlet say:

> What may this mean,
> That thou, dead corse . . .
> Revisits thus the glimpses of the moon,
> . . . So horridly to shake our disposition
> With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls? (I, v, 51-53, 54-55)

Hamlet is consequently confronted by the huge problem of how to know whether purgatory exists or not–part and parcel of the questions of how to determine if the Ghost is in it; of who the Ghost is; of whether, finally, he can be trusted and should be obeyed. The suggestion that the Ghost is from purgatory is thus considerably more than just a part of Shakespeare's novel way of presenting him as less bombastic, less unequivocally evil, more integrated into the plot than such spirits tended to be in Elizabethan theatre. It is the means, precisely, of advancing the "pre-eminently interrogative mood," launching thereby the Prince's–and play's–focus on the need to interpret. This, we shall see, serves to open up some of *Hamlet's* deepest intellectual and psychological concerns.

To be specific, Shakespeare, by introducing the idea of purgatory, puts Hamlet in the predicament of having to decide how he will go about determining who or what the Ghost is. This will be found to have a double significance: for the plot, as well as for the mental world in which the plot unfolds, be it within or without the play. That said, let us follow the steps Hamlet takes to resolve his predicament. For who can doubt that it *is* a predicament? Dilatory as Hamlet may be, he cannot turn his back permanently on the terrible command of a Ghost whose provenance and hence nature he therefore badly needs somehow to confirm. Yet how can he possibly do so, without the benefit of either Catholic or Protestant doctrine on the subject? There are only two alternatives available to the Prince.

The first is to deny the evidence of his senses, attributing his vision to distortions caused by melancholy. Horatio, for his part, begins skeptically, believing the apparition is mere illusion. This embodies what James I was to call the "damnable opinions" of Reginald Scot in his *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), including "the old error of the Sadducees, in . . . denying spirits."[10] For Protestants certainly did believe in spirits, although, having no doctrine of purgatory, they held that the dead went straight to heaven or hell, crossing a "bourn/(from which) No traveller returns" (*Hamlet*, III, i, 79-80). James I's view in his *Demonologie* (1597) was that specters might be angels, but were more usually devils in the form of departed relatives.[11] Yet, for Horatio, actually seeing the Ghost becomes believing:

> Before my God, I might not this believe
> Without the sensible and true avouch
> Of mine own eye. (I, i, 59-61)

It leaves Horatio saying: ". . . this is wondrous strange" (I, v, 172). To which Hamlet replies: "And therefore as a stranger give it welcome" (I, v, 173). For Hamlet at no point denies the reality of the Ghost. It is an option he never considers, restricting himself to questioning, rather, the Ghost's identity.[12]

There is a second way open to Hamlet for confirming the Ghost's provenance and nature, without reference to doctrinal writings of any kind. It is from direct experience. Hamlet resorts to it. How? The simple answer is through the medium of the play within the play. He orders a troupe of actors to insert "a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines" (II, ii, 535), into a play based upon a murder similar to that which Claudius committed. For

> I have heard
> That guilty creatures sitting at a play
> Have, by the cunning of the scene,
> Been struck so to the soul that presently
> They have proclaim'd their malefactions. (II, ii, 584-88)

By this means Hamlet certainly does "catch the conscience of the King" (II, ii, 601). It proves to Hamlet's satisfaction the truthfulness of the Ghost's story, together with the authenticity of the Ghost himself. Not that Shakespeare goes on to work out the wider theological impli-

cations for a Protestant Prince, or an Elizabethan Anglican audience, of having the Ghost's claim to come from purgatory validated. He need not treat the question of purgatory further now that it has served its purpose of forcing his protagonist to depend on his direct experience by testing the Ghost's veracity through the play within the play. He simply dispenses with the issue, as can we, turning instead to look more closely at the nature of the test Hamlet has devised.

Three main characteristics stand out. First, Hamlet is thinking experimentally. He is consciously constructing a situation, the play within the play, on the basis of a previously acquired principle, that guilty creatures proclaim their misdeeds on such occasions. The anticipated outcome will be to test an assertion, that the Ghost's allegation of murder is true, with the logical conclusion that here is, or is not, an honest ghost whose demand to revenge must be heeded.

Secondly, Hamlet's approach to the experiment is through the senses. Of his uncle, he says: "I'll observe his looks," (II, ii, 592). He tells Horatio: "Observe my uncle," (III, ii, 80) and again: "Didst perceive?" (III, ii, 281). Yet even the operation of one's senses needs further sensory confirmation. Hamlet says to Horatio of Claudius:

> Give him heedful note;
> For I mine eyes will rivet to his face,
> And after we will both out judgments join
> In censure of his seeming. (III, ii, 84-87)

Thirdly, phenomena require interpretation. Hamlet is driven to this realization by what to him is the Ghost's originally equivocal status, although previously he had, in another context, sought to assert the primacy of the plainly authentic. He had asserted to his mother that although there is that which merely "seems" (I, ii, 75-76), "I have that within which passes show" (I, ii, 85). Now, however, there are vital matters the truth of which is far from self-evident. They badly need interpreting through the use of experiment based on the senses.

There are also two paradoxes to notice when thus describing Hamlet's way of interpreting the appearance of the Ghost. Hamlet's medium for determining factual realities is an illusion. It is drama. And:

> . . . these our actors,
> As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
> Are melted into air, thin air . . .[13]

Not that *Hamlet* lingers over the NeoPlatonic implications of these seemingly illusory underpinnings of reality, as Shakespeare does in some of his later plays. But still the interdependence of these apparently opposed categories is implicit here. In fact, the ambiguous relationship between reality and drama is a running theme in *Hamlet*, as when the Prince asks himself why the Player sheds actual tears for Hecuba, to "amaze indeed/The very faculties of eyes and ears" (II, ii, 553-54 and 559-60). While, conversely, some real events are staged, for example the encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia, set up by her father for Claudius's benefit (III, i, 90-151).

A second paradox is the outcome of the Prince's strategy for verifying facts. Does it not lend credence to the tale of a phantom; an entity whose existence, of its immaterial nature, cannot be verified by the material senses?

These paradoxes caution us against treating either Shakespeare or Hamlet as if they were practicing philosophy in a modern idiom. It is for the convenience of clarity that I have offered an analytic account of the Prince's epistemological method, as well as to highlight what, it will be argued, is his distinctive outlook. This is not to suggest that we should ignore the play's reminders that its two students have taken natural philosophy as part of the scientific curriculum at Wittenberg University. "There are," Hamlet says, "more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (I, v, 174-75). But we remember that *Hamlet* was written between 1600 and 1601, while it was not until 1605 that Francis Bacon, the first significant early modern English philosopher, published his *Advancement of Learning*. It inaugurated his series of philosophical studies, including *Novum Organum*, drafted between 1608 and 1620, and *De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum*, published in 1623. With these, Bacon closed the two and a half centuries' long lacuna since England's previous major philosopher, William of Ockham.

Shakespeare therefore worked in an as yet philosophically unsettled environment. The great Baconian, then Cartesian, crystallizations of post-medieval thought were still to come. But this does not mean Shakespeare did not have access to any of the ideas that Bacon, at least, would go on to systematize. He had a marked capacity for intellectual osmosis. An instance is when Hamlet writes to Ophelia: "Doubt that the sun doth move" (II, ii, 116). This reflects the findings of Copernicus. Shakespeare drew fully on his late Renaissance intellectual context in adapting the Hamlet story so as to

make it focus on interpreting, as in the case of the Ghost. So Hamlet is hardly the first to demand that knowledge must be derived from direct observation through the senses. It was a major preoccupation for a group of sixteenth-century Italian scientific thinkers. Bernadino Telesio, the Neapolitan, published his major work, *De Natura Juxta Propria Principia*, from 1565 to 1586. He substituted for Aristotle's purely conceptual analysis of phenomena the notion that direct observation of sensory data is the sole way of understanding the natural world. Telesio's empiricism was developed by another Neapolitan, Tommaso Campanella, in his *Philosophia Sensibus Demonstrata*, (1591). He took human experience as the indispensable basis for philosophy, with the result that he was tried for heresy. There is no direct reference to him by Bacon and certainly not to either Italian by Shakespeare. But Bacon did call Telesio "the first of the moderns." He draws on the Italians' ideas in his systematic works, while Hamlet is implicitly preoccupied by the same themes.

One route by which contemporary ideas certainly did come to Shakespeare is through the writings of Montaigne. His *Essays* were translated by the Elizabethan John Florio, Sir Philip Sydney's friend and perhaps Shakespeare's. In fact, *Hamlet's* direct intellectual affinity is with Montaigne's skeptical review of humanity, rather than with the Neapolitans' observations of nature. Moreover, given that the play is no work of technical philosophy, despite the philosophical implications of many of its themes and references, the Prince's soliloquies easily adopt the *Essay's* discursive manner. Whole passages from the *Essays* are directly borrowed in *Hamlet*, though transformed by Shakespeare's needs.

Much has, of course, been written on the links between Montaigne's writings and Shakespeare's. There is no need to review the whole of that complex relationship here. We shall simply focus on what is relevant to our present argument: the parallel concern *Hamlet* and the *Essays* have with how to interpret phenomena. In "On Experience" Montaigne begins very differently from the Neapolitans by quoting Aristotle in the first book of the *Metaphysics*: "There is no desire more natural than the desire for knowledge."[14] He follows Aristotle, too, in asserting the role of reason–and yet: "When reason fails us, we make use of experience."[15] So he cites the Roman poet Manilus: "By various experiments, experience has led to art, example showing the way."[16] What, then, is the best way to interpret? Montaigne rejects the kind of interpretation that depends upon ever finer logical categories. The field

in which this error becomes acute is in interpreting books. Here he concentrates on contemporary Protestant Biblical interpretations:

> And those men who think they can lessen and check our disputes by referring us to the actual words of the Bible are deluding themselves, since our minds find just as wide a field for controverting other men's meanings as for delivering its own.[17]

> Who would not say that commentaries increase doubt and ignorance, since there is no book to be found, human or divine, with which the world has any business, in which the difficulties are cleared up by the interpretation?[18]

Of Wittenberg's inaugurator of Protestantism, Montaigne says: "I have observed in Germany that Luther has left behind him as many schisms and dissensions concerning the uncertainties in his beliefs as he raised about the Holy Scriptures."[19] And Montaigne goes on to state his essential position pithily: "There is more trouble in interpreting interpretations than in interpreting the things themselves . . ."[20]

The significance of this for *Hamlet* is not only that the Prince, like his near contemporaries Montaigne, Telesio and Campanella, relies upon direct experience in "interpreting the things themselves." It is that Montaigne, from a starting point and in a mental atmosphere dissimilar to that of the Neapolitans, provides far ampler explanation than we can legitimately expect from a play of how this position is reached in the ideological climate to which Shakespeare undoubtedly had specific access. Indeed, we may extrapolate further from Montaigne what seems especially relevant to Hamlet. It is that Protestants, so Montaigne apparently recognizes, replace the authority of the Church by that of the Bible. Yet this is no real advance since scripture requires interpretation to which there is no end. Once the concept of interpretation has been introduced, however, it cannot be dispensed with, for no better reason than that it undermines efforts to center authority on the Bible. It acquires a life of its own. It puts itself at the service of a further, final, because more valid, authority: interpretation by direct experience of "the things themselves."

With this shift in mind, we can also see how Hamlet, the student from Wittenberg University, is reapplying the Protestant interpretation of scripture to the interpretation of his personal reality. That reality thereby

takes on for him the solemn significance which is usually attributed to the Bible. Hamlet's life, his predicament, becomes at once a sequence to be lived and a text to be explained. This diversion of Biblical exegesis to the Prince's interpretation of his private existence carries with it an additional implication. It derived from the Protestant refusal to permit the Catholic Church and its priesthood a role as intermediary between God and man. Man's access to God was direct, through his personal interpretation of that substitute for the authority of the Church, scripture. Though how could one person's interpretation be more efficacious than another's? What authenticated this man's view rather than that man's? The response was that the interpreter had to be guided by the Holy Spirit. Nothing less sanctified the individual conscience, which must therefore be rigorously searched to prepare for and verify the influence of Divine grace. And that individual conscience it is now operating, in Hamlet's case, in his direct interpretation of his own life.

There is, then, inescapably, as much a focus on the interpreter as on the interpretation. Whereas in the case of Biblical exegesis the explicator's state of grace is indispensable, in the thought of Montaigne and Shakespeare's Prince the question of the individual's fitness to interpret his human experience becomes a conscientious sifting through of the nature and condition of the self. Such is the substance of Hamlet's soliloquies. It is the subject of that *Essay* whose author says:

> I present a humble life, without distinction; but that is no matter. Moral philosophy, as a whole, can be just as well applied to a common and private existence as to one of richer stuff . . . no man ever came to a project with a better knowledge and understanding than I have of this matter, in regard to which I am the most learned man alive; and . . . no man ever went more deeply into his subject, or more thoroughly examined its elements and effects, or more exactly and completely achieved the purpose he set out to work for. To perfect it I need only bring fidelity to my task; and that is here, the purest and sincerest that is to be found anywhere.[21]

It is important not to allow a misunderstanding to enter in at this point. We are not saying, of course, that Montaigne, in focusing on the self who interprets, no less than on what it interprets, betrays a prima-

rily Protestant pedigree. Even so, Protestantism does play a galvanizing role in his thinking, as Marc Fumaroli suggests:

> . . . it could well be that his greatest originality . . . rests on his successful attempt to work out a perfectly orthodox form of spirituality for the use of laymen and of the gentry, a *liberal* spirituality quite distinct from the models traditionally conceived for clerics bound by constraining vows, inscribed within a narrow hierarchical discipline and thus ill suited to the specificity of an independent lay existence. Everything seems to show that such a need was keenly felt in the last third of the sixteenth century in Catholic circles, as an answer to the solution which the Protestants of the Reformation had proposed to this old malaise in Christendom.[22]

There is a sense in which Protestantism sets Montaigne's agenda. And in his variant answer to the questions it confronted

> he was not alone in his grasp of skepticism as an intellectual tool; skepticism was in vogue among Roman Catholics as a defense against Protestants who sought to subvert them with arguments they could not answer. In such cases, the only safe reaction was to demolish reason and scholarship entirely–both theirs and yours, while clinging, by faith, to the Church alone.[23]

Yet Montaigne's Catholicism is kept within strict bounds. He

> . . . acknowledged his Church's right to censor, but he also asserted that Theology . . . best kept her dignity by remaining apart from the mere humanities. As a humanist he enjoyed seeking after truth, even though truth, by human means alone, can seldom if ever be found within this life.[24]

What Montaigne offers is a skeptical, humanist response to pressing sixteenth-century issues with which Protestantism's prior answers effectively challenge Catholicism also to engage. Renaissance issues they are, including the nature of man and scope of his knowledge; issues with wider and deeper implications than their specific the-

ological formulations by either Reformation camp. Shakespeare's Prince, no less than Montaigne, responds to these preoccupations in a manner finally emancipated from direct commitment to either ideological party, although in the Prince's case, like Montaigne's, Protestantism inaugurates the need to answer. It does so with that first, local question raised by its absence of a doctrine of purgatory.

Ultimately, though, Montaigne was a Catholic in the matter of faith, regardless of what his detractors may have claimed. What Shakespeare's religious beliefs were we cannot know for certain and it may not be worth asking. Just this much is clear: while Prince Hamlet's thinking is saturated with religious references, he cannot finally come to any settled theological conclusions. He does not accept the guidance of the Church, the Bible, or direct revelation, on the nature of "death,/The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn/No traveller returns . . ." (III, i, 78-80). As for *Hamlet*, its author omits the contemporary convention of having the Ghost reappear at the end of the drama to state and thus seal the meaning of the play. Horatio's pious words over his friend's corpse: "Good night, sweet prince,/And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest," (V, ii, 364-65), carry no weight except as an expression of Horatio's sudden need to express a personal sentiment, with whatever conventional or real force. The play itself remains steadfastly uncommitted spiritually. The ending is, ". . . in structural terms, resolutely secular."[25]

Hamlet plunges its Prince into a predicament of which he must make sense without the guidance of prior religious orthodoxy of whatever stripe. Theological props are inadequate in a world–Hamlet's world–where phenomena cannot be taken on faith, but must be assessed by the test of firsthand experience. Such interpretation finally gives dramatic voice to the late Renaissance intellectual climate in which the play was written. It reverberates with that accumulation of scientific, philosophical and transmuted religious thought to which we have been referring. It articulates it in terms of a new, open, engagement with the world, predicated on the self, to which Bacon and Descartes will, in their different conceptual ways, soon lend systematic expression.

*

What first impels Hamlet to interpret experience directly in this way is, as we have seen, the equivocal nature of the Ghost. The play within the play is his means of doing so. But the Ghost is far from being all that requires interpretation. And many other ways of enabling

it are devised. For the need to interpret is a constant preoccupation in *Hamlet*, directed as much to the Prince's character as to his father's Ghost. Hence, we find intensive efforts to explain Hamlet's personality–or, more specifically, the sudden change in it noticed by others. His altered behavior dates from the time when he first encounters the Ghost, telling Horatio: "I perchance hereafter shall think meet/To put an antic disposition on" (I. v, 179-80). Ophelia describes it to her father in these terms:

> My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
> Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbrac'd,
> No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd,
> Ungarter'd and down-gyved to his ankle,
> Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
> And with a look so piteous in purport
> As if he had been loosed out of hell
> To speak of horrors, he comes before me. (II, i, 77-84)

We might well ask to what extent Hamlet is stage-managing the impression he gives, suspecting that Ophelia acts as proxy for her father and his royal master. Whatever the case, Polonius instantly offers Ophelia the interpretation to which he clings for the rest of his abbreviated life: "Mad for thy love?" (II, i, 85). And again: "This is the very ecstasy of love" (II, i, 102). Other interpretations are advanced for what Claudius calls "Hamlet's transformation" (II, ii, 5). At this point, speaking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Claudius says:

> What it should be,
> More than his father's death, that thus hath put him
> So much from th'understanding of himself
> I cannot dream of. (II, ii, 7-10)

Gertrude, for her part, says: "I doubt it is no other but the main,/His father's death and our o'er-hasty marriage" (II, ii, 56-57). Nevertheless, Claudius continues trying to plumb his nephew's worrying behavior, explicitly setting aside Polonius's interpretation:

> Love? His affections do not that way tend . . .
> There's something in his soul
> O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,

And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger. (III, i, 164, 166-69)

Eventually Claudius expresses in barely veiled terms what that "something" is. It is Hamlet's plotting to destroy his uncle, the new King, for which Claudius seeks his nephew's death. For the

terms of our estate may not endure
Hazard so near us as doth hourly grow
Out of his brows. (III, iii, 4-6)

This debate about the correct interpretation of Hamlet's behavior and intentions is advanced by dramatic means similar to Hamlet's own use of the players. Again and again situations are stage-managed in which he may be observed. Claudius orders the Prince's companions from youth, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to:

draw him on to pleasures and to gather,
So much as from occasion you may glean,
Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus
That, open'd, lies within our remedy. (II, ii, 15-18)

Polonius will, he tells Claudius and Gertrude:

loose my daughter to him.
Be you and I behind an arras then,
Mark the encounter. (II, ii, 162-64)

Then Polonius hides–fatally–behind the arras in Gertrude's chamber, in III, iv, to observe the conversation between mother and son. Truly, the Prince is, as Ophelia says of him in another context: "Th'observ'd of all observers" (III, i, 156).

Apparently, it is not only Hamlet who is preoccupied with interpreting and the means of doing so. Nor is the Prince the only flesh and blood character requiring interpretation. Ophelia's distraction invites it no less than does Hamlet's:

Her speech is nothing,
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
The hearers to collection. They aim at it,

And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily. (IV, v, 7-13)

Furthermore, the practice of "lawful espials" as Claudius calls them, (III, i, 32), so fully exploited by and against Hamlet, are turned on Polonius's own family. We have spoken of the father eavesdropping on his daughter's conversation with her beloved. Polonius also orders his man Reynaldo to spy on his son Laertes in Paris, tutoring him on how to do so most effectively. While of Polonius himself, Claudius tells Gertrude "we shall sift him" for information about Hamlet (II, ii, 58).

It is not hard to suggest that the Renaissance court provides the way of rendering the theme of interpretation in dramatic form. For no less than the sixteenth-century intellectual climate, to which we have referred, the nature of contemporary politics puts at Shakespeare's disposal a means of developing earlier versions of the play through his theme of interpretation. *Hamlet* itself suggests such an Italian context when the Prince refers during the play within the play to the murder of Duke Gonzago (III, ii, 232-34), done in Urbino.[26] But despite Madariaga's suggestion that Hamlet had much in common with Cesare Borgia, not least because he regards Borgia as actually Spanish not Italian, Shakespeare had little need to look further afield than England for examples of fatally dangerous eavesdropping, trickery and intrigue at the center of power. Elizabeth I's court provided them aplenty, as did Henry VIII's. It was a lethal environment felling Essex, Mary Queen of Scots, Henry's wives, Cromwell and even that universally respected intellectual, the King's Chancellor and friend, Thomas More. While this political background can easily be seen as supplying Shakespeare with his methods of interpreting behavior and motive in *Hamlet*, it is, however, possible to press it beyond a level of mere generality. As we do so we shall find it giving the play access to a further, profounder form and method of interpretation.

Sir Thomas More was beheaded for a newly defined form of High Treason. It was "malicious silence" in refusing to give his assent under oath to the Act of Succession declaring the King's marriage to Catherine of Aragon void and that with Anne Boleyn valid. The latter union entailed a repudiation of papal supremacy which More found unacceptable, and to which he thus refused to swear. He retreated into silence: silence into which another of the King's courtiers, the poet Sir

Thomas Wyatt, withdraws.

> Now cesse, my lute, this is the last
> Labour that thou and I shall wast,
> And ended is that we begon;
> Now is this song boeth sung and past:
> My lute be still, for I have done.[27]

For with his lute, his lays, the court balladeer embodies and gives voice to the assumptions of his audience. They are the norms of a traditional face to face society with feudal bonds of honor and allegiance. But suddenly the lutanist has no place in Henry's new Machiavellian world of naked power politics. There the group is atomized into interchangeable, all-too-dispensable pawns. The lutanist and More, have been forced by the prevailing political environment into internal exile. It is silence and seclusion that now affords them the space to live conscientiously, within themselves, disengaged from what has come to pass as a "normal world."

More embraced prison life in the Tower of London. He settled down to write a Christian work: *A Dialoge of Comfort Against Tribulacion*. He told his daughter Margaret that, but for his family obligations, he would always have chosen for himself "as strait a room and staiter too."[28] Now, is this not a tone soon to be echoed by a voice we have already heard in our preceding pages? It comes from someone born two years prior to More's execution. Montaigne was to retreat from the French Wars of Religion, whose fanatical excesses destroyed all vestiges of Renaissance optimism, and were as much political as religious. He returned to his country house thirty miles away from Bordeaux, a bare year before the horrific Massacre of Saint Bartholemew. There, he retired to the library he built into one of its towers. Larger, admittedly, than More's cell, his occupancy of it has many of the same attributes:

> From this room I have three open views . . . It is a little difficult of access and out of the way, but this I like, both for the benefit of exercise and for its keeping people away from me. It is my throne, and I try to rule here absolutely, reserving this one corner from all society, conjugal, filial, and social . . . Miserable to my mind, is the man who has no place in his house where he can be alone . . . I consid-

> er nothing so harsh in the life of austerity followed by our religious orders, as the rule which I found in one of their communities, by which they are required perpetually to be in company . . . I find it rather more bearable always to be alone than never to have the power to be so.[29]

Montaigne differs from More in that his seclusion was not permanent. The very civil war he shunned was to draw him in again. Then he traveled in search for a cure for the stone. He was received by the Pope in Rome. Nor was Montaigne's withdrawal enforced, which More's certainly was, even if he embraced it as part of a Christian martyrdom, contrasting, again, with the non-religious temper of Montaigne's retreat. Nonetheless, beneath these obvious differences there are points of vital continuity between the men's forms of withdrawal. They will suggest how the political experience of the century into which Shakespeare was born provides the dramatist with means to develop his theme of interpretation.

First, although Montaigne is not incarcerated in his library because of alleged High Treason, he is no less debarred from the active political world. He has discharged himself from it by the expedient of introjecting it: the library "is my throne, and I try to rule here absolutely."[30] The result is solitude, silence and internal exile. They are the preconditions for that introspective self whose genesis consequently owes so much to the political environment from which it strives to separate itself.

Secondly, More's way of experiencing the internal exile into which Henrician politics drove him was religious. He was a martyr-in-the-making, scrutinizing his soul in preparation to meet his God. Does not Montaigne's retreat embody many of these religious elements, albeit in a secularized form? His library brings to the threshold of his mind, by contrast with the kind of monastery he dislikes, his library's similarity to the sort of monastery he does approve. Rightly so, for here is the silent solitude of a chapel with those three open views like a triptych for meditation. Yet meditate he does—not pray. He has moved, in his view of the self, of *him*self, from the religious devotee overseen by God, to the solitary being, auto-reflective in the luminous after-image of his dead friend, Étienne de la Boétie.

Here we too have advanced by isolating both sets of similarities between Montaigne and More. For we are now looking well beyond the Machiavellian politics of the Renaissance court and how its cut-throat spying, suspicion and traps suggest to Shakespeare paranoid

stratagems for interpreting behavior. Passing into the silence of internal exile, we have traced the emergence of a new kind of self; one that interprets, not least, itself. Earlier on, considering the intellectual underpinnings of Shakespeare's emphasis on interpreting, we met that self's Protestant forebear: the individual conscience needing to scrutinize itself in order to ensure its fitness to receive the Holy Ghost's guidance in interpreting the Bible. Now we encounter other antecedents, from an originally political perspective. Either way, the result is a self-sifting, in a non-theological vein, characterizing Hamlet as much as Montaigne. We need to show how.

We may begin by returning to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, ordered by Claudius to watch the Prince so as to shed light on his transformation. Hamlet says that he himself will tell them why they were sent, even if he only does so implicitly. What follows is Hamlet's description of his own state of mind, albeit one in which he may be taking into account the pair of hearers through whom his words will come to the ears of that third, his uncle. In spite of which, the description might also stand as sincere, given its continuity of tone with Hamlet's soliloquies, *a priori* without an audience of *dramatis personae*. "I have of late, but where-/fore I know not, lost all my mirth . . ." (II, ii, 295-96). For although he says: "What piece of work is man . . ." (II, ii, 303), he goes on: ". . . and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" (II, ii, 308-09). Hamlet hereby expresses the transformation in his outlook that his companions seek to explain to their royal masters. In other words, Hamlet is joining all the rest who seek to interpret him, by interpreting himself.

Now, the Prince, we have already seen in the case of the Ghost, is an accomplished interpreter. Moreover, it is a role natural to him. When he gives a commentary on the play within the play, he says to Ophelia, referring to the man who explains the action in a puppet show: "I could interpret between you and your love if I/could see the puppets dallying" (III, ii, 241-42). Nevertheless, the Prince's interpretation of his own self is quite another matter. It is, furthermore, of an entirely different order from the interpretations of him offered by others. It differs in motivation, nature and significance, as we may judge not only from this instance but from numerous others.

Let us take the motivation for Hamlet's self-analysis first. He differs from the others interpreting him in that he does not seek to find thereby a simply defined key to his behavior, whether love-sickness, mourning, or murderous ambition, in order that he may be better con-

trolled. On the contrary, we note that he is temperamentally inclined to introspection. It is a compulsive habit, not an objective requirement. He is, from the outset, melancholic. This gives him grounds for obsessive self-rumination, intensified, even before the Ghost's appearance to him, by his father's death, his mother's overhasty marriage and his forfeit of the throne to Claudius. The atmosphere of the court world, his world, is so "rank and gross" (I, ii, 136), where nothing can "come to good" (I, ii, 158), that his human feelings cannot be openly expressed: "But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (I, ii, 159). Isolation and silence are Hamlet's lot. They breed the unending self-scrutiny of psychic solitary confinement in that internal exile equivalent to More's, or Wyatt's lutanist's. Here it is aptly metaphorised by the dramatic form of the soliloquy. In fact, Hamlet will go on to say of Denmark: "To me/it is a prison" (II, ii, 250-51). To Hamlet, with his initial disaffection, the appearance of the Ghost demanding revenge for murder, adds a massive extra impulse to rumination and self-analysis. These liberate his consciousness to an extent that no other character remotely matches, certainly not in observing him. Only Ophelia, in her verbally fractured descent into madness, and Claudius, conscience-stricken after the play within the play, undergo any change of consciousness in respect of themselves, although neither experiences anything remotely comparable to the sustained surge, the sheer largeness, of Hamlet's forcibly enhanced mental vision.

How exactly does the command to revenge have its impact on Hamlet's thinking? Anne Barton says:

> Retaliation for an actual death . . . is inherently tragic, not only because blood will have blood, but because of what it does to the life and personality of the virtuous avenger: a man cruelly isolated from society by the nature of the task he has undertaken. The revenger's position, necessarily secretive, solitary, and extreme, is conducive to introspection. It encourages meditation on the anomalies of justice, both human and divine, on past time, and on the value of life and human relationships.[31]

This has an obvious relevance to Hamlet—with an important additional observation prompted by Barton's phrase "virtuous avenger." Neither the Prince nor the play ever challenge the legitimacy of the revenge. They only question, for a time, the veracity of the

Ghost ordering it. Hence John Bayley says: ". . . the duty of revenge removes from Hamlet's consciousness any question of dilemma or soul-searching. He does not have to concentrate; his mind floats freely and takes on the color of new occurrences . . . Conscience and its activities are a distraction and a relief from duty." This is ". . . the paradoxical freedom of consciousness, when confined by an unquestioned duty . . . ."[32]

Hamlet's consciousness consequently explores a multiplicity of themes. Sometimes he directly interprets his own character and its supposed defects. One example is the scene we have considered, where he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of his transformation. Another is the third soliloquy: "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" in which he asks: "Am I a coward?" (II, ii, 543-601). On other occasions Hamlet does interpret his own disposition, although by implication. This happens while offering an account not just of himself in particular but of man, or some aspect of the human predicament, in general. The "To be" soliloquy is an instance (III, i, 56-88). There are others, including the Prince's speech to Horatio about ". . . that man/That is not passion's slave . . ." (III, ii, 56-74). For the expansion in Hamlet's consciousness results in him now interpreting all and any aspect of humanity–as he does by taking his cue from Montaigne's view of man in the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discussion, if only to invert it. Moreover, virtually anything, no matter how accidental, becomes food for the Prince's thoughts. The passage of Fortinbras's Norwegian troops through Denmark to fight the Poles inspires the last soliloquy to consider "What is a man . . ." (IV, iv, 32-66).

Hamlet's melancholic consciousness is, then, strangely freed by the motivating command to revenge. It considers not merely Hamlet but the world. In fact, it has the capacity to include everything, relate everything, interpret everything. This driven expansiveness of his view of himself in the widest context available to him, gives Hamlet's self-analysis a radically different nature from the narrowly prosaic attempts others make to interpret him. Nor do Claudius's tormented confession and Ophelia's distracted utterances ever depart from their narrowly specific personal predicaments.

Hamlet's consciousness uncoils endlessly–but it does so from what is initially consciousness of himself. It accords centrality to his self, therefore. And in this he strongly resembles Montaigne, as we have seen. Admittedly, Hamlet is hardly at ease with himself, or with the circumstances in which he is living, in which respect he has a

greater affinity with the imprisoned More than with the voluntarily leisured, self-confident Montaigne. Certainly, too, he has a more dejected view of his own being than the Frenchman. Yet not only is the self the foundation for interpreting reality in both Hamlet's and Montaigne's cases. It suffuses all it interprets with its skeptical, humane and free-floating consciousness. Above all, it does so, in either case, unconstrained by any controlling theological position–despite the fact that, in the *Essays*, such a religious stance can eventually be extrapolated, whereas Hamlet's outlook, for all its superstitious fears, remains ultimately secular.

So what, we may ask, is the significance of our protagonist's interpreting, springing, as it does, from self-reflection? It differs, we claimed, from the significance of other characters' interpretations of him. But we may best establish its cardinal quality by first reminding ourselves of the similarities between their approaches so as to see what their likenesses leave wanting. Thus the Prince's relations and associates resemble him not only in interpreting him and each other, but also in the restlessness with which they do so. It constitutes virtually their entire activity. For they all serve to express the theme of interpretation which is thereby a major preoccupation of the play, not just a concern of its protagonist. It is carried on into parts of the action, such as Polonius's family, where Hamlet is not involved. This suggests that the central character is not the be-all-and–end-all of the audience's attention. He is simply one character, among others, in a larger entity, the play, of which he and his self-interpreting form but a part. Yet what a part!

We need only remind ourselves of the divergences between Hamlet's way of interpreting and that of the rest. Its motivation and nature are, we recall, quite different. They highlight its greater range in starting from himself, yet moving to take in the rest of the world. Above all, the Prince, unlike the rest, gives us from within, over seven soliloquies and much else, one mind's engagement with the theme of interpretation. It provides, from inside Hamlet's very self, his unmediated, direct interpretation of reality, as a response to being, not just in the stiflingly corrupt world of Elsinore but in the universe as he conceives it. As such it is, by far, the most intimate, searching and sustained exploration of this preoccupation in the play. This argues so different a role for Hamlet that there is really no question of submerging his significance as a character as such, in favor of an exclusively thematic reading of the play. The theme of interpretation is advanced most fully by, and inseparably from the movement of its protagonist's

qualitatively different, emphatically personal consciousness. Rooted precisely in his subjectivity, it inevitably highlights the importance of Hamlet as character. Theme and character are one.

Post-Bradleyan critical orthodoxy contrasts them, favoring the former. The play becomes a thematic poem rather than a psychological interplay between beings. It is a sterile and misleading opposition in the case of *Hamlet*, where theme and character not only co-exist but amount to one and the same, as we expect in great drama. Moreover, the tendency of some post-modern criticism to abandon both theme and character simply does not square with the experience of seeing the play in performance. The Prince's subjectivity dominates. Insofar as the protagonist of Joyce's *Ulysses* has been called the prose, the Prince's consciousness is the tragic hero of *Hamlet*.

Different, then, as may be the significance of the way in which Hamlet and the other characters interpret, we might well go on to wonder, finally: what *is* his interpretation of the world as he knows it? He gives interpretations, of course, of specific things, such as whether the Ghost is a good Ghost, or the reason for his own transformation. But a wider, fuller interpretation of reality is something he never offers. Least of all does he do so about his own self, which, if it is actually the mystery he claims, remains one that he never resolves. What we get instead is a dark mood of disaffection, seeming to some twentieth-century critics downright adolescent. It rejects the kind of Renaissance optimism to be found in Pico della Mirandola. Hamlet presents us with the temperamental inclination to radical skepticism, occasioned by specific instances of emotional urgency. He rejects complacent certainties, the banal: he questions: he does not assert positively. Caught as Hamlet is between two movements of philosophical systematization, the unraveling medieval and barely nascent early modern, he is still ill-suited to define a coherent philosophical position from the intellectual welter of his times, despite all his mentions of philosophy. Or, as Terry Eagleton puts it in Marxist terms: "His 'self' consists simply in the range of gestures with which he resists available definitions, not in a radical alternative beyond their reach. It is thus wholly parasitic on the positions it refuses . . . Hamlet is a radically transitional figure, strung out between a traditional social order to which he is marginal, and a future epoch of achieved bourgeois individualism." [33]

There is, however, another way of looking at Hamlet's failure to offer a specific interpretation of the world. Maybe it is not just the result of a disadvantageous historical position between two philosoph-

ical or social and ideological moments. Perhaps to ask what such an interpretation might be is a case of *une question mal posée*. Does Hamlet not, rather, resemble Wittgenstein who said he "holds no opinions in philosophy?" Philosophy exists to remove "a feeling of puzzlement, to cure a sort of mental cramp."[34]

Hamlet is a man ordered to revenge his father's murder without a theological means of validating the command. Reason enough, surely, to suffer from a spectacular attack of mental cramp! Is there any wonder that he draws on a constitutional inclination to worry things out? He thereby dramatizes the alternative which Wittgenstein suggests to philosophy as system-building. But he also expresses emergent secular man's reliance on the activities of consciousness as an intellectual form of mental self-cure.

Notes

[1] Harry Levin, quoted by Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet: The Arden Shakespeare* (London: Thomson, 2002), 122.

[2] All references to the play are to *Hamlet: The Arden Shakespeare*.

[3] Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (New York: Oxford UP, 1959), 20.

[4] Quoted by John Dover Willson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), 56.

[5] *Julius Caesar: The Laurel Shakespeare*, ed. Charles Jasper Sisson (New York: Dell Publishing Company 1958), 137.

[6] For the novelty of the Ghost I have drawn on John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet*, 55-60 and E. Pearlman, "Shakespeare at Work: The Invention of the Ghost," *Hamlet: New Critical Essays* (hereafter referred to as HNCE), ed. Arthur F. Kinney (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 71-84.

[7] L. C. Knights, *An Approach to Hamlet* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960), 46 and 89.

[8] Arthur F. Kinney, "Introduction," HNCE, 15.

[9] Jenkins, 436.

[10] Quoted by Dover Wilson, 64.

[11] Quoted by Dover Wilson, 62.

[12] For discussion of the sixteenth-century debate on spirits I am indebted to Dover Wilson, 60-75.

[13] *The Tempest: The New Penguin Shakespeare*, ed. Anne Barton (London: Penguin Books, 1968) IV, i, 148-50.

[14] Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. J. M. Cohen, (London: Penguin

Books, 1958), 343.

[15] Montaigne, *Essays*, 343.

[16] Montaigne, *Essays*, 344.

[17] Montaigne, *Essays*, 344.

[18] Montaigne, *Essays*, 347.

[19] Montaigne, *Essays*, 349.

[20] Montaigne, *Essays*, 349.

[21] Montaigne, "On Repentance," 235-36.

[22] Marc Fumaroli, "Foreward: Spirituality for Gentlemen," M. A. Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), xiii.

[23] Screech, 3.

[24] Screech, 5.

[25] Pearlman, 77.

[26] Here I follow Jenkins, 507, who believes that the location of the murder in Vienna is a textual mistake.

[27] *Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 51.

[28] Quoted in article on More, ed. Germain P. Marc'hadour, *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Volume 8, 15th Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 315.

[29] Montaigne, "On Three Kinds of Relationships," 263.

[30] Montaigne, "On Three Kinds of Relationships," 263.

[31] Anne Barton, "Introduction," *Hamlet: The New Penguin Shakespeare*, ed. T. J. B. Spencer (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 14.

[32] John Bayley, *Shakespeare and Tragedy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 172.

[33] Quoted by Kinney, 43.

[34] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigation' Generally Known as the Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), 1.