ROBERT R. HELLENGA

Hamlet *in the Classroom*

I

TEACHERS OF SHAKESPEARE generally tell their students something like this: "Shakespeare was a dramatist; his plays were meant to be acted; the text we have before us is only a script; all the bustle and pageantry of the stage must be supplied by our imaginations; you can learn more from seeing a performance . . . ." And yet for most of us, the theater which really counts is neither the Elizabethan nor the modern, but the classroom itself, where the soliloquies generally fall to the teacher and the dialogue often "goes halting off" like Benedict's four senses. Fortunately the two theaters are not in competition with each other. Of course it is better to see a play than to read it, but how often does one get the chance to see *As You Like It*, or any of a dozen other favorites? It is possible, of course, to contend that Shakespeare was *in some essential way* not a dramatist but a poet whose genius transcended the limits of the stage, etc., but I do not wish to raise that question here. What I do wish to discuss, as unpretentiously as possible, is what goes on in that second theater, the classroom.

There is a difficulty, of course, in writing about the classroom, for students are unpredictable; they do not always give us the answer we expect, the answer which leads so beautifully into our next question. But this is just what we must take into account. We must seek alternatives to the "right answer game"—sometimes called the "Socratic method"—in which we ask questions and then nudge and prod our students till they come up with the answers we are looking for. As most of us are vaguely aware, this often creates a great gap between what we (as teachers) think is going on in the classroom and what students think is going on.

The solution is to find some common ground on which the teacher and the students can explore the play together. This is not easy; but we can at least destroy in our students the persistent belief that teachers have some special, inside source of information (teacher's manuals?) unavailable to anyone else.

II

The beginning.

Hamlet is easy to teach because there are so many things to talk about, so many "problems." But for this very reason we should take extra care. It is too easy to miss the forest for the trees, to fall back upon such time-honored questions as "Is Hamlet really mad?" or "Why doesn't he kill Claudius at his prayers?" These questions must be asked, of course, but we must also be asking,

Robert Hellenga, Assistant Professor of English at Knox College, is interested in developing classroom strategies which help students become personally involved with works of literature. He is currently editing a collection of essays on death.

"What is at stake here?" "What difference are the answers going to make?"

This suggests that there are basically two types of questions we may ask about the play, which I believe to be the case. It is important to distinguish between them. The first type asks the student to interpret the action within the context of the play itself. We ask, for example, why Shakespeare delays so long in revealing the crime, and hope that the students will respond by talking about suspense, about the fact that Hamlet feels something is drastically wrong even before he learns of the crime, and, if we are lucky, about the way Shakespeare manages to put us in Hamlet's position so that we feel the situation with him, see it through his eyes. The second type of question asks students to explore their own responses to the play, to relate it to their world. Both types of question are necessary; but I think most of us tend to rely upon the first type at the expense of the second.

In leading the class discussion it is important to find an approach which gives students the opportunity to make a real contribution instead of simply trying to come up with the right answers. Unless we begin with genuine questions, there is little chance of stimulating genuine discussion. This puts us in a dilemma. It would be hypocritical, on the one hand, to pretend that we do not know why Shakespeare delays in revealing the crime; but it would be foolish, on the other hand, to avoid important questions simply because we know (or think we know) the answers. The way out of the dilemma, as I have suggested, is to begin with the students' own responses, on which they alone are the experts. If we go about this in the right way, the traditional questions will take care of themselves. They will arise naturally in a larger and more meaningful context.

With some classes we can manage this simply by asking, "How do you like it?" "What do you make of it?" Usually, however, this is too general. Students are often not sure how they like it and need (and deserve) some help in deciding what to make of it. With these considerations in mind I would like to propose three lines of questioning, or clusters of questions, as ways of getting into *Hamlet.*

I like to begin at the beginning—with the ghost.[1] "Does anyone in the class believe in ghosts?" (jocularly). "Has anyone seen a production of *Hamlet?*" "How was the ghost done?" "How did you react?" "Was it funny?" "If so, why?" "Was it scary?" "Did your reaction have anything to do with your belief or disbelief in ghosts?" "Do you find the ghost convincing even if you don't believe in ghosts?" "Can you respond to the feelings of the soldiers on guard?" (This is a good place to read the opening—dramatically; and, if feasible, to compare it with the opening of *The Spanish Tragedy.*) "Is the ghost primarily a bearer of information?" "Would some other way of disclosing the crime have worked just as well?" "What would be gained?" "What would be lost?"

The plan here is to begin with questions that the students can easily answer by drawing upon their own experiences and move on to what seems to me to be

[1] I am indebted to C. S. Lewis's remarks on the ghost in "*Hamlet,* The Prince or the Poem," reprinted in *Shakespeare's Tragedies: An Anthology of Modern Criticism,* ed. Laurence Lerner (Baltimore, 1963), pp. 70-71. I have cited this anthology because it is one I ask the students to purchase. The essay was originally delivered as the *British Academy Shakespeare Lecture,* 1942, and has been reprinted in Lewis's *They Asked for a Paper* (London, 1962).

of central importance: "Why did Shakespeare choose to traffic in the supernatural?" "Why does the play begin in this particular way and not in some other way?"

The ghost's message, and Hamlet's reaction, suggest another line of questioning: "Where do we stand with regard to the issue of revenge?" "The Elizabethans regarded revenge as one of the most common motives operating among men, like sex today. How does this square with our (your) view of the world?" "What are some other names for revenge?—justice?—getting even?" "Are you ashamed of revenge motives? —proud of them?" "Do you approve of revenge in some cases?" "When?" ("Is it OK to shoot a man if you catch him in bed with your wife?—if he murders your father?")

Having spent a few minutes on these questions we may invite Shakespeare to join us.[2] "What does the first act of *Hamlet* have to say about revenge? "What does the ghost say?" "Hamlet himself?" "Does Hamlet have any choice in the matter?" "Can he appeal to law and order?" "Does Shakespeare approve of revenge?" "Do his views differ from ours?" "Do you feel any qualms about Hamlet 'sweeping to his revenge'?" "Is this what you would do?" "Do you find the revenge conventions harder to accept than the ghost?"

There are no "right answers" to these questions, which force the student to relate the play to his own beliefs; but the kind of discussion they invite is not likely to leave us at loose ends. It will lead, probably, to the larger context in which we may pose more traditional questions —not in order to discover the right answers, but to explore the revenge theme more fully: "What *is* the context of the revenge theme?" "What do the first three scenes have to do with revenge?" "Does this theme account for everything in the first act?" "Is it the most important thing for you?" "If not, what is?"

The third line of questioning I would introduce has to do with Hamlet himself. I ask students how they relate to Hamlet, who is, after all, an undergraduate. "Do you know any Hamlet types?" "What makes someone a Hamlet type?" "Have you ever felt the way Hamlet feels?" "How many different roles does Hamlet assume in the first act?" "Which is the *real* Hamlet?" "Which do you feel closest to?"

Again, because these are personal questions, there are no single correct answers. The job of the teacher in these circumstances is not to see to it that everyone responds identically, but (1) to help students articulate and clarify their own responses, and (2) to maintain a satisfactory balance between the different voices in the classroom—the voices of the students, the voice of the play, and, of course, his own voice. He must keep the lines of communication open between the students and the play by repeatedly asking students to connect their responses to the text. He must ask the student who says he feels, or has felt, like Hamlet to describe not only his own feelings, but Hamlet's as well. He must move in both directions, keeping both the student and Hamlet in the discussion. "What makes you feel this way?" "What makes Hamlet feel this way?" "How do you know how Hamlet feels anyway?" No one can predict the direction that such a discussion will take; but in all likelihood it will touch upon

[2] This way of approaching a work of literature was suggested to me by an essay by Benjamin DeMott, "Reading, Writing, Reality, Unreality . . . ," in *Supergrow* (New York, 1969), pp. 146-49.

the more traditional academic questions. Whatever relationship the students discover between themselves and Hamlet can be connected to the way Shakespeare presents Hamlet—to the way the plot unfolds, to the parallel with Laertes, to Hamlet's enigmatic remarks, to the way Shakespeare uses the soliloquy to get at Hamlet's inner voice, to the family tensions.

III

The middle.

From the teacher's point of view the middle of the play can be described as a series of classic problems—"Does Hamlet really suspect the ghost or is he just rationalizing?" "Is he ever really mad?" "Why does he turn on Ophelia?" "Why doesn't he kill the king immediately?" "What really happens during the play scene?" "Is Hamlet's expressed reason for not killing Claudius at his prayers a rationalization?" "Why does he disobey the ghost by attacking his mother?" To these problems there are classic but incompatible solutions; but it is not the business of the teacher to turn exciting drama into academic exercises.

The question of Hamlet's delay is at the center of these problems. It is a fascinating question; but it is important not to let it get out of hand. The very fact that the evidence is so ambiguous, that Shakespeare has left so many loose ends, that experienced critics cannot agree on what Hamlet's conduct actually is, to say nothing of what it should be, leads one to suspect that we have not yet touched the heart of the matter. As C. S. Lewis says, by way of analogy, "If two men who have both been talking to the same woman agree in proclaiming her conversation delightful, though one praises it for its ingenuous innocence and the other for its clever sophistication, I should be inclined to conclude that her conversation had played very little part in the pleasure of either. I should suspect that the lady was nice to look at."[3]

In dealing with the delay we must ask ourselves, "What is at stake here?" "Why all the fuss?" I like to clear the ground for discussion by asking the students to read two essays on the subject, chapters III and IV of Ernest Jones's *Hamlet and Oedipus* and C. S. Lewis's "*Hamlet:* The Prince or the Poem," which have been conveniently brought together (slightly abridged) in Laurence Lerner's *Shakespeare's Tragedies.*[4] It is by no means necessary to read these essays in order to get at the issues, but it saves time, especially since Lewis gives a convenient (and brilliant) account of the different schools of thought on the subject. And indeed, both essays raise profound questions not only about the central problem of Hamlet's delay, but about the nature of all literary experience.

Both arguments are subtle and complex and it is necessary to spend some class time simply going over them, disposing of such red herrings as "How could Shakespeare give Hamlet an Oedipus complex before Freud discovered it?" or "How can Jones speak of Hamlet's childhood when Hamlet didn't even have one?"

The real issue between Jones and Lewis is the question of motivation. Jones believes that earlier critics were correct in fixing on this as the central problem of the play, but that they failed to solve it. His own solution is certainly

[3] "*Hamlet:* The Prince or the Poem," p. 69.

[4] See note 1. Jones's study of *Hamlet* first appeared in the *American Journal of Psychology* in 1910 and has been reprinted several times in different versions. (See Lerner's introduction, p. 47.) The version in *Shakespeare's Tragedies* is entitled "Hamlet Psychoanalysed."

open to question, as modern psychologists no longer take much stock in the Oedipus complex, yet his contention that the play owes its mysterious appeal to the fact that "the hero's conflict finds its echo in a similar inner conflict in the mind of the hearer" remains persuasive.[5]

Lewis, on the other hand, does not hold to this or that theory of motivation but argues that the whole question of motives is beside the point. He bases his case partly on the fact that critics have never been able to agree on the motives, and partly on his own experience of the play.

The job in the classroom is to test these two views against *our* experience of the play. "I am trying," says Lewis, "to recall attention to the things a child or a peasant notices,"[6] and we may ask ourselves, "What do we respond to in reading or seeing the play?" "Is it the emotional tension generated by Hamlet's mysterious inner conflict, or is it the spiritual region which he describes and makes real for us, regardless of how he entered it?"

There are any number of ways of getting at this, but my own bias leads me to ask, "Why does Hamlet ask so many questions?"[7]

> What a piece of work is a man! . . . And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?
>
> To be or not to be, that is the question.
>
> Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?
>
> What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth?
>
> What is a man if his chief good and market of his time be but to sleep and feed?

If there is an opportunity I like to ask the students specifically about their responses to the "To be or not to be" soliloquy. "How often have you heard this?" "What do you usually think of when you hear it?" "Why is it so famous?" "Does it express any of your own feelings?" "Is it true that conscience doth make cowards of us all?"

One can pursue this line with all Hamlet's questions, but I prefer to dwell on "To be or not to be" for the simple reason that it is so famous, and this enables us to ask about the context. "Does this speech mean one thing out of context and another thing in context?" "Do you respond differently when it is in context?" "Is this speech a key to the meaning of the whole play?" "If so, in what sense?" "If not, how does it fit into the play as a whole?" This helps us focus on the initial question, which, restated, is: "Why is Hamlet so profoundly troubled?"

In the end the problem turns out to be metaphysical. Whether we seek the answer in the tangled skein of motives and psychological relationships which underlie the action, or whether we seek it in the nature of Man himself, will depend on what we believe to be ultimately real. All Hamlet's ultimate concerns are, for Jones, merely the spin-off of a conflict so deep that the hero, the poet, and the audience are unaware of its source.[8]

> On the surface, of course, this does not appear so, for, by means of various psychological defensive mechanisms, the depression, doubt, despair, and other manifestations of the [sexual] conflict are transferred on to more tolerable and permissible topics, such as anxiety about

[5] "Hamlet Psychoanalysed," p. 49.

[6] "*Hamlet:* The Prince or the Poem," p. 77.

[7] I am indebted to Maynard Mack's illuminating remarks on Hamlet's questions in "The World of *Hamlet*," *The Yale Review*, XLI (1952), 504-506.

[8] "Hamlet Psychoanalysed," p. 49.

> worldly success or failure, about immortality and the salvation of the soul, philosophical considerations about the value of life, the future of the world, and so on.[9]

We would do well to ponder this momentous paragraph in the classroom. To reduce Hamlet's ultimate concerns in this way is, of course, to reduce our own. (It may take a little time to get this across, but it is worth doing.) Some will resist this, and some will delight in it.

IV

The end.

Whatever approach we use in dealing with the last part of the play must depend to some extent on what has gone before, on how the students have responded. I like to begin the discussion, however, by taking a few minutes or so to try to say what the play means to me personally. Whether this view turns out to be attractive or unattractive to the students, it gives them a springboard for discussing what the play means to them.

Most attempts to deal with this question are too theoretical, too far removed from our actual experience of the play, to satisfy: for indeed, it is hard, even when we have just turned from any particular work, to say what we have experienced. We must, nevertheless, make a stab at it.

In many works of literature we are invited to share or participate vicariously in an experience or experiences by identifying with one of the characters. This is, more or less, how the Freudians account for all literary appeal, and it certainly smacks of wish-fulfillment. We read the stories in popular magazines for this very reason, as aids to building fantasies. And yet there can be a more disinterested kind of identification which may at times even stretch us beyond the limits of our old selves.[10] Such, I believe, is the case with *Hamlet.* We are invited to identify with him. We see things through his eyes, and as we do so his problems become our problems, his questions our questions. At least such is the case with me. I do not have to avenge a father's murder; but like Hamlet I have discovered—and I believe we must all discover—that there is evil abroad in the world, and, in the words of Ernest Jones, I am troubled by such "tolerable and permissible topics" as "anxiety about worldly success and failure, about immortality and the salvation of the soul, philosophical considerations about the value of life, the future of the world, and so on." Are we offered any answers to these questions? I think we are, though implicitly, to be sure. Such questions are never answered otherwise; we cannot have absolute clarity without oversimplification.

In the graveyard scene in the last act Hamlet is faced with the greatest question of all, the question that subsumes all others: "In the light of our mortality does anything matter at all? Is anything important?" And yet, having just con-

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53. Jones's position is admittedly extreme, but I do not think it is unrepresentative of the main line of *Hamlet* criticism, which has always attempted to "reduce" Hamlet's preoccupation with ultimate questions to other, more immediate, concerns. I myself prefer to go along with C. S. Lewis and Maynard Mack (in the essays cited) in regarding the questions as central and the "immediate concerns," the "motives," as peripheral. The difference of opinion is not so much about *Hamlet* as it is about the nature of human existence.

[10] The question of "identification" is too complex to deal with here. My own views have been influenced by Robert Penn Warren's "Why Do We Read Fiction?" in *The Saturday Evening Post,* CCXXXV (20 October 1962).

fronted the most powerful and insistent symbols of man's mortality, he proceeds to leap into Ophelia's grave with this telling cry on his lips: "This is I, Hamlet the Dane." Surely he has found himself. Surely something matters very much indeed, though I hesitate to say what that something is. It is his love for Ophelia, to be sure; but I believe that it is somehow greater than this. It is an affirmation, in the face of death, of how precious life is.

A more pervasive answer lies in the change which we may observe in Hamlet after his return.[11] He does not, to be sure, come back answer in hand; but he does come back with a different outlook. He has in some way come to terms with his world. His mood is one of acceptance. We cannot imagine him still dressed as Ophelia describes him in II.i,

> No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
> Ungart'red, and down-gyvéd 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 looséd out of hell
> To speak of horrors.

His mood in describing his adventure to Horatio is anything but morbid. He is able to size up his situation at a glance. His purgative apology to Laertes and his speeches on providence (all in V.ii) provide a striking contrast to his earlier soliloquies.

It is interesting to speculate about this change, for unless we are willing to attribute it to the fresh sea air, it is perhaps the greatest mystery of all. Next to it the mystery of Hamlet's delay seems trivial. Why does Shakespeare show us Hamlet changed but not Hamlet changing. To spell things out too clearly, as we know, may trivialize them. *Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner.* We do not know why Iago is so bent on destroying those around him. We do not know why Judas betrayed Christ. The motives, the thirty pieces of silver, are woefully inadequate. Evil is not to be explained away psychologically. Nor, perhaps, is good; for I take Hamlet's change to be a great good. How does one come to terms with a world infected, like our own, with sin, with murder and adultery, with compromise, with death itself? Could Shakespeare have shown us if he had wished to? If he had, would we believe him?

If Hamlet's problems become ours, it follows that his solutions will become ours also. This, for me, is the beauty of the play. I do not know by what miracle Hamlet comes to terms with his world; but he does, and in so doing helps me to face my own uncertain future and even my certain death; and I like to think that these remarks, however controversial or unstable they may seem to some, may help others to respond similarly.

> Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come—if it be not to come, it will be now—if it be not now, yet it will come—the readiness is all.

I have repeatedly insisted that it is impossible to predict the direction that any classroom discussion will take. This is especially true when one begins with such general and comprehensive remarks as these, which could lead to the question of identification in our experience of literature, to philosophical considerations about the value of life, to the problem of living in and accepting (or not accepting) the world as it is, "and so on." I have also insisted that genuine dis-

[11] I am indebted to Maynard Mack on this point, pp. 520-23. (See note 7.)

cussion must begin with genuine questions, and this is why I believe it is important for us, as teachers, to try to express as concretely as possible, what *Hamlet*—or any other work of literature —really means to us. Having done so in the classroom, we are going to be mighty curious about the response of our students—"Do they think I'm crazy?" We will question them with enthusiasm. We will have created a situation in which their answers really count, in which, instead of struggling to outguess us, they can make a real contribution.