Who Said That—Hamlet or *Hamlet*?

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LIKE every play, *Hamlet* is a complex rhetorical structure, a series of verbal and visual cues which guide its audiences' responses. The function of these cues is to create a coherent dramatic experience in the minds of its audiences, for that is finally where all plays are enacted. At the same time, however, the speeches, gestures, and settings, all those things which serve as rhetorical cues, come together as dramatic phenomena in creating an apparently self-contained world on stage. Thus, about a single speech we may say either, "Here Hamlet reveals such and such about himself," or, "Here we learn to take this perspective rather than that one upon the action." The fact that we may say either or both points to an essential characteristic of dramatic art: the fact that in plays phenomena are used rhetorically. Because they are, we may demand of any play that it both *be* and *mean*. But difficulties arise when we assume that all speeches ought to be referable both to character and situation and to the play's address to its audience; or, failing that, when we assume that all speeches ought at least to be referable to character and situation. Here audiences of *Hamlet* have a distinct advantage over dramatic critics, because audiences may be content to observe the world on stage and respond to its rhetoric without worrying overmuch about the relationship between the two while critics must perforce attempt to understand both, with particular attention to their relationship. That is by no means an easy task at any level, even the simplest, for it is not always clear whether a particular speech serves both rhetorical and mimetic intentions. Or to put it another way, it is not always clear who the speaker of certain lines may be presumed to be.

Most exchanges in *Hamlet* offer no particular difficulty: the motives for speeches and the sources of speeches in the emotions and thoughts of the characters are roughly self-evident. Hamlet tells us that he thinks of himself as a "rogue and peasant slave," and then proceeds to tell us why. There are some sequences, however, in which the emotional and intellectual sources of speeches are not self-evident, and to understand these we are forced to hypothesize a continuous inner life for the characters of which we see only the phenomenal outgrowths. In sequences of this sort, we assume that the characters themselves are speaking out of some part of their beings that we do not see, and we take what they say as cues which guide us toward the configurations of their inner lives. In such speeches which are literally *non sequiturs* or somehow literally inappropriate in tone or quality, we get a sense of the reality of characters, and from these speeches we are led toward characterological analyses. Speeches of both sorts, the self-evident or the characterizing, may be treated indifferently under rhetorical or mimetic analyses, and what is said may be referred either to the address the play makes...
to its audience or to the world of the play itself. As a matter of critical prudence we ought to assume that all problematical speeches will fall into one or the other of these categories if we can only read them in the right way. But there are some speeches which may not be understood in either way, and which yield a false or confusing sense if we try to refer what is said to the inner life of the character who says it. These are speeches which function only as rhetorical cues. In speeches of this sort we understand the play itself to be speaking through its characters, employing their voices to advance its perspectives.¹

That distinction may be taken as roughly analogous to the distinction between the characters and the chorus of a Greek tragedy. The difference between the two voices, the voice of the play and the voice of its characters, is relatively clear when formal rhetorical distinctions are made between them, as they are in Richard III, or when the speaker of the words of the play is understood not to be simply himself, as in Act IV of King Lear. But difficulties arise when the two voices are intermingled, as they are in Hamlet’s exchanges with Polonius in the early part of Act II. There Hamlet provides us with both subjective and objective cues, cues to his own state and to the moral perspective of the play, in rhetorically similar forms. If we are not careful in distinguishing between them, we run the risk of overcomplicating the play by seeking out reasons in Hamlet for sentiments which issue not from his mind but from the mind of the play. At the very least we obscure the skill with which Shakespeare guides us through the play’s real complexities. I want to discuss one place where such a distinction needs to be made by applying to the familiar problem of Hamlet’s “fishmonger” speech, the assumption that dramatic characters ought to be discrete and consistent. I intend to suggest that that problem involves the tragic design of the play, and in particular the place of the death of Ophelia in that design.

Throughout Act II of the play Hamlet is bitterly, almost savagely ironical at Polonius’ cost. Perhaps his most bitter thrusts have to do with Ophelia:

\[\text{Ham.} \quad \text{For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion,—Have you a daughter?}
\]
\[\text{Pol.} \quad \text{I have, my lord.}
\]
\[\text{Ham.} \quad \text{Let her not walk i’ the sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive. Friend, look to’t.}
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(II. ii. 181-87)²

Polonius, of course, takes such lines to be further confirmation of his suspicion that Hamlet is mad for love of Ophelia, a “harping on my daughter” refracted through Hamlet’s madness. But we know that Polonius is wrong. From our perspective the emotional sources of those lines in Hamlet him-

¹ Maynard Mack discusses this problem with respect to King Lear: “King Lear” in Our Time (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965), p. 68. See also Nicholas Brooke’s discussion of “The Characters of Drama,” Critical Quarterly, VI (1964), 72-82, where the problem of voice is engaged in Ulysses’ “Degree” speech from Troilus and Cressida.

² I have used The Complete Plays and Poems, ed. William Allan Neilson and Charles Jarvis Hill (Boston, 1942).
self are relatively clear. The lines express an almost ontological revulsion against sex, especially procreation, in their linking of conception and the breeding of maggots in a dead dog. Behind that revulsion lie the facts of Hamlet’s situation and their emotional consequences. And we might trace the genesis of his attitude from the incestuous marriage accomplished with “most wicked speed,” through “frailty thy name is woman,” to the literally shattering revelation that it is all more horrible, more sordid than Hamlet could ever have imagined:

_Ghost._ O Hamlet, what a falling off was there!
From me, whose love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with that vow
I made to her in marriage, and to decline
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
To those of mine!
But virtue, as it never will be mov’d,
Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,
So lust, though to a radiant angel link’d,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage.

(I. v. 47-57)

Hamlet himself has provided the key to the sort of logic that might draw Ophelia into Gertrude’s orbit. We may take the doctrine of the root sin, which he asserts just before the Ghost appears, to have emotional as well as moral provenance: “The dram of evil/ Doth all the noble substance often dout/ To his own scandal” (I. iv. 36-38). Throughout the play we see Hamlet’s capacity for generalizing in just the way that this system of logic suggests, from the perception of a particular flaw to a sense of the corruption of the whole. Perhaps most to the point is the exchange with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act II that ends, “for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so” (I. ii. 255-57). And we can recognize how apt that psychological principle is for Hamlet by recalling how Hamlet loses sight of Ophelia in his vision of the sins of womankind at large in the Nunnery Scene. But all of the energy in this process of generalization does not lie on Hamlet’s side. Ophelia has contributed innocently to the possibility of associating herself with Gertrude, however momentary and alogical that association might be. For at a time when Hamlet most needs support, when the foundations of his being have been called into question and he desperately needs assurance that purity and innocence are still to be found, Ophelia, in obedience to her father, has suddenly and inexplicably denied Hamlet access to her and refused his letters.

I am not here urging a reading of the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia that would require us to believe that “get thee to a nunnery” really means “get thee to a brothel.” That reading seems to me overingenious and false to the play. There is no reason to believe that by Act III Hamlet has not sufficiently recovered his moral equilibrium so that he can distinguish morally between Gertrude and Ophelia. Indeed there is every reason in the Nun-

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nery Scene to believe that he has. For while he continues there to generalize from Ophelia to the weakness and corruption of Woman as She appears to him through the glass of Gertrude, directing toward Ophelia satirical descriptions of feminine traits we have not seen her display, his dominant intention throughout the scene is to save Ophelia from what he imagines to be her sexual destiny. But Hamlet’s relationship with Ophelia is another and larger question, and I am concerned here only with distinguishing those lines which are explicable with reference to Hamlet’s inner life from those which are not.

The “good kissing carrion” lines, expressing an ontological revulsion, may be supported generally by calling to mind Hamlet’s emotional state. In the same fashion, Hamlet’s mockery of Polonius, in so far as it suggests that he is a fool and a meddler, is supported by the knowledge we share with Hamlet of Polonius’ general character. But when Hamlet calls Polonius “fishmonger,” or when he later links him insistently with Jephth, his referent is not being in general or Polonius’ character in general; it is rather an act of some sort. If we assume that Hamlet the character speaks these lines and if we are called upon to explain what he means and why he says these things, we will need to do so by establishing that Hamlet has knowledge of an act that would lead him to call Polonius a procurer. We may, of course, take Polonius’ reading of “fishmonger”: “Yet he knew me not at first; he said I was a fishmonger. He is far gone, far gone” (II. ii. 189-91). Or we may take Coleridge’s understanding of the term: “‘Fishmonger’; i.e. you are sent to fish out the secret.” But there is no mistaking the accusation in Hamlet’s use of the story of Jephtha:

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There are some puzzles in this exchange, especially in the last line where the

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4 That reading of the scene is fully developed in Harold Jenkins, “Hamlet and Ophelia,” Proceedings of the British Academy, XLIX (1963), 140-43. See also, H. D. F. Kitto, Form and Meaning in Drama (New York, 1960), pp. 275-82. I want to acknowledge here my debt to Professor Kitto’s judicious reading of the play.

meaning of “the first row of the pious chanson” is not wholly clear. Still the import of the passage is clear. Hamlet associates, and insistently, Polonius with Jephtha, judge of Israel, who unwittingly sacrificed his only daughter for victory in battle. Polonius apparently does not know the old ballad, but he will humor Hamlet. If Hamlet wants to call him Jephtha, he will grant that he has a daughter whom he loves passing well. But Hamlet will not allow that. He goes on to develop “nay, that follows not” with reference to the lines that follow in the ballad, but that phrase seems to function immediately as a logical contradiction: it does not follow from having a daughter that Polonius loves her. Why? The ballad of Jephtha suggests that it is because he, like Jephtha, is willing to sacrifice her.

On two occasions, then, Hamlet accuses Polonius of misusing his daughter. In the Fishmonger Scene he calls him a procurer; here in the Players' Scene he accuses him more generally but more insistently of sacrificing her. What does Hamlet know or suspect that leads him to make these accusations? The Nunnery Scene, in which Polonius does finally “loose” his daughter to Hamlet, does not come until Act III. When these accusations are made Hamlet has not yet been on stage with Ophelia, and all that we know is that he has come in some disarray to her chamber, where no words passed between them. Further, the first accusation comes in the first lines of Hamlet's first meeting with Polonius in the play, and there is no mention of Ophelia between Polonius' exit at line 222 and his re-entrance at line 398, when Hamlet accuses him for the second time.

All that Hamlet may be said to know in Act II, scene two is that Ophelia has refused to see him or to receive letters from him (II.i.108-10). We may, if we like, invent a chain of reasoning from that fact to Hamlet's first accusation. Hamlet asks Ophelia why she will not see him. Ophelia replies that her father has forbidden her to see him and warned her that his only aim is to seduce her (I.iii.126-31). Hamlet knows that this is not his aim, and knows further that he has done nothing to warrant such suspicions. He concludes that in fact Polonius has no such suspicions. Polonius is really using his daughter in another game, trying to extort marriage from Hamlet as a condition of access to her:

Pol. Do you know me, my lord?
Ham. Excellent well, you are a fishmonger.

(II. ii. 173-74)

That is not very convincing, but then we have no more warrant for inventions of that sort than we have for speculations about Hamlet's boyhood. When Hamlet is off stage he exists only when Shakespeare tells us that he does. If Shakespeare had intended us to understand Hamlet's accusations in light of some such process, he was perfectly capable of indicating it, as he indicated the emotional logic which leads to Hamlet's association of Ophelia and Gertrude. The fact is that he did not.

7 The story is told in Judges II. A version of the ballad to which Hamlet refers to reproduced in the Variorum, p. 174.
It was this problem, in part, coupled with an assumption that dramatic characters ought to be discrete and consistent, which led to Dover Wilson's reconstruction of a "lost" stage direction at line 159 or 161—a stage direction which would have Hamlet enter at that point, overhear Polonius' scheme to "loose" his daughter to him, and then re-enter at line 167, where all the texts agree that he does enter. This double entry would solve the problem and permit us to understand the lines as spoken by Hamlet himself. For as Wilson admits, the assumption that Hamlet is a discrete character requires that he know about Polonius' scheme: "Hamlet must have overheard what Polonius said to the King. The context allows no escape from this conclusion inasmuch as what Hamlet says to Polonius is only intelligible if the conclusion be allowed." The fact that there is no solid evidence for an inner stage at the Globe or any other Elizabethan theater need not tell against this conclusion, since there is no conclusive evidence against one. But the fact that there is no textual support surely ought to tell against it. And the fact that Wilson's suggestion trivializes the Nunnery Scene by making it merely a show put on by Hamlet for the benefit of Claudius and Polonius ought to tell against it even more.

Wilson's suggestion has not gained wide support for a variety of reasons. If we reject it, however, we would seem to have reasoned ourselves into a corner from which there is no escape without either giving up our reading of the "fishmonger" and Jephtha exchanges or abandoning our notion that Hamlet is consistently a discrete character. Since I am convinced of the accuracy of those readings, I would like to argue that nothing is lost, and a good deal is gained, if we understand Hamlet to be speaking here out of the mind of the play at large rather than his own mind. What I would suggest is that Hamlet might most fruitfully be seen here as an element in the rhetorical structure of the play.

Let me make clear that I am not urging a literary reading of Hamlet that would make it a great dramatic poem—with the emphasis on poem. I do not think that the problem is to be solved by appeals to patterns of imagery, mood, or anything of the sort. Indeed it is an exclusively literary reading that created the problem in the first place, for whatever difficulties the "fishmonger" or Jephtha exchanges may offer in the study, they do not create any special difficulty on stage. There we accept Hamlet's accusations without question. But neither am I arguing for the sort of loose acceptance of Hamlet as merely a play—an acceptance that would permit us, say, to...

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8 Wilson, p. 106. The italics are Dover Wilson's. Cf. Salvador de Madariaga: "True, Hamlet has overheard that Ophelia is to be used as a decoy" (On Hamlet [New York, 1964], p. 61).
9 John Gielgud, whose production of Hamlet introduced Dover Wilson's theory to the stage, finally concluded that the earlier entrance was unsatisfactory: "I was continually struck with the feeling when playing this scene that if Shakespeare had meant Hamlet to overhear something, he would surely have made it clear in the text. The play has much spying in it . . . but in each case it is Hamlet who is spied upon. I think it unlikely that Shakespeare would have weakened this characteristic feature of his play by having Hamlet spy upon, or overhear, any other character before the important point of his enemies' spying upon him had been definitely registered with the audience" (R. Gilder, John Gielgud's Hamlet [New York, 1937], pp. 51-52; quoted in Bernard Grebanier, The Heart of Hamlet [New York, 1960], p. 16). See also, Kiito, p. 275; Jenkins, pp. 145-46.
answer the question of Hamlet's delay by saying that Shakespeare had still four acts to go when Hamlet learned of the murder. It is a play, and thus fully intelligible only on stage, but it is also a consummate piece of narrative art and thus neither loosely structured nor sloppily imagined.

Our difficulty with Hamlet's accusation of Polonius comes, I think, out of a misconception of the extent to which realistic standards of probability ought to be positively evident in a play. We have been assuming that all of the conditions of action in Hamlet ought to correspond to the conditions of action in life itself, that Hamlet ought to be verisimilar. Thus, while we might rule out-of-bounds Granville-Barker's explanation of the Fishmonger Scene as an act of clairvoyance on Hamlet's part, we would recognize that it shares our assumption that some explanation consonant with life itself ought to be made. That assumption arises quite naturally out of the rhetorical effectiveness of the theater. And while it does not seriously disable our reading of modern plays—whose theatricality is clearly evident to us—I suspect that it does serve to condition our reading of earlier plays. Since this view of drama has so often been related to Aristotle's Poetics, perhaps we might see the issue more clearly if we considered the place of probability in the Poetics and in some of the works Aristotle drew upon for examples.

The terms "probability and necessity" appear throughout the Poetics as characteristics of a properly developed dramatic action. A tragedy must be long enough "that the sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad" (VII). And what is true of action is true of character: "As in the structure of the plot, so too in the portraiture of character, the poet should always aim at the necessary or the probable. Thus a person of a given sort should always act in a given way, by the rule of necessity or probable sequence" (XV). That last clause might seem to settle the question of Hamlet, at least as far as Aristotle is concerned. But the issue of probability in the Poetics is not quite that simple. While Aristotle argued that "it is the function of the poet to relate . . . what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity" (IX), he did not argue that rational standards of probability ought to be applied throughout the whole reach of the plot, but rather that the plot should not be in any material part improbable. At the limits, probability appears as essentially a negative standard in the Poetics, and in some cases Aristotle would see it as posing merely a rhetorical problem; thus he would have the poet prefer "probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities" (XXII). And finally, in extreme cases, he might waive rational standards altogether in favor of another sort of logic: "the element of the irrational, and, similarly, depravity of character, may justly be censured when there is no inner necessity for introducing them."

10 "But such apathy of the will only leaves the mind more active, nakedly sensitive, preternaturally clear, . . . So it is that, dull and muddily-mettled as he feels, Hamlet is startlingly quick to suspect Polonius and his scheme . . ." (Harley Granville-Barker, Prefaces to Shakespeare, I [Princeton, 1946], 71).

11 I have used S. H. Butcher's translation, and quotations in the text will be followed by the chapter number in Butcher's edition, Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, 4th ed. (New York, 1951).
Such is the irrational element in the introduction of Aegeus by Euripides . . .” (XXV). In thus granting that irrational events might be justified by poetic necessity, Aristotle indicated that the rational standards of probability and necessity offer merely a secondary system of logic. But if the logic of plot does not lie in probability realistically conceived, where does it lie? To take Aristotle’s extreme case, what would lead a poet to “need” an impossibility, and thus oblige him to persuade an audience of what could not possibly be true?

In discussing anagnorisis and peripeteia, Aristotle observed that “these last should follow from the internal structure of the plot, so that what follows should be the necessary or probable results of the preceding action” (X). Almost immediately thereafter he pointed to the scene in Sophocles’ Oedipus involving the messenger from Corinth as an instance of a peripeteia effected in a probable way. What Aristotle meant is that the scene proceeds probably once the messenger has come on stage. And that is true. But in what sense may we understand his entrance itself to be probable? I realize that in asking that question I am risking the sort of dogmatically rationalistic trap that critics like Rymer fell into, but I will take that risk for a moment merely to sharpen my position. For the answer is clearly that the messenger’s entrance lies outside the bounds of probability. If we consider it in terms of either internal or external standards of probability, if we consider whether it follows from what has happened thus far in the plot or whether it is in accord with the way that things may be expected to happen in life itself, we cannot estimate whether it is probable or not. Unlike Tiresias and the old shepherd, the messenger is not called into the plot by anything that has happened up to the moment of his entrance. His reasons for coming lie all at Corinth. Those reasons make it probable enough that he would come at some time, but since they lie outside the play we may imagine him coming at any time in no less probable a way. The fact that he arrives at this moment—in answer to Oedipus’ fears about the oracle he had received at Pytho and in apparent confirmation of Jocasta’s assurances that oracles need not be believed—is outside the limits of probability. If we were to talk about it in those terms at all we should have to call it a coincidence, that point at which two unrelated systems of logic come meaningfully together.

That is surely the wrong way to go about it, for we are now in the paradoxical position of saying that what makes the messenger’s entrance questionably probable—and thus “wrong”—is precisely what makes it artistically right. Our error lies in asking that it be probable in a positive sense at all. What Sophocles demands is that it be germane and that it advance the action. Jocasta has been assuring Oedipus that oracles need not be believed—is outside the limits of probability. If we were to talk about it in those terms at all we should have to call it a coincidence, that point at which two unrelated systems of logic come meaningfully together.

12 Cf., “In general, the impossible must be justified by reference to artistic requirements, or to the higher reality, or to received opinion” and “if he describes the impossible, he is guilty of an error, but the error may be justified if the end of the art is thereby attained. . . .” Aristotle addressed himself throughout this chapter to the critic who might be tempted to apply rational standards in a mindless way.
dead. But as he goes cheerfully and helpfully on, he shows Jocasta to be disastrously wrong by revealing that Polybus was not Oedipus' father at all. And as he does, we recognize that his entrance reflects necessity rather than probability—not the rational necessity of cause and effect but the dramatic necessity of the developing action of the play, according to which Jocasta's unwise counsel must be answered. The negative logic of realistic probability is thus subsidiary to the philosophical logic of action, and within that system of logic questions of probability of another sort might be put: "Is it probable that the Jocasta who denies that life is ordered will find to her cost that it is?" The answer to that question for a thousand Jocastas in life might be no; but to that question the whole of Oedipus Tyrannos answers yes.

It is in that latter sense that we may best understand probability as a positive standard for Aristotle—indeed the positive standard. History may be more realistic than poetry in one sense, but poetry is more accurate, more philosophical than history in another. For poetry reveals the relationships among events, renders discrete events intelligible in a single and coherent action. It does this through its design, its plot in the largest sense, which must develop according to necessity or probability if it is to be coherent. The principal logic of a play thus lies in its design, and the apparently separable logics of its parts, mythos, character, etc., are ultimately functions of the logic of its design. We recognize that relationship implicitly when we grant certain conventions to the drama—the confidant of French classical tragedy who listens with rapt attention to information we may be sure she already has, or the Elizabethan villain or hero who unburdens himself in soliloquies and asides.

Critical difficulties arise when no formal or conventional distinction is made between speeches which arise out of the design of the play and those which proceed from the characters themselves. But in light of these and similar dramatic conventions it may be more fruitful to regard Hamlet's accusing Polonius of acts of which Hamlet has no knowledge as primarily functional rather than expressive, as accusations which proceed from the mind of the play rather than the mind of Hamlet—even though the accusations are not formally distinct. Both accusations serve the purposes of the action, the connective tissue of the play, by marking out perspectives the audience must assume if the action is to be perceived clearly through the events. The "fishmonger" passage draws an explicit conclusion about Polonius' attitude toward Ophelia in the preceding scene and about his intended uses of her. The Jephtha exchange reinforces that conclusion, and, further, in its adumbration of Ophelia's death fixes the moment when she begins to move toward death as the moment Polonius begins to use her for his own advantage.  

Still, recognizing the theoretical propriety of Shakespeare's use of Hamlet as an instrument of the play's purposes is no help unless we go on to ask

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13 We might see the association of Ophelia with Jephtha's daughter taken up again just before her death in those pathetic songs of "lament" for her virginity. Certainly, those songs do not support ingenious arguments such as Madariaga's about a carnal relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. I was pleased to discover that my reading of the songs had been anticipated by Jenkins, pp. 150-51.
why he should have used him in so curious a way. Two questions in particular remain: How does Shakespeare make the inconsistency of Hamlet's accusations credible? And why does he not either present Hamlet with the information which would make them consistent, or, failing that, drop them altogether? 14

I would suggest that we are not bothered by Hamlet's accusations in the theater because when they are made they seem to us to be well founded. As a general rule, I think that we are led to wonder about the sources of statements within a character or within the range of his experiences only when those statements do not accord with the view we have been given of their subject, or when our perspective on the subject has not been adequately developed. From the beginning of the play we have been led to think of Polonius as an inveterate schemer, more particularly as a man not averse to directing his schemes at his son or to using his daughter in his schemes. Some sixty lines before Hamlet calls him a "fishmonger," we see Polonius reading Hamlet's letter to Claudius and Gertrude. Thirty lines before Hamlet's entrance, we see Polonius as a self-serving liar. Five lines before the entrance, he is talking about loosing his daughter to Hamlet, and the barnyard associations of that word "loose" are fixed by his vow to "keep a farm and carters" if Hamlet does not reveal his love. We would not, perhaps, think of calling Polonius precisely a procurer—nor does Hamlet call him precisely that. But within the bitter extravagance of Hamlet's language, the term "fishmonger" contains a moral judgment we are prepared to accept. That judgment is made more precise in the Jephtha scene—where the language is more temperate—in Hamlet's insistence that Polonius, like Jephtha, is sacrificing his daughter.

Indeed, that is a judgment we must accept if the play is to be morally and dramatically intelligible. Hamlet is prodigal with death. Eight characters are killed; two families are wiped out. Unless we can see all of those deaths issuing from a tragic economy, we ought to conclude that it is too prodigal, that it courts deaths for thrills or pathos. That is, of course, not the case. Gertrude is corrupted and destroyed by Claudius. Laertes is twisted by Claudius into a hypocritical would-be murderer and destroyed by their joint scheme. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are set to spy on Hamlet and later to be unwitting instruments of Claudius' plan to have Hamlet killed, and they are destroyed by that scheme. Their deaths are not on Hamlet's conscience because "they did make love to this employment" (V. ii. 57). Polonius too made love to his employment and died in its course. Only Ophelia's death lies outside this astringent system of retribution, her only error a too faithful obedience to her father. But her father is not merely Claudius' chief counselor, as close to Claudius as the head is to the

14 Granville-Barker suggests that the "fishmonger" exchange was "originally written... to follow close upon the Ophelia-baited trap and Hamlet's discovery of it"—that is, after III. i. as it does in the first quarto. He goes on to explain how the passage made its way to Act II in the second quarto and the Folio: "But why, then, did Shakespeare not omit the lines when, addressed to a still guiltless Polonius, they had lost their primary point? They are effective lines in themselves; he would be loath to part with them. And he found, besides, I suggest, that the whole passage could be interpreted as sardonically oracular praise of the Polonius who had so prudently withdrawn his daughter from the dangers of a corrupt world..." (Prefaces, p. 165).
heart, serving him as the hand does the mouth (I. ii. 47-49); he is also a member of Claudius' generation, and like all members of that generation in Hamlet he is morally corrupt. We must be enabled to understand when Ophelia dies with those pathetic snatches of song on her lips that Polonius is to blame—not merely because his death is the occasion for hers, but because he has twisted her into an unwitting instrument to be used against Hamlet, just as Claudius twists Laertes and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. For if we do not understand that Polonius is guilty of a design which involves (if it does not intend) her destruction, we see her death as merely a pathetic side light to the tragedy of Hamlet rather than a tragically logical consequence of the evil and moral grossness which characterize the Danish Court.

By linking Polonius with Jephtha, Shakespeare, through the voice of Hamlet, indicated Polonius' responsibility in the only way available to the play. For if Polonius is responsible, it is not in a way chargeable at law or demonstrable in a plot. Ophelia's employment is trivial compared to that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. And her death does not follow as a consequence of her employment, as theirs does, but rather as a consequence of her tragically proper love for her father. According to the astringent morality of Hamlet, Polonius is responsible simply in being the sort of father he is, the cynical courtier who sets a spy upon his son, the eager servant of Claudius who draws the innocent love of his daughter into a courtly intrigue that leads directly to his death and ultimately to hers. Similarly, Ophelia's own measure of responsibility, callously weighed, lies in her being the innocently obedient and loving daughter she is. Both, "between the pass and fell incensed points of mighty opposites," are tragically constrained and destroyed. Hamlet is the agent of both their deaths, directly of Polonius', indirectly of Ophelia's, and as such he too must share in the assignment of blame, as he acknowledges. But both are put in the way of death by Polonius' machinations. Thus Polonius' responsibility, that judgment of the balance between character and circumstances, is solely a matter of moral perspective in a way that Claudius' responsibility for the death of old Hamlet or for the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is not.

Throughout the play Hamlet is the voice of that perspective. It is only through his eyes that we recognize the moral grossness of the Danish Court and discover all the forms that equivocation takes. And while we sometimes ought not to trust Hamlet's moral vision, it is Hamlet who tells us that, and corrects his vision. In failing to understand Hamlet's place in the design of Hamlet, modern productions of the play have subtly undermined its moral and dramatic coherence, for example, by casting Claudius as an attractive man. They thereby naturalize Gertrude's choice, but they also fix the audience's perspective at a remove from Hamlet's and open wide the gates to psychologizing analyses. But if we cannot trust Hamlet's perspective, there is no perspective in the play that we can trust. And while the modern theater has opted for structural ambiguity, Shakespeare's theater did not.

15 So that "providential" speeches in V. ii. "correct" those which despair of the human condition earlier in the play.
Still it might fairly be asked why Shakespeare should not have given Hamlet the knowledge necessary to support his accusations. I would suggest that if he had we would be led to see Hamlet's actions with respect to Ophelia in just the wrong way. We would see the Nunnery Scene then as the sort of show Dover Wilson would have it be, a show for the benefit of Polonius and Claudius. For all its momentary excitement, that show would be dramatically pointless. But more, it would introduce confusion precisely where the play can least afford it—in its moral perspective. For if the scene were to be played as a show, with all Hamlet's motives intact and limited, how should we understand those lines about beauty being disjoined from the good, or the general moral loathing that Hamlet expresses? It is precisely because these things said to Ophelia have no limited cause, either in the immediate situation or in Ophelia herself, that we are led to refer them to Hamlet's emotional state and to recognize the extent to which his own moral vision has been corrupted. But we would not do that, I think, if there were alternative explanations to which we could cling, if we could say with Dover Wilson that "everything [after III. i. 102] is intended for the ears of Claudius and Polonius,"16 or even if we attempted to sort out those lines Hamlet intends for them from those Shakespeare intended for Hamlet. I suspect that such gymnastics are unlikely in the theater.

Shakespeare proceeded carefully in the play by giving us objective means for judging Hamlet's moral vision, and nowhere more carefully than in having Hamlet's most searing statements about the loss of innocence said to or about Ophelia. It is Ophelia who enables us to measure Hamlet's excesses, just as it is Claudius and Gertrude and Polonius who enable us to understand his precision. Through the use of these characters as dramatic correlatives, Shakespeare was able to create in Hamlet a character at once complex and ambiguous. Indeed he has done that so successfully that we sometimes lose sight of the fact that Hamlet is not an ethical or psychological enigma; he is rather a rhetorical component in the play Hamlet, and thus he may be used as a voice in service of its rhetorical purposes. If we want to complain at all about Shakespeare's use of Hamlet as the moral voice of the play, perhaps we ought to complain that his voice does not speak loudly or insistently enough to us. But then, that is our fault. Hamlet has been around for a long time.

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16 Wilson, p. 131.