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Friendship in *Hamlet*

Robert C. Evans

In 1958, Harry Levin reported that in the previous sixty years a new item of *Hamlet* commentary had been issued every twelve days.¹ By now the rate must be something closer to a new item every twelve hours or minutes. My chief justification for adding one more straw to the camel’s back rests on the surprising fact that friendship—a crucial concern of classical and Renaissance thinkers—has not received much explicit or systematic attention as an important and pervasive theme in Shakespeare’s great tragedy. Inevitably the topic is raised—usually in passing—in discussions of Horatio and of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but it has not received much sustained exploration.² My immediate purpose is merely to show that the theme of friendship does run throughout the entire play—that it appears even where it might seem present only slightly. While trying to establish its general importance, I also hope to focus on a few scenes and characters in some detail, as well as to discuss in broader terms how Shakespeare’s concerns with friendship help enrich his tragedy.³

Hamlet seems at least in part a play that is very much about friendship: a play about finding, making, losing, and keeping friends. It explores, from numerous perspectives, one of the most significant and inherently complex of human relationships—a relationship particularly fascinating to Renaissance thinkers, for many of whom friendship (in the words of Clifford Davidson) “is not only a radiant ideal but is also an expression of a most necessary kind of good will that makes society cohesive.”⁴

I

The play’s concern with friendship is sounded at once: “Who’s there?” (1.1.1).⁵ Quite literally, Barnardo wants to know not only who is there (whether the unseen figure is a friend or foe) but also why he is there (whether his intentions are friendly). This opening epitomizes the entire play and particularly Hamlet’s position at court: surrounded by darkness, a lone figure needs to recognize his friends. Most humans can relate to this

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need, and the play probably exercises such strong psychological appeal partly because we all, to one degree or another, resemble Barnardo and Hamlet in wanting to know whether the persons nearest us are persons we can trust. Determining one's friends is only one dilemma the tragedy portrays and confronts, but it seems to be a dilemma immediately and forcefully relevant to most human lives.6

Barnardo's nervous question is answered by an apparently unfriendly and certainly formal challenge (1.1.2), which in turn elicits an equally formal, impersonal response that is also a pledge of public allegiance or political friendship (1.1.3). Only when Francisco uses a familiar personal name (1.1.4) do tensions relax: we realize, precisely when they do, that these men already know each other and perhaps are even friends. This intuition seems confirmed when Barnardo solicitously urges Francisco to get to bed (and thus to peace, quiet, and comfort). Like so much else in this play, however, these apparently caring words can also be interpreted in another way: as a calculated maneuver to dismiss Francisco before the ghost appears. Neither reading need (or perhaps can) have priority: here as elsewhere in Hamlet, exchanges even between apparent friends can have multiple significations, and just as it is sometimes hard but important to interpret the precise nuances of our own friends' speech, so it is usually difficult in Hamlet for either us or the characters to make absolutely unambiguous sense of anything said, not said, or implied. The play fascinates partly for this reason.

Further evidence of friendship between Barnardo and Francisco comes in the latter's response to the suggestion that he head to bed (1.1.8–9). Francisco's immediate willingness (once he knows he is speaking to a friend) to share not only his physical but especially his deepest emotional feelings seems significant in a play whose central character finds it so difficult to share true feelings openly, except in soliloquy. Francisco is lonely, cold, and sick at heart, but he at least has a comrade to whom he can confess these thoughts. Hamlet, at first, has no one with whom he can openly speak except the crowd of strangers who sit or stand off-stage.

As Francisco leaves, Barnardo bids him a solicitous "good night" (1.1.12) and asks him to urge his "rivals" to "make haste" (1.1.13–14). Here, with nice irony, the word "rivals" means not "foes" but "partners"—just one of many subtle touches of paradox in an immensely paradoxical play. Having briefly provided friendly relief to Francisco, Barnardo now seeks such comfort
himself: throughout the play, the fear and danger of being left literally or metaphorically alone is stressed. In this work, many characters will eventually find themselves suddenly isolated.

Hearing Horatio and Marcellus approaching, Francisco now repeats Barnardo’s earlier demand: “Who is there?” (1.1.15). It hardly seems an accident that Horatio’s very first words are “Friends to this ground” (1.1.16). Horatio will later prove one of the play’s best examples of friendship; his first word thus quite literally reflects his essential character. At this point, though, he uses the word “friends” more in a political than personal sense, thereby helping to remind us how the connotations of the term have evolved since the Renaissance. Today the word mainly refers to an inherently personal relation. In Shakespeare’s time, however, it often carried associations of political or social allegiance. If a person was politically important, his “friends” were often his allies or followers, his dependents or entourage, his loyal citizens. Horatio, however, is a “friend to this ground” in more ways than one. Throughout the play, he seeks not only what is best for Hamlet as a person and prince but also what is best for Denmark. His opening words help make it seem entirely appropriate that at the very end of the play he becomes the designated spokesman not only for Hamlet but also for the entire Danish nation.

Marcellus echoes and endorses his friend’s explanation by announcing that he and Horatio are “liegemen to the Dane” (1.1.16), although it seems subtly fitting that he (not Horatio) is the first to mention Claudius, the great rival of Horatio’s future friend, the prince. It seems appropriate, too, that Marcellus uses a word (“liegemen”) whose connotations are subtly formal and legalistic rather than intensely personal, for by the end of the play Claudius, although surrounded by friends in a superficial, political sense, will finally be abandoned by them all. Both Hamlet and Claudius lose friends during the course of the play, but in the final analysis Claudius is by far the more lonely and isolated figure.

The mutual solicitude all four men show in this opening scene helps establish an air of comradeship and community that not only helps counteract the very opening emphasis on isolation and fear but that also helps prepare, by contrast, for our later sense of Hamlet’s isolation at court. Yet the small community no sooner forms than it begins to disintegrate: Francisco is eager to be gone, and his first words to Horatio and Marcellus (1.1.17) are at once a greeting and farewell. Even as he leaves he is bid adieu
with conspicuously friendly words (1.1.18), while the heavy emphasis here on what seem to be first names also helps enhance the tone of friendship. Marcellus calls for "Barnardo," and Barnardo also seems already familiar with the man he addresses as "Horatio" (1.1.20–21). Horatio, in turn, adds to the friendly atmosphere by making a self-deprecating joke: to a question by Barnardo—"is Horatio there?"—he responds, "A piece of him," thereby telegraphing immediately his informality, his sense of humor, his tendency not to take either himself or situations too seriously, and also his ability to express personal discomfort without focusing excessive attention on himself (1.1.21–22). All these qualities would (and do) help make him an excellent friend, not only to these men but also, later, to Hamlet. Barnardo’s enthusiastic greeting of the visitors, moreover, expresses more than merely formal courtesy: obviously he is sincerely glad that his friends have now arrived.

Horatio’s first reference to the ghost as "this thing" (1.1.24) can be read in several complementary ways, all relevant to the friendship theme. The word “thing” already implies, perhaps, some slightly haughty skepticism, some gentle teasing and chiding. Horatio may already know Marcellus and Barnardo, but he is clearly not so close a friend that he is willing to take their mere testimony as absolute proof of the ghost’s existence. His skepticism implies his mental distance, but his slightly mocking tone also suggests, paradoxically, that he feels comfortable enough to tease them. His question, then, establishes him as an outsider to their present bond, but also as someone capable of bonding. By calling the ghost a “thing,” moreover, he suggests (unintentionally, perhaps) that it is the ultimate outsider, the ultimate “other”: non-human, alien, and incapable (almost by definition) of normal friendship.

For the moment, then, Horatio stands apart from Marcellus and Barnardo. Like many friendships, theirs is rooted in a shared experience—one Horatio knows only by report. Perhaps there is wounded rebuke in Marcellus’s comment that “Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,/ And will not let belief take hold of him,/ Touching this dreaded sight twice seen of us” (1.1.26–28). It is as if Horatio even doubted their rationality, perversely rejecting their testimony even though they have twice witnessed the ghost together. Thus the ghost plays even here the double role it fulfills throughout the play: it simultaneously unites and divides. It binds Marcellus and Barnardo but separates them from Horatio, just as it will later bond Horatio and Hamlet while separating
them from the court at large. The ghost proves a potent catalyst of both friendship and enmity.

Barnardo’s invitation to sit (1.1.33) partly signals a relaxation of tension, an opportunity for physical comfort and psychological bonding. The guards’ willingness to tell Horatio their story already implies their trust and respect (as does his willingness to listen). Even as the trio relax, however, an undercurrent of probably gentle enmity pervades Barnardo’s request that Horatio should “let us once again assail your ears,/ That are so fortified against our story,/ What we have two nights seen” (1.1.34–36). Barnardo implies that Horatio willfully rejects reliable testimony. Horatio responds with patient diplomacy: “Well, sit we down. And let us hear Barnardo speak of this” (1.1.36–37). His willingness to listen once more to a story he knows but doubts shows that his friends are more important than his comfort, time, or sleep; by merely listening, he affirms and repairs their slightly threatened bond.

Barnardo’s leisurely, painstaking opening itself presumes patient, well-disposed listeners, but his narrative soon crumbles when the “thing” appears. Here as elsewhere, the ghost intrudes on genuine exchange, shattering a previously defined community. Marcellus’s abrupt interruption of Barnardo (1.1.43) might normally seem rude, but here it signals both real friendship and narrow self-concern. There are, perhaps, touches of both triumphant sarcasm and genuine respect in Marcellus’s injunction, “Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio” (1.1.45), just as there seem both smug assurance and profound wonder when Barnardo asks, “Looks a not like the King? Mark it, Horatio” (1.1.46). The two friends are having both their worst fears and their personal veracity confirmed, and they cannot help feeling satisfied terror. Horatio, meanwhile, cements a new and deeper bond with them by confessing his own terror (1.1.47). Such ability to share so openly an emotion one might normally hide is often the sign or start of friendly relations.

When Barnardo and Marcellus urge Horatio to address the ghost, they acknowledge their fear, confess their own incapacity, and show respect for their educated friend. At the same time, Horatio’s prompt willingness to challenge the ghost shows that he deserves their respect; this is one of the bravest acts in the play—an act soon repeated by Hamlet himself, and therefore one that helps establish Horatio’s fitness as Hamlet’s future friend. Perhaps Horatio feels specially obliged to confront the ghost because he had previously doubted his companions’ word: his will-
ingness to speak helps him make amends by retracting his earlier skepticism. Likewise, his speech may also help alleviate his friends' fear: he dares, quite literally, to stand between them and "this thing" (1.1.24), whom he now addresses with the respectful, familiar "thee" and "thou" (1.1.49, 52). Such potentially friendly phrasing is balanced, though, by his implication that the "thing" is lawless ("What art thou that usurp 'st . . ." [1.1.49]), while his final words can be read either as an invocation of a shared ideal or as a threatening command: "By heaven, I charge thee speak!" (1.1.52). Horatio (like Hamlet later) cannot know whether the ghost is a friend or foe, and so he addresses it (to some degree) as both. In this sense the ghost symbolizes one of the play's most important issues: the difficulties of interpreting others' intentions and conduct. Horatio confronts a question we all, like Hamlet, repeatedly face: what exactly are the motives of this other being standing before me? Is this "other" a potential friend or not?

As so often happens in life, Horatio (like Hamlet later) must wait for an answer. The ghost stalks off. Marcellus thinks it "offended" (1.1.53)—a remark which may reflect either the ghost's sensitivity, Horatio's lack thereof, or both. Horatio responds with words perhaps motivated by fear, courage, desperation, wounded pride, apologetic humility, or all these feelings at once: "Speak, speak, speak, I charge thee speak!" (1.1.54). As elsewhere, such phrasing can be interpreted as a command and/or a plea. Although Barnardo cannot help teasing and chiding Horatio for his present fear and earlier skepticism (1.1.56–57), such mockery actually signals the beginnings of a deeper friendship among the astonished trio.

Horatio is now part of the fellowship of Barnardo and Marcellus because he has now shared the strange experience which earlier bound the other men together. In a sense, his experience is also ours, and, just as he now feels tied to the two guards in a way he didn't earlier, so do we. Here as so often, Horatio functions (in Bert States' clever phrase) as "our man at Elsinore"—as a surrogate member of the audience, whose reactions guide and mirror our own. We trust him almost as much as Hamlet does, and so do many others. Barnardo, for instance, no sooner chides Horatio than he earnestly seeks the latter's honest opinion (1.1.58), and Horatio, like a true friend, answers without equivocation, in effect confessing his earlier error as he moves from real skepticism to total belief (1.1.59–67).

As Horatio recollects old King Hamlet (whose ghost has ap-
apparently just appeared), he emphasizes how the deceased monarch had once "th’ambitious Norway combated" and how he once "smote the sledded Polacks on the ice" (1.1.64, 66). Here as throughout, references to political alliances and national warfare help reinforce the play’s parallel focus on private friendship and personal enmity. Indeed, because of their political roles, neither older nor young Hamlet was (or is) capable of enjoying truly private relationships. All their connections are tinged by politics—which is one reason why Horatio, who seems almost totally uninterested in courtly power or large affairs of state, will attract Hamlet so much. He seems to treat Hamlet less as a prince than as a person. Little wonder that Hamlet will find Horatio himself so appealing.

The modesty of both Horatio and Marcellus (1.1.70–82) once again shows their capacity for real friendship, and the friendship theme is indirectly reinforced as Horatio recounts the foreign conflicts faced by “our last King” (1.1.83), who had been challenged to combat by the Norwegian monarch, Fortinbras. Such an open challenge meant treating even an enemy with a certain friendly honor (and therefore contrasts strongly with the secret, treacherous death King Hamlet later suffered at the hands of Claudius). Once again Shakespeare subtly lulls both his characters and us into a relaxed, comfortable mood, even while making Horatio describe such serious and open conflict. As Horatio ends, we know much not only about the old king but also about the currently unfriendly relations between young Fortinbras and the Danes. When the ghost suddenly reappears, he seems (thanks to Horatio’s exposition) a less alien, more sympathetic figure, and Horatio addresses him as such. He offers to treat the ghost as a friend (1.1.133–35) and seems willing to assume that the spirit itself may be motivated either by friendly intents (1.1.136–38) or by a sincerely troubled conscience (1.1.139–42). Yet when the ghost fails to respond and begins to leave, he shouts (in either a command or a plea), “Stop it, Marcellus” (1.1.142), and when Marcellus asks whether he should strike the ghost, Horatio responds with poised, balanced reason: “Do it will not stand” (1.1.144). In seconds, his treatment of the ghost has gone from hostile (1.1.130) to solicitous (1.1.131–42) to a complex blend of both (1.1.142–44).

Horatio does not disagree when Marcellus says, “We do it wrong, being so majestical,/ To offer it the show of violence” (1.1.148–49). This comment can be read either as an implicit rebuke of Horatio for having urged him to strike or as the kind of
frank, unembarrassed self-criticism (implicating them all) of which good friends are capable. Marcellus's troubled conscience in fact shows another aspect of his capacity for friendship, while his comment also reveals how much (in his mind) the ghost now seems sympathetic. Horatio, typically, reasserts balance by suggesting that it may yet prove a "guilty thing" (1.1.53), while Marcellus's subsequent reference to "our Saviour's birth" suggests another tie—common faith—that binds these friends (1.1.164). As the scene closes, in fact, Shakespeare strongly emphasizes their new bond. Horatio urges, "Break we our watch up, and by my advice,/ Let us impart what we have seen tonight,/ Unto young Hamlet" (1.1.173–75). He speaks of them as a trio, advises (rather than dictates) their next step, and even asks explicitly whether the others approve his suggestion (1.1.177–78).

Here, as throughout the play, Horatio demonstrates his capacity as a true friend. By the same token, Shakespeare in this opening scene has already introduced, often quite subtly, many nuances of the friendship theme that will later become far more explicit. In this scene we have witnessed a lone, lonely man approached first by one friend and then by two others. We have witnessed the newly assembled group begin to bond and then watched their disturbed, distressed reaction when surprised by an alien "thing." We have witnessed one of the men bravely confront the thing, seen the thing depart, and then seen how the shared experience binds the group (and particularly two of them) even more tightly together. We have witnessed, in short, a detailed preview of what will happen when these men seek and find Hamlet himself.

II

Our own first glimpse of the prince occurs at the court of Claudius, who clearly holds center stage. Having just witnessed an old king who seemed silent, lonely, isolated, offended, frightening, and perhaps even frightened, we now see a new king who seems confident, voluble, friendly, and surrounded by personal and political friends. Here is the consummate politician, the man skilled at compliments, thanks, and hearty farewells (1.2.15–16, 41), an imposing glad-hander who knows all the social graces. But here, too, is Hamlet—standing aside, dressed in black, and immediately speaking the sardonic, biting, ambiguous language one never uses with truly friendly intent (1.2.65, 66, 74). Hamlet speaks like a person who feels threatened but who cannot lash
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out; his ambiguity both concedes and mocks his enemy’s power. He speaks a private language, its true meanings known only to himself—a dialect at odds with the frank, friendly conversations of the play’s first scene. That scene opened with our glimpse of a man alone and frightened in the literal darkness; the present scene shows Hamlet isolated in metaphorical darkness, though presumably surrounded by much literal light. His very first words may be an aside (1.2.65)—a technique that establishes his distance from the court while implying a connection with us. This aside (if that is what it is) thus foreshadows the great soliloquies, in which he will seem to speak to himself but will in fact bind himself ever more tightly in sympathetic friendship with the audience, winning our concern by privately baring his soul.

It is Hamlet’s mother who first explicitly introduces the word “friend” here by urging Hamlet to “cast thy nighted colour off,/ And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark” (1.2.69–70). Here as so often, Shakespeare squeezes maximum meaning from a few words, particularly (in this case) “like.” The effect would differ if Gertrude had asked Hamlet to “be” a friend to Claudius; all she is asking, instead, is that he be “like” a friend. And even that, of course, is not the limit of her words’ complexity. If she had asked Hamlet to “be” Claudius’s friend, she would be implying that she knows he now isn’t such a friend; instead, by asking him to look on Claudius “like” a friend, she may be suggesting that he merely needs to show more obviously the friendship she expects he inwardly and naturally feels. Yet her words are open to still other interpretations, since in saying “look like a friend on Denmark” she can be taken to mean, “look upon Claudius as your friend—realize that he is friendly toward you.” And, if “Denmark” is taken to refer not simply to the king but to the whole country, her words can be understood to suggest either that Hamlet should treat his nation with friendship (by abandoning his self-absorption) or that he should realize the friendship his countrymen feel for him, or both of these meanings together. Ironically, all these possible meanings only help emphasize Hamlet’s bitter isolation. He feels neither friendly towards Claudius nor genuinely befriended by him; and at the moment he feels no great affection toward (or from) his fellow Danes, who have so eagerly embraced the new king. Gertrude’s soothing words (especially coming from Gertrude) only enhance his profound alienation. This feeling, in turn, is intensified by his realization that he cannot even fully express, at least outwardly, the true depth of his emotions (1.2.76–86).
Paradoxically, after delivering one of the most famous, powerful, and eloquent soliloquies in all of Western literature, Hamlet cautions himself to "hold [his] tongue" (1.2.159), and he says this just before the entrance of the man who will shortly become his closest friend and confidant, the future boon companion with whom he will finally be able to share some of his deepest concerns and most thoughtful ruminations. When Horatio does arrive, he greets Hamlet with decorous formality, and although the prince replies magnanimously, obviously he isn't at first sure whether he correctly remembers Horatio's identity (1.2.160–61). We first witness the pair, then, before their real friendship properly begins, and, just as the play will trace the steady growth of their connection, so it will trace the parallel decline of Hamlet's links with much older friends.

It is Hamlet, in fact, who first calls Horatio his "good friend" (1.2.163), but the words here imply just about everything except their usual meaning. Horatio is not, at this stage, Hamlet's "good friend": he seems at most an acquaintance. Yet Hamlet's willingness to call Horatio his "good friend" reflects well on the prince: in one deft phrase he cuts through layers of rank, reaching out to the humble inferior who has just called himself Hamlet's "poor servant" (1.2.162) and thereby showing genuine concern for the other's feelings. If the preceding soliloquy showed Hamlet depressed and self-absorbed, his conduct here seems graciously thoughtful. His gesture of friendship to Horatio—though perhaps at this point merely a gesture—shows him capable of a warmth, kindness, and fellowship hitherto lacking in our sense of him. Immediately after expressing his own deep pain in his bitter soliloquy, he can nonetheless reach out to others, putting them at ease when he himself is in turmoil. His words, moreover, may also suggest his own deep need at this point for friendship; perhaps he can reach out so magnanimously to Horatio because he now feels so totally isolated.

It is also possible, however, that Hamlet is so gracious to Horatio precisely because he knows that Horatio is both his social inferior and a relative stranger. Horatio, in short, poses no present or even potential threat; he can be welcomed as a friend because he is not a possible enemy. His distance from Claudius's court, in fact, probably makes him attractive to the prince. All in all, then, when Hamlet offers to exchange the "name" of "good friend" with Horatio (1.2.163), we cannot be sure whether the prince is motivated by mere courtesy or by potentially deeper feelings. Here as so often elsewhere in the play (and in our own
social relations), we are left with possibilities to interpret, with ambiguous clues and unclear signals which we must struggle to read correctly, even when no single "correct" reading is probably possible.

The friendship theme is sounded explicitly again when Hamlet says he would be unwilling to hear even Horatio's "enemy" accuse him of a "truant disposition" (1.2.169-70). Both Horatio's humility and Hamlet's solicitous compliment show their potential as friends to themselves and others, while Horatio's brief and tactful comment about Gertrude's quick remarriage (1.2.179) shows at once his intelligence, discretion, moderation, and reasonableness—all qualities valuable in a good friend. Meanwhile, the friendship theme is reiterated when Hamlet mentions the possibility of confronting his "dearest foe" in heaven (1.2.182), while our sense of Horatio's fitness as a friend is reinforced when he recounts how Barnardo and Marcellus were willing to share with him "In dreadful secrecy" their original vision of the ghost (1.2.207). Similarly, Hamlet's request that all three of them keep the vision a secret (1.2.248) suggests that he has already begun to treat them as friends, yet once again this request also illustrates the uncertain status of numerous speech-acts in the play. Hamlet seems to speak as a friend, but since he is their prince his request also amounts to a command. Yet the fact that he does request (rather than order) their silence might seem, once again, to show his magnanimity. This rosy interpretation, though, is complicated by the fact that Hamlet is now dependent on these men—who may be potential friends, who are certainly social inferiors, but who also possess secret information that gives them power over him. His request for their silence, therefore, may demonstrate both graciousness and dependence, just as his promise to "requite [their] loves" (1.2.251) may indicate both generosity and power (including perhaps his financial superiority) and vulnerable need. Hamlet explicitly seeks their "loves" rather than the "duty" they offer (1.2.253-54), thereby suggesting a desire for an intimate rather than merely legalistic bond. He wants (and has apparently already to some degree achieved) their friendship rather than their simple political loyalty, and in less than three hundred lines we have seen him move from painful isolation to secret comradeship. He now heads a small community of seemingly trusting, trusted friends.
Friendship of a different sort is emphasized next. Laertes and Ophelia seem so attractive partly because they seem as much friends as brother and sister. Apparently they understand one another completely: they amiably tease, showing little sibling rivalry (1.3.1–52). Laertes shows real concern for Ophelia by warning her that Hamlet, because of his status, can never be a true friend or lover in the usual sense (once again underscoring Hamlet’s special isolation). This advice also increases our respect for Laertes: a different kind of brother might seek to profit from his sister’s closeness to the prince, but Laertes apparently values Ophelia more than any personal ambition. Meanwhile, Polonius’s own friendly advice to his son (1.3.52–87) introduces some of the play’s most explicit commentary on the friendship theme. Indeed, the fact that the father emphasizes friendship so much in these parting comments implies its crucial importance. He warns Laertes to beware of enemies who twist one’s words; he counsels him to behave (as we have just seen Hamlet behaving) in ways that are familiar but not vulgar, since the excessive familiarity designed to win friends can often turn them away; he urges Laertes to be loyal to old and trusted friends and not abandon them for new friendships rooted in mere pleasure; and he advises his son about proper ways to conduct a quarrel (ironic advice in light of Laertes’s later conflict with Hamlet). Nearly everything Polonius says here is relevant to dealings with friends, and nearly everything also implies the potential danger inherent in those relations. Ironically, even (or perhaps especially) the son of a powerful man needed to fear what and to whom he might speak and how he might behave, and Polonius’s speech merely articulates many truisms of standard Renaissance friendship doctrines. (This fact makes it unlikely that Shakespeare intended Polonius here to seem merely ridiculous, as is sometimes suggested.) Much of his wisdom boils down to the standard teaching that one must first be a good friend to oneself in order to attract good friends and be one to others. As his son departs, Polonius implicitly concedes what any parent must: that a child’s welfare depends as much on his friends as on his family.

After Laertes leaves, Polonius turns to Ophelia, seconding her brother’s advice about becoming too friendly with “Lord Hamlet” (1.3.89, 123). Someone (a friend?) has warned Polonius of their connection. That Hamlet reaches out to this (non-threat-
ening) woman just after his father’s death and his mother’s remarriage once again emphasizes his special need now for intimacy and affection, and if Polonius were indeed an arch-courtier, he might see Hamlet’s attentions as a splendid opportunity to promote his own fortunes. Instead, like his son, he speaks to Ophelia as a friend might, warning her to mistrust deceptive appearances and Hamlet’s apparently amiable overtures. Here, as in speaking with Laertes, he stresses the potential danger of apparent friendships. Personal ambition seems less important to him than Ophelia’s welfare—although here, as so often, we can never be sure of the full complexity of a character’s motives. Polonius may realize the dangers of too close a connection with royal power, especially given the current tensions between Claudius and Hamlet. His advice, in some ways so apparently non-political, may also be quite politic indeed. His concern for another may also imply self-concern—a paradox which would only make him typically human.

When Hamlet soon reappears, he is accompanied by his friends Marcellus and Horatio. The trio’s relative isolation is emphasized not only by their discomfort but by the noise made by Claudius and his abundant friends of pleasure, whose revels trouble Hamlet far more than the cold. Such carryings-on, he feels, will not win respect for Denmark but will damage the nation’s reputation, just as an individual may fail to win friends because of a single private (but publicly known) defect. As Hamlet explains this point, however, the ghost appears, although it seems not to trust the friendly intentions of Hamlet’s companions enough to share its secrets with them. It seeks, through “courteous action,” a private conference (1.4.60), and although the attempt by Hamlet’s friends to restrain him might ordinarily seem highly unfriendly and disrespectful, in this case their willingness to risk such uncourteous action signals deep affection. Horatio’s words “You shall not go, my lord” (1.4.80) can seem both a command and plea, while Hamlet’s reply (1.4.84) can seem the same. His words are polite but forceful, while his willingness to threaten them shows not genuine enmity but rather his desperation to satisfy both his curiosity and the demands of a relation even more important than friendship. By the same token, their decision to disregard his explicit order (1.4.88) shows no lack of respect but the depth of their affection.

The friendship theme appears again when Hamlet finally confers with the ghost, who reveals how he was poisoned with a potion holding “an enmity with blood of man” (1.5.65). Hamlet
seems particularly disgusted that Claudius can pervert an obvious token of friendly feelings—smiling—while acting with such hypocritical hatred (1.5.106–08). When Horatio and Marcellus eventually find the prince, he shows himself his father’s son by being unwilling to trust them with his newly discovered secrets—such trust being a conventional sign of true friendship. Ironically, and with typical ambiguity, Hamlet twice addresses Horatio and Marcellus as “friends” (perhaps with a tinge of sarcasm?) precisely while refusing to trust them (1.5.145–46) but also while requesting that they not reveal the little that they do now know.

Here again Hamlet is paradoxically more powerful than, but actually quite vulnerable to, his new friends. Both his real need and his probably genuine affection help explain why he humbles himself by making “one poor request” of them (1.5.148), but the fact that he swears them to secrecy also shows a lack of trust. He wants their public commitment to himself, each other, God, and even the ghost, knowing that to break such a public vow would reveal their unfitness for friendship, one of the chief private virtues. His use of his sword to confirm the vow is nicely ambiguous, for although it resembles a cross (thus symbolizing the religious dimensions of their oath), it is a sword, thus symbolizing an implicitly violent punishment if the oath is broken. The sword, often an emblem and instrument of hatred, here betokens one of the deepest possible bonds: violating this oath would make one an enemy not only to Hamlet but to God.

Ironically, although Hamlet himself plans to be (and already is) ambiguous in his own language, he makes his friends swear to avoid ambiguous hinting at court about what they already know (1.5.181–88). In short, he paradoxically urges them to be deceptive by acting and speaking as if they had nothing to hide. After they have sworn to all his conditions, he again tenders them his “love,” but he immediately follows this emotional gesture with the promise of perhaps more practical rewards (1.5.191–94). Once more his complex position as a friend is implied: he is, after all, not “poor” or powerless, and so can handsomely reward these friends if they do remain loyal. If, however, one of them violates their vows and tells Claudius about the ghost and about Hamlet’s plans, then the prince would indeed suddenly be far more vulnerable (or “poor”). Because of his relative isolation, Hamlet desperately wants friends, but now he also desperately needs them—facts which give added resonance to such words as “Let us go in together./ And still your fingers on your lips, I
prayer” (1.5.194–95). Hamlet needs these friends to consider him a friend if he hopes to keep his secret, and for that reason he needs to convince them of his own sincerely friendly feelings. Thus the word “pray” may be simultaneously a subtle command, a superior’s magnanimous request, and a needy man’s genuine hope. Similarly complicated are the famous lines, “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,/ That ever I was born to set it right./ Nay, come, let’s go together” (1.5.196–98). Once again Shakespeare juxtaposes Hamlet’s desire for companionship with his political, social, and metaphysical isolation. These lines show both his need for friends and his realization of being, in the deepest senses, utterly alone.

IV

The friendship theme seems especially prominent in act 2. It is emphasized, for instance, when Polonius talks with Reynaldo about Laertes’s Parisian friends (2.1.6–15). He instructs Reynaldo to portray Laertes as attracted by frivolous pleasures, hoping thereby to detect whether Laertes is indeed associating with the wrong people. Concerns with friendship become even more prominent, though, when we meet Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two of Hamlet’s oldest and dearest chums (2.2.10–18). Just as Polonius seeks to monitor his son by deceiving his son’s companions, so Claudius seeks information about his nephew by employing friends of Hamlet’s youth. Yet whereas Polonius is motivated by genuine concern for his son, Claudius’s motives are far less benign. Incapable of genuine friendship, Claudius instead constantly seeks “to use” others as instruments (2.2.3). He urges Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to “draw [Hamlet] on to pleasures” and thus solicit information (2.2.15), but such phrasing already (ironically) suggests the standard Renaissance distinction between true friends (joined by a love of good) and temporary friends (united by an ephemeral love of pleasure). Gertrude, meanwhile, speaks with similarly unintended irony when she says she is “sure” that “two men there is not living/ To whom [Hamlet] more adheres” (2.2.20–21). She cannot know, of course, that by this point his main allegiance is not to these friends of his youth but to an elderly dead man—the ghost.

Although Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are often criticized as ambitious, time-serving lackeys incapable of true friendship, such a reading seems too simplistic. Shakespeare, after all, makes even his obvious villain—Claudius—exhibit some real
moral complexity (particularly in the prayer scene [3.3.36-98]), and his depiction of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is arguably far more subtle and sympathetic than is often supposed. Even their tendency to speak (and be spoken to) as a unit (e.g., 2.2.26-34) can be read not as mockery but as evidence of their close bond and mutual comfort: they know each other’s minds and willingly share the spotlight.10 Neither lords it over the other (as might be expected if ambition were their main motive). Instead they seem genuinely friendly and capable of serving as Hamlet’s true friends. One minor tragedy of this great tragic play, in fact, is that their ancient friendship with him is soon ruined.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are another pair (like Barnardo and Francisco in 1.1, or Ophelia and Laertes in 1.3, or Horatio and Marcellus in 1.4, or Voltemand and Cornelius in 2.2, or Claudius and Gertrude throughout) whose very pairing helps emphasize Hamlet’s isolation. They would need to be scheming hypocrites indeed if Guildenstern’s closing words to Claudius are self-consciously ironic: “Heavens make our presence and our practices/ Pleasant and helpful to [Hamlet]” (2.2.38-39). Such words (like Rosencrantz’s later comment to Polonius, “God save you, sir” [2.2.221]) suggest instead the relative sincerity of this pair in a play in which sincerity, ironically, is a trait Hamlet especially prizes. Of course, the fact that their motives have been so much disputed illustrates a central problem the play raises and confronts: the problem of ever being able to interpret another’s intentions and behavior precisely, even when (or perhaps especially when) that person seems to be a friend. Hamlet himself never quite seems sure of his old friends’ true intents, although he eventually chooses—wrongly, it would seem—to treat them as enemies (or at least as dispensably inconvenient). Paradoxically, one of the most unsettling aspects of Hamlet’s own character is his easy dispatch of his two old friends and especially the relish with which he regards their eternal suffering (5.2.47). It is precisely his former friendship that makes his final hatred so intense—but to say this, of course, is to jump too far ahead.

Hamlet’s first encounter with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is one of the longest and most interesting scenes in the entire play, especially in its bearing on the friendship theme.11 Already Shakespeare begins to distinguish subtly between them: Rosencrantz seems closer to Hamlet, a distinction implied by the pair’s first words. Guildenstern calls Hamlet his “honoured lord,” whereas Rosencrantz terms the prince his “most dear lord” (2.2.222–23). Hamlet immediately greets them as his “excellent
good friends" and as "Good lads," words echoed when Rosen-
crantz describes them as "indifferent children of the earth" (2.2.224–27). Such language not only subtly underscores their
childhood connections with the prince but also becomes increas-
ingly ironic. If Rosencrantz and Guildenstern really are ambi-
tious hypocrites, then emphasizing their childhood links with
Hamlet makes them seem true schemers who betray both their
friend and their former innocence. If, on the other hand, their
motives are sincere and they thus retain some of their youthful
idealism, then Hamlet’s own later treatment of them seems
shockingly brutal. In either case their relationship with him will
now no longer be what it once was, as soon becomes clear.

The trio’s easy, light-hearted banter implies the age and inti-
macy of their friendship, but their jokes about Fortune already
introduce a darker note. Meanwhile, their bawdry (2.2.228–36)
implies a friendship ultimately rooted in ephemeral pleasures and
thus lacking the serious substance of Hamlet’s new connection
with Horatio. The off-hand allusion to the rarity of honesty (2.2.
237–38) helps remind us that honesty is especially prized in a
friend, but the reference also seems ironic since dishonesty is
precisely what Hamlet will come to suspect in (and even display
toward) his old friends. Meanwhile, Hamlet’s description of
Denmark as a “prison” (2.2.241) helps stress his isolation, since
a prison deprives one (almost by definition) not only of freedom
but of true friends. Once again Hamlet’s alienation is emphasized
by the closeness of the pair he addresses: their intimacy is im-
plied even in Rosencrantz’s simple disagreement with an opinion
Hamlet has just expressed: “We think not so, my lord” (2.2.248).
Rosencrantz can confidently assume that he knows his compan-
ion’s mind; Hamlet can rarely feel confident enough to assume
this about anyone (except, perhaps, Horatio).

Hamlet’s growing separation from his erstwhile friends is
subtly emphasized by his pronouns when he responds to the
comment just cited: “Why, then ’tis none to you; for there is
nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me
[Denmark] is a prison” (2.2.249–51). Rosencrantz’s rejoinder—
“Why, then your ambition makes it one; ’tis too narrow for your
mind,” 2.2.252)—tries playfully to echo Hamlet’s syntax and
phrasing, but it introduces the topic of ambition in a way that
inevitably seems ironic. Ambition, after all, is the flaw Hamlet
later suspects in them. If his suspicion is wrong, then it seems
doubly ironic that Rosencrantz should here falsely (if jokingly)
accuse Hamlet of the fault. If, however, Hamlet’s suspicion is
correct, then it seems ironically smug, daring, and/or foolhardy for Rosencrantz to accuse Hamlet. Indeed, the fact that Rosencrantz can accuse another so comfortably of ambition suggests that ambition is not one of this pair’s major motives. There is, of course, another possibility: that by raising the issue, he seeks to trap Hamlet into confessing his own aspirations—in which case Rosencrantz would paradoxically be demonstrating his own ambitiousness. (The multiple ways in which even this one brief exchange might be read illustrates the difficulty of making clear, unambiguous interpretations of others’ motives—a difficulty quite relevant to the friendship theme.) In any case, this exchange helps remind us that although shared ambitions can cement a friendship, conflicting ones can help tear it apart.

By playfully debating Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seek the kind of amiable disagreement and conflict that often, ironically, build or reveal friendship. Their banter shows how well they know him—how much older friends they are with him than is Horatio. It is almost as if (in this scene) we witness them reenact old routines. Of course, the visitors completely miss (at least at first) the more serious implications of Hamlet’s words: while they play an old game, he has left such play behind. The trio converse but do not really communicate, and although Hamlet rejects considering them his “servants” and insists on calling them “friends” (2.2.267–74), treating them as true friends is precisely what he refuses to do.12 Indeed, his claim that he is “most dreadfully attended” may even be a sarcastic gibe, in which case his claim to speak “like an honest man” is itself a bit dishonest, and perhaps also sarcastic (2.2.267–70). Sarcasm, of course, is complicated: it expresses contempt but perhaps also fear, superiority but perhaps also weakness, hostile aggression but perhaps also a hope for reform. It may insult (by mocking the target’s dull imperception) but may also pay understated tribute to the target’s ability to take a subtle hint. Sarcasm can prick a target without severing a relationship completely. Once again, the problem of correctly determining precise motives in ostensible friends becomes apparent here.

This problem surfaces again when Hamlet bluntly asks his visitors to tell him, “in the beaten way of friendship, what make you at Elsinore?” (2.2.269–70). Rosencrantz blatantly lies (2.2.271), although his response is less easy to judge or condemn than it might at first seem. It raises the difficult issue of whether it can ever be right to lie to a friend, especially if motivated by sincere concern for the friend’s welfare. Hamlet’s visitors may truly be-
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lieve, after all, that they can help him by discovering his secret—although they obviously know, too, that such a discovery will also please Claudius and Gertrude. Once again Shakespeare refuses to simplify, especially when dealing with friends. Particularly resonant, for instance, is Hamlet’s response to the lie: “Beggar that I am, I am even poor in thanks, but I thank you. And sure, dear friends, my thanks are too dear a halfpenny” (2.2.272–74). If this is sarcastic, then his true meaning is precisely the opposite of what he seems to say. The claim of inferiority and poverty would then mask his strong sense of moral superiority and of greater political power, and his apparent graciousness would barely disguise his growing frustration and anger.

Hamlet’s elaborate self-deprecation is immediately followed by blunt, plain words that may simultaneously express a hostile challenge, impatient contempt, and a genuinely heartfelt, even pained plea to old, beloved comrades: “Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation? Come, come, deal justly with me. Come, come. Nay, speak” (2.2.274–76). Critics who see Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as practiced, hypocritical courtiers pay insufficient attention to Hamlet’s own immediately ensuing admission that “there is a kind of confession in your looks, which your modesties have not craft enough to colour” (2.2.279–80). He seems to concede that they are too innately honest to lie effectively to a friend. The visitors seem richer, truer characters (and less like cardboard stereotypes) if we see them as true but cornered friends: do they continue to lie (thus seeking to help Hamlet) but thereby destroy their friendship with him, or do they confess and thus jeopardize assisting him (while also betraying their obligations to the king and queen)? They are trapped between duty and friendship, and, to complicate matters even more, their own self-interests are inevitably involved. If they alienate the prince, they lose not only a friend but a powerful ally; if they disappoint the king and queen, they not only fail in a serious obligation but also risk angering the royal couple. As always, Shakespeare makes things difficult—or rather, he imitates the complexities of real human dilemmas. It is precisely this refusal to simplify that makes his plays—and his treatment of the friendship theme—so rich.

In a moment that echoes Horatio and Marcellus’s earlier being forced to swear secrecy on Hamlet’s sword, the prince now forces Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to swear openness by “conjuring” them “by the rights of our fellowship, by the
consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preserved love, and by what more dear a better proposer can charge you withal, [to] be even and direct with me whether you were sent for or no” (2.2.283–88). The anaphora is ringingly effective, and Hamlet’s words can imply both strength and vulnerability, both power and weakness. He speaks as he would be spoken to: with directness. He abandons subtle sarcasm, and although his words still seem full of suppressed anger, they may also express a pained and deeply injured plea. When his visitors hesitate, Hamlet himself says, “Nay, then I have an eye of you. If you love me, hold not off” (2.2.290–91). The first sentence has been read either as an aside or as direct address, and the difference shows how even slightly altering one apparently simple phrase can complicate interpretation, especially in exchanges between friends. If Hamlet does here speak an aside, then that decision already suggests his distance from (and even contempt for) his old friends. If, however, he speaks directly to them, then he once more shows a friendly, open willingness to appeal to their good natures and “ever preserved love” (2.2.285–86). Guildenstern’s brief, monosyllabic reply—“My lord, we were sent for” (2.2.292)—is wonderfully, paradoxically eloquent, implying at once reluctance, shame, sincerity, and reticence. It is just the kind of simple but complicated language one friend might use to another.

Hamlet’s offer to explain why they have been sent for (2.2.293–95) can be seen as contemptuous, solicitous, or both, since he anticipates their discomfort with telling the reasons themselves. Significantly, he then shuts off any genuine discussion of his own feelings, telling them he doesn’t know precisely why he has lost his earlier mirth (2.2.295–97)—although in saying so he obviously lies. Having just urged them to be honest, he is now dishonest himself, but only because he suspects them of possible dishonesty: as always, motives and their interpretation are complex, especially between friends. Paradoxically, he describes with supreme effectiveness earthly wonders he claims he can no longer even recognize, and his image of earth as a “sterile promontory” is particularly relevant to the friendship theme, implying isolation amidst vast surrounding space (2.2.297–303). Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern are treated to another small soliloquy: Hamlet has not yet completely shut them out or off, and although he refuses to share his chief secret with them, he does share some of his deepest, sincerest feelings (2.2.303–310).

The visitors even seem comforted by Hamlet’s willingness to share his gloom. Certainly the earlier tension now begins to
subside—a change signaled by Rosencrantz’s smile (2.2.310). Hamlet interprets the smile as a reversion to their earlier youthful bawdry (2.2.309–10). Rosencrantz’s insistence, however, that Hamlet has misinterpreted his reaction (2.2.311) simply raises once more a chief theme: whether we can ever really know another’s motives, even a friend’s. Yet the smiling and the shift of topic, following Hamlet’s profound and eloquent words, may also suggest that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern simply cannot operate on the prince’s intellectual or spiritual level, that they cannot truly comprehend him, that they haven’t really been listening. Rosencrantz’s very smile, which seems to signal a resumption of their earlier friendly relations, may instead suggest that these men are now too shallow (or rather that Hamlet, having been chastened by his father’s death and the ghost’s visit, is now too deep) for the trio ever to resume a real friendship. Alternatively, the smile may perhaps indicate some real subtlety and perceptiveness in Rosencrantz. Perhaps, recognizing the prince’s deep pain, he solicitously seeks to change the subject, to brighten the mood, to give his old friend happier things to think about.

V

Significantly, when Rosencrantz tells Hamlet of the players’ approach, he says that they travel partly because they have been abandoned by city audiences. Once again unstable friendship is implied, especially since the players have been rejected for a competing children’s group. Hamlet explicitly likens the disloyal audiences to the fickle courtiers who once mocked but now flatter Claudius. All this behavior, of course, is relevant to the friendship theme—a theme also reiterated when the prince finally welcomes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, even offering them his hands (2.2.366–71). The trio’s old friendship seems momentarily restored, as does Hamlet’s mood, but even this moment is ambiguous. Some critics see Hamlet’s gesture here as just that: a gesture, not a real reconciliation, and his famously puzzling comment that he can distinguish “a hawk from a handsaw” (2.2.375) can be read as warning, threat, friendly advice, or all three at once. His friendship with his old chums is, like so much else in the play, continually open to interpretation. Ironically, however, Hamlet and his two old friends (now positioned at each ear) do seem united by contempt for Polonius. Rosencrantz even joins Hamlet in mocking the old man (2.2.376–81)—neatly illustrating the aggression latent in friendship, the
way friends can bond by turning on someone else. The irony, of course, is that Hamlet will eventually also turn on these two and eventually kill both them and Polonius. The trio’s current alliance will not last.

Toward the players, however, Hamlet seems immediately and unfailingly friendly—though even this moment is complex, since he had earlier said he planned to greet them with a zeal therefore partly planned (2.2.368–71). Yet there seems real warmth in his words “Welcome, good friends” and “O, old friend” (2.2.418–19) and in his playful demeanor. His warmth seems particularly striking after his coldness toward Polonius (and, before that, toward Rosencrantz and Guildenstern). Indeed, perhaps these encounters with possibly false friends help make his feeling for the players so enthusiastic. Although the actors, paradoxically, are professional deceivers, to Hamlet they seem more trustworthy than almost anyone else. Their relative powerlessness and dependence means that he can also comfortably treat them as friends: like Horatio, they are too impotent to pose any threat, so he can relax with them in ways he can’t with most others. He can even joke with them about their not being friends (2.2.420), while his generally friendly treatment of them, and particularly his teasing of the younger players, winningly demonstrates his underlying capacity for real affection and generosity. In such scenes, as in those with Horatio, we glimpse Hamlet’s normal character. We see who he has been (and is capable of being) when unburdened. We see a Hamlet whose capacity for affection makes him seem, in turn, eminently lovable.

Another reason Hamlet can relax with the players is that they are openly suitors. They obviously seek favor and money, without hidden motives. Paradoxically, he can welcome them as friends partly because he knows they need employment, and their abandonment by their own former friends (and paying customers) makes them even more dependent on friendly patrons. Given the actors’ importance to the larger friendship theme, therefore, it hardly seems surprising that the chief player’s speech deals so explicitly with open hatred (2.2.464–514). The familiar lines stir tearful compassion even in the actor, and his empathy with the sufferings of long-dead, fictional persons seems particularly striking when ironically followed by Polonius’s smug intention to treat the players “according to their desert” (2.2.523). Hamlet’s wonderful response—“God’s bodkin, man, much better. Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping? Use them after your own honour and dignity . . ." (2.2.524–25)
—memorably encapsulates two chief principles of true friendship: charity and the Golden Rule. Yet Hamlet’s rebuke of Polonius for being insufficiently friendly also constitutes (as he seems to realize) an implicit rebuke to himself. Thus, having mercilessly mocked the old man earlier, he now cautions the players, “look you mock him not” (2.2.539). These words, like the explicit references to friendship with which this interlude concludes (2.2.530–31, 540), help emphasize once more a crucial theme.

2.2, one of the play’s longest and most interesting scenes, is in fact particularly significant to the friendship theme, which is soon sounded again. As Hamlet commences another lonely soliloquy, he upbraids himself for being incapable (unlike the player) of true compassion for another’s sufferings, especially those of his own father. Yet he also reveals one reason he has not already avenged his father’s death: he is not yet sure whether the ghost is a true friend or a tempting foe (2.2.594–600). Like all of us, in short, he confronts the problem of interpretation, of trying to determine whether another’s apparently beneficent motives are truly friendly or not.

VI

Just as friendship had surfaced explicitly in 2.2, so it arises again in 3.3, when the long-absent Horatio reenters. Significantly, he appears just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (whom Hamlet now considers false friends) are leaving (3.2.52). This juxtaposition seems deliberate: Shakespeare faced no need to bring Rosencrantz and Guildenstern back so briefly (especially with Polonius, whom Hamlet also considers no friend) unless to contrast them with Horatio, whom the prince greets enthusiastically. He is answered, in turn, with more obvious affection and less formality than Horatio has previously used (3.2.52–55). Clearly their friendship has deepened, as Hamlet confirms in a speech centrally important to the friendship theme.15 Horatio has humbly offered “service” (3.2.53), but Hamlet instead extols him as being “e’en as just a man/ As e’er my conversation cop’d withal” (3.2.54–55). “Just” can imply that Horatio is not only personally ideal and well-balanced16 but is also a perfect human. In all these senses Hamlet’s praise looks back both to his earlier commendation of mankind (at 2.2.303–08) and to the moderation he had just been celebrating when instructing an actor (3.2.1–45). Like the ideal man Hamlet had earlier called “the par-
agon of animals” (2.2.307) and also like the ideal actor who never oversteps “the modesty of nature” (3.2.19), Horatio strikes just the right proportion and balance—qualities Hamlet himself may feel he now lacks (although this very speech shows how much he still possesses them and how much they remain his ideals).

When Horatio tries to demur, Hamlet cuts him off (3.2.56), but the interruption isn’t rude. Instead, Hamlet protects both his and Horatio’s dignity by claiming he doesn’t flatter: why, he asks, should he flatter the poor? The question might normally seem ungracious, insulting, or condescending, but Hamlet’s mere asking of it shows how comfortable he feels with Horatio, how much he trusts Horatio’s perception. That Hamlet can mention Horatio’s relative poverty so blatantly shows how little he prizes such matters, how much he values Horatio for better qualities than wealth or power. Although a cynic might note that Horatio is in fact far from totally powerless (because apparently only he knows the full secret)17, and that Hamlet therefore has some reason to “flatter” him (3.2.56), this exchange mainly shows Hamlet’s mutual confidence in himself and his friend. What might normally seem awkward or impolite instead illustrates their easy friendship. The very blatantness with which Hamlet risks insulting Horatio instead helps guarantee the sincerity of the enthusiastic commendation that now follows.

Hamlet’s extended praise of Horatio amounts, in effect, to another soliloquy. It thus helps intensify (almost as much by form as content) our sense of Horatio as Hamlet’s true friend, a man with whom (and to whom) he can speak frankly. To no one else has Hamlet earlier spoken so intensely, for so long, about matters so obviously important—except to himself. His praise of Horatio even recalls the soliloquy in which he had wondered whether it was “nobler in the mind to suffer/ The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune . . .” (3.1.57–58).18 Here he extols Horatio as one who, “in suff’ring all, . . . suffers nothing,/ A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards/ hast ta’en with equal thanks” (3.2.66–68). As elsewhere, this speech links—while implicitly contrasting—friendship with Fortune. True friendship is Fortune’s opposite: a true friend is as stable, trustworthy, and certain as Fortune is not. A true friend is not “a pipe for Fortune’s finger,/ To sound what stop she please” (3.2.70–71), and Horatio is just such a friend. But before Hamlet continues, he abruptly stops himself (3.2.74). Perhaps he ends so suddenly for fear of embarrassing Horatio; perhaps he stops because both understand that
deep friendship need not be verbalized; or perhaps he stops partly because he realizes he is slipping into self-absorption—that even his praise is falling into monologue. Whatever his reason for stopping, his words clearly reflect well on himself; by commending Horatio, he wins our own respect. And the fact that he has apparently shared with Horatio his deepest secret—the ghost's allegation against Claudius—shows that Hamlet's trust is more than merely verbal.

The play's tendency to link friendship and fortune is reflected also in Hamlet's Mousetrap. Thus the Player King observes how love fluctuates with fortune, and how "The great man down, you mark his favourite flies" while "The poor advance'd makes friends of enemies," so that "who not needs shall never lack a friend,/ And who in want a hollow friend doth try/Directly seasons him his enemy" (3.2.195–204; italics in original). The taut syntax mimics the quick mutability it describes, while the sudden shifts between total opposites imply how superficial such changes are. Similarly intriguing is the ambiguity of "needs": in one sense the word suggests that the highly fortunate will never lack friends, but in another sense it implies that whoever doesn't need a friend will always have one. The latter meaning suggests superficiality on both sides—as if friendship were merely a matter of need. Here as in other respects, the language of the play-within seems more subtle than we might first suspect. Thus "hollow" nicely suggests an inner emptiness invisible from without, while "seasons" perverts the normally pleasant associations of that word. When false friendship is the topic, even the language used to discuss it seems perverse.

Ambiguity of a different sort arises when, after the play upsets Claudius, Hamlet exults with Horatio, whom he calls his "Damon dear" (3.2.275). When editors gloss the reference at all, they usually assume that "Damon" alludes to a shepherd from conventional pastoral literature. Even this meaning would suggest a close friendship between Hamlet and Horatio, but another possibility is that "Damon" might also suggest the legend of Damon and Pythias, two of the most famous classical friends. They united against a tyrant—a detail that gives the possible allusion all the more relevance to Hamlet. Indeed, just when the prince links Horatio with Damon, Horatio offers a clear (if typically subtle) criticism of Claudius by sarcastically implying that the new king is an "ass" (3.2.279). And immediately after Hamlet and Horatio reaffirm their bond by agreeing about Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (whom Hamlet now considers
false friends) appear. As before, Shakespeare here juxtaposes the true friend with the alleged imposters, thereby enhancing our awareness of both.

Significantly, Hamlet converses mostly here with Guildenstern, from whom the prince has always seemed more distant than from Rosencrantz. Their quick, staccato, back-and-forth exchange underscores their mutual impatience, and Guildenstern soon feels Hamlet's contempt. Twice, seeking better treatment, he utters either a plea or a demand or both (3.2.300–01, 306–10). Yet because he and Rosencrantz represent Hamlet's mother, the unfriendly treatment they receive also amounts, in part, to sublimated rage at Gertrude. They, of course, cannot know this, and there seems genuine hurt in Rosencrantz's stung comment, "My lord, you once did love me" (3.2.326). He now (ironically) shares the same emotions as Ophelia, and his plain-spoken sentence comes with all the more force after all the earlier edgy ambiguity. His comment can be read as pained, defiant, or both; it can seem at once an assertion of dignity, dependence, and protest. Although Hamlet offers his hand, this normally friendly gesture can now seem either empty or contemptuous. Likewise, Rosencrantz's request that Hamlet share his "griefs" with his "friend" (3.2.330) can seem either genuinely solicitous (and therefore all the more generous, especially if he does feel rejected and insulted) or as dishonestly prying and probing. Hamlet, of course, is willing to share his griefs with his friend—but that friend is now Horatio.

Just as Hamlet's earlier praise of Horatio had echoed the "to be or not to be" soliloquy, so his rebuke of Guildenstern echoes the speech to Horatio. (The allusion is especially significant if Horatio hears it: Hamlet thus implicitly commends the true friend before the allegedly false.) The prince had earlier praised Horatio for not being "a pipe for Fortune's finger" (3.2.70). Now, after offering Guildenstern a recorder, Hamlet accuses him of treating the prince himself as a pipe (3.2.355–56). Normally the offer of the instrument would seem friendly; here, though, it seems muted physical aggression that concretizes the very metaphor Hamlet now explains. His repeated emphasis on pronouns such as "you," "me," and "my" (3.2.354–63) underscores his new distance from his former friends, while his closing request (or command—"Leave me, friends" (3.2.378)—nicely illustrates the complex ambiguity of the key word, since "friends" here presumably includes not only Rosencrantz and Guildenstern but also Horatio. Hamlet, at this moment, is surrounded by "friends," but
to him only one seems a friend in the deepest sense.

VII

Friendship remains important in the rest of act 3 and throughout act 4. Thus Hamlet no sooner departs than his chief enemy enters, flanked by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Claudius' first words—"I like him not" (3.3.1)—can refer to Hamlet's recent conduct, the prince himself, or both, just as Guildenstern's concern to "keep those many bodies safe/ That live and feed upon your Majesty" (3.3.9–10) can seem public-spirited, self-serving, or a combination. Rosencrantz (predictably) echoes his friend (3.3.11–23), and although their words can be seen as merely parasitic, what they say is also simply true: threats to kings can threaten commonwealths. As usual, Shakespeare leaves his characters' motives unclear, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can indeed be seen as acting as sincere friends to Claudius, Denmark, Hamlet, and themselves—all at once. Their willingness to accompany Hamlet to England after his obvious recent hostility suggests that self-concern is not their only motive, though of course they inevitably now recognize that if Hamlet defeats Claudius they will also likely lose. They exemplify the peculiar instability of friends to the powerful: as Hamlet's intimates, they once stood to gain the friendship of many others. Now, as men he deems enemies, they risk losing the friendship of many—except for Claudius and Claudius's friends. Friendship, normally thought a buffer against the world's uncertainties, here seems to be just the opposite, no matter which perspective they adopt.

Similar ambiguities arise in act 4. There Claudius, learning that Hamlet has killed Polonius, addresses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as friends (4.1.33), although—as usual—it isn't clear whether he thus shows diplomacy, real certainty of their loyalty, desperate need, or a combination thereof. Likewise, when he says he plans to consult his "wisest friends" (4.1.38), he can seem motivated by heartfelt need and/or clever cunning, especially since, by consulting them, he hopes to head off potential enemies who may include the "friends" themselves (4.1.40–45). Meanwhile, further ambiguity seems inherent in Hamlet's ensuing treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, especially when he calls the former a "sponge" (4.2.11). Obviously the word expresses contempt, but in explaining it Hamlet may also be warning his former intimate about Claudius's true motives (4.2.
14–20). And Rosencrantz’s uncertain reaction to the accusation (4.2.13) can seem either pained, indignant, or both.

Claudius must deal cautiously with Hamlet partly because the latter has too many friends among the people (4.3.4), and so, speaking with the prince, he uses friendly diction to disguise unfriendly motives (4.3.40–46). Ironically, he calls Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Hamlet’s “associates” (although they are now more nearly his; 4.3.35), and he plans to rely on his friendship (or “love”) with “England” (4.3.61) to help eliminate the prince. Many paradoxes inherent in the friendship theme are implied here: “England” is not merely the country but the brother king—a friend whom Claudius hopes he can count on. Yet their connection is not merely one of friendship but of intimidating “power” (4.3.62), and Claudius’s hope for Hamlet’s death—“Do it, England” (4.3.68)—can seem both a demand and a desperate plea. Such political dimensions of friendship are then immediately reinforced when we see Fortinbras—who started the play as Claudius’s enemy—seeking the Dane’s friendship so he can attack the Poles, his new foes (4.4.1–6). Juxtaposed with this, however, are Rosencrantz’s gentle words urging the prince to board ship: “Will’t please you go, my lord?” (4.4.30). This question can seem tenderly solicitous, calculatedly ingratiating, cautiously diplomatic, or some combination of these. Even in such simple words Shakespeare captures the complexities of dealings between (former?) friends.

Politics and friendship intersect again near the end of act 4, when Claudius fears that “buzzers” will “infect” the newly returned Laertes’ “ear” with slander against the King (4.5.90). Although “buzzers” implies that such people are true friends neither to Laertes, Claudius, nor the state, Claudius is obviously motivated less by concern for Laertes or Denmark than for himself, and it is indeed Claudius who will soon pose as Laertes’ friend and “infect” his “ear.” When Laertes bursts in with a mob whom he courteously treats as friends (4.5.112–15), Gertrude and Claudius themselves respond with friendship that seems partly genuine though mostly fake (4.5.116, 122, 125–27, 129, 137, 139). Had the King responded with anger or force (as he might if Laertes had not come with so many friends), he probably would have stirred up enmity. Instead, by responding with apparently calm friendship, he disarms his potential rival. He cautions Laertes not to allow intended revenge to harm “both friend and foe,” thereby prompting the young man to say that he seeks only his father’s “enemies” and will welcome and reward
his father’s “friends” (4.5.142–47). Later Claudius asks Laertes to put him “in your heart for friend” (4.6.2)—words that can seem deceptively hypocritical or that may reveal a genuine desire and need. When Claudius appeals to Laertes’ “conscience” (a valuable quality in a friend) he implies that he has one, too (4.6.1), while his nervous reference to Hamlet’s many friends (4.6.16–24) seems particularly ironic since it was (and is?) a similar concern that determined his treatment of Laertes. Claudius now seems to share his secrets, worries, and even his self-love with Laertes (4.6.30–35). Normally such openness would characterize a good friend, but his apparent frankness is part of a ruse. Likewise, his willingness to praise Hamlet as “Most generous, and free from all contriving” (4.6.134) seems ironic in more senses than one. His praise may be sincere; or it may be calculated; but (as we will soon learn from Hamlet’s own mouth) it may also be naive.

VIII

Act 5 opens with the famous exchange between the two grave-digging clowns, who seem to be old friends or at the very least old acquaintances. Their easy barbs suggest, ironically, their amity. Soon they are confronted by another pair of friends (Horatio and Hamlet). As the latter inspects a nearby skull, he even imagines it as having once been a false friend or flatterer (5.1.81–85). The grave-digger, appropriately, speaks with neither false friendship nor flattery; instead, he addresses his social superior with the same insouciance he had just used toward his associate. Shakespeare thus underlines the ultimate lack of human distinctions (a main theme of this scene): the clown treats the prince as little more than another man (and thus as a potential friend). A similar familiarity now also characterizes Hamlet’s relations with Horatio (whom he addresses frequently here by his first name), although Shakespeare effectively contrasts the banter between the clowns (and between the clown and Hamlet) with the more thoughtful conversation between this other pair of comrades. Indeed, Horatio’s willingness here even to criticize Hamlet’s thinking (5.1.199) implies their present closeness: as he will demonstrate repeatedly in this final act, Horatio is often willing to disagree with his companion—a willingness which often signals true friendship.

The ensuing fight between Hamlet and Laertes in the grave emphasizes the friendship theme in a different way: these men
who might have (and ultimately will be) friends (5.1.217) battle
to show who bears greater affection for Ophelia. Yet Hamlet is
also angry because he feels wrongly accused by the man he ear-
lier considered a friend: "Hear you, sir, What is the reason that
you use me thus?/ I lov’d you ever" (5.1.283–85). For Hamlet,
the shock of Ophelia’s death is intensified by the shock of Laer-
tes’ hatred. Oddly enough, he cannot seem to imagine why Laer-
tes is so unfriendly. Ironically, however, the very circumstance
that might have united these men (the shared loss of beloved fa-
thers at the hands of killers) prevents their friendship.

When Hamlet reappears in 5.2 with Horatio, he is recounting
a different battle against different former friends—Rosencrantz
and Guildenstern. He reports how, having stolen the secret death-
warrant they carried to the English king, he forged a substitute
letter, full of friendly phrasing (5.2.39–42) but ordering that his
two old chums be "put to sudden death,/ Not shriving-time
allow’d" (5.2.46–47). Horatio’s response—"So Guildenstern and
Rosencrantz go to 't (5.2.56)—is wonderfully cryptic and can, of
course, be interpreted in varying and contradictory ways.23 It
seems to register shock, especially when we realize that Hamlet
has now treated his two old friends precisely as Claudius treated
his murdered brother. Hamlet himself seems to interpret Hor-
atio’s comment as an implied criticism, or perhaps his con-
science is bothered even though he claims it isn’t (5.2.58). If the
first interpretation is correct, then Horatio seems to be a good
friend by being willing to question his friend’s behavior; if the
second interpretation makes more sense, then Hamlet demon-
strates a continuing capacity for friendship by showing that he is
not completely ruthless. Although he claims his conscience is
untroubled, his very need to claim this may paradoxically sug-
gest the opposite. In any case, he at least feels a need to explain
to Horatio, who in a sense functions (here and elsewhere) as the
play’s embodied conscience. Curiously, Horatio never directly
responds to Hamlet’s self-justification but instead shifts subjects
(5.2.62). Perhaps he realizes that there is no point in arguing (the
deed, after all, is done); perhaps he is afraid to argue; perhaps he
even approves the prince’s conduct. Shakespeare wisely leaves
all options open: Horatio’s reticence adds to the rich ambiguity
of the drama. If Horatio had openly approved the killings, he
might seem less a friend than a toady. By instead keeping him
relatively silent, Shakespeare here (as usual) gives us plenty to
think about.

As if to see how and why Horatio is not a toady, we now
meet the real thing: Osric. He appears just after Hamlet has regretted quarreling with Laertes and expressed his intent to “court” the latter’s “favours” (5.2.78). Osric, however, is a courtier in the more obvious sense and thus serves as a foil to both the prince and Horatio. His pliability helps emphasize, by contrast, Horatio’s plain-spokenness, and Hamlet’s playfully contemptuous treatment of the fop is, in part, a show staged to amuse his comrade. Uncharacteristically, Horatio even joins the mockery (5.2.129–30, 152–53, 183), although he seems rather to tease Hamlet than openly torment Osric. Such intellectual and verbal fencing (not only Horatio’s with Hamlet but also Hamlet’s with the unarmed Osric) ironically precedes the real fencing in 5.3, and by lampooning Osric Hamlet implies at once his ideals of friendship, his capacity for friendship, but also his continuing capacity for aggression. The fact that courtiers such as Osric are now generally doted on (5.2.184–91) makes Hamlet’s choice of Horatio as a friend seem all the more worthy. His own character is implied by the friend he selects.

Hamlet’s decision to fight Laertes before the court shows, paradoxically, his public respect for the other man and willingness to treat him as an equal; their fencing will potentially help renew their bond. By dueling with Laertes, Hamlet seeks to make amends for their earlier public confrontation; at the same time, of course, by accepting the challenge he also helps display his self-respect and protect (and repair) his reputation. Disciplined swordplay will ideally function, for both of them, as ritualized atonement (to each other and the court) for their earlier chaotic fight. Gertrude even wants Hamlet to offer Laertes an open show of friendship before they fight, and Hamlet’s willingness to do so shows his own capacity for amity—both to her and to Laertes (5.2.202–04). Horatio, meanwhile, speaks with a true friend’s bluntness when he unflatteringly predicts that Hamlet will lose the duel (5.2.205), but he can have no idea, of course, just how prophetic he is. Similarly, Hamlet shows his trust in and comfort with his friend when he confesses misgivings about the fight (5.2.208–12), while Horatio’s willingness to lie for Hamlet (5.2.213–14) shows that he values his private friend more than the public truth.

When Claudius places Laertes’ hand into Hamlet’s before the duel, he perverts one of the most symbolic gestures of friendship. This act becomes an emblem of his role as corrupt mediator between the younger men. Hamlet’s public apology to Laertes, meanwhile, sounds almost too glib to strike Laertes as sincere,
however sincerely Hamlet may have intended it. Once more the potential for misinterpreting even truly friendly gestures arises: we have reason to believe (from the recent exchange with Horatio) that Hamlet does genuinely want to make amends with Laertes; but to Laertes, Hamlet’s words may sound either ironic ("Was’t Hamlet wrong’d Laertes? Never Hamlet") or sardonic ("Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong’d; His madness is poor Hamlet’s enemy," 5.2.229, 234–35). This public apology is inherently ambiguous: by speaking before the court, Hamlet can be seen either as seeking to make truly open amends or as engaging in public relations (or both). Little wonder that Laertes seems unsure about how to respond until he consults some trusted friends (5.2.244). In the meantime, he is willing to receive Hamlet’s "offer’d love like love/ And will not wrong it" (5.2.247–48). This whole exchange shows the complications that result when private friendships are negotiated in public.

No sooner do Hamlet and Laertes reach apparent accord, in fact, than the latter suspects the former of mocking him (5.2.252–55), while the apparently friendly words between Hamlet and Claudius can be seen either as a brief cessation of hostilities or as disguised verbal jousting (5.2.256–60). Meanwhile, once the real fighting begins, Laertes’ eventual willingness to confess to being hit (5.2.288) seems to show a capacity for honor and friendship even in the thick of combat. This appearance is complicated, though, by our knowledge that he is Claudius’s willing instrument, yet we begin to doubt our doubts when Laertes confesses (in an aside) to a troubled conscience—just before he nonetheless strikes the fatal blow (5.2.300). Shakespeare thus goes out of his way to make Laertes (and nearly all the characters) difficult to judge simply: instead, they easily seem as complex as our own friends or ourselves. Ironically, the final reconciliation between Hamlet and Laertes is preceded by apparently real hatred (5.2.306), but in his dying moments Laertes shows himself capable of real friendship not only by forgiving Hamlet (and seeking Hamlet’s forgiveness) but also by accusing himself (5.2.332–36). His self-condemnation paradoxically functions as self-praise: the more he denounces his own "treachery" (5.2.313), the more worthy he seems. One aspect of the play’s tragedy, indeed, is that these young men feel a kind of friendship just when real friendship between them becomes impossible.25

Meanwhile, although “friends” is almost Claudius’s final word (5.2.329), such phrasing seems wonderfully ironic. The king appeals to friends to defend him, yet no one moves: instead,
he is now almost completely friendless. The man who sought to
win, keep, and manipulate friends dies alone, even though sur-
rounded by fellow-revelers and erstwhile drinking companions.
Their final disloyalty is no surprise: they are largely friends of
pleasure. Openly denounced by his co-conspirator and recog-
nized as a murderer by his dying wife, Claudius dies suddenly,
his throat flooded by wine, no shriving time allowed. Hamlet, in
contrast, dies a slower death that allows him to speak final
friendly words to Laertes, his dead mother, the court, and espe-
cially Horatio (5.2.337–45). Horatio’s desperate effort to act as a
true friend by dying with Hamlet is prevented by the prince him-
self, who claims to interpet the apparently selfless gesture as a
sign of selfish weakness. Ironically, one of Hamlet’s last physi-
cal acts is to duel with his friend for possession of the poisoned
cup (5.2.347–48). From Hamlet’s perspective, Horatio’s willing-
ness to suffer the pain of living, not any willingness to end pain
by death, will truly show him a friend (5.2.351–54).

This final conflict between Hamlet and Horatio paradoxi-
cally signals the depth of their mutual love, but it also shows the
extent of Hamlet’s dependence. He needs Horatio now more than
ever, and he needs him particularly to help Hamlet win and keep
friends even after the prince is dead: “O God, Horatio, what
wounded name,/ Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave
behind me” (5.2.349–50). Even as he leaves the world, Hamlet is
concerned with his worldly reputation—with having friends,
with being well regarded and truly respected. He therefore im-
plcitly challenges the sincerity of Horatio’s friendship (thereby,
ironically, showing his real trust in it): “If ever thou didst hold
me in thy heart,/ Absent thee from felicity awhile” (5.2.351–52).
Hamlet is now a totally dependent and vulnerable friend, and
Horatio now, unusually, has nearly total (but not total) power in
their relationship. Even as he dies, Hamlet tries to control his
friend’s future words, conduct, and status. He publicly appoints
Horatio his spokesman, just as he publicly nominates Fortinbras
(once an enemy) as the new king. Although physically weak,
Hamlet still wields power, particularly over his once and future
friends.

Horatio’s famous words (“Good night, sweet prince,/ And
flights of angels sing thee to thy rest”; 5.2.364–65) are ironically
juxtaposed with sounds of drums. These might normally signal
war but now symbolize a kind of peace. The very brevity of
Horatio’s reaction to Hamlet’s death makes it seem more power-
fully heartfelt and sincere than any long, rhetorical speech could
be, while the adjective “sweet” suggests how their friendship has ripened into love. Horatio’s last image of Hamlet depicts the prince surrounded by true spiritual friends who will properly appreciate and love him and who, almost by definition, are incapable of doing him any harm. This image of ministering angels, though, is soon contrasted by Fortinbras’s image of “proud Death” as an enemy feasting on the scattered bodies (5.2.369–72). And that image is complicated, in turn, when the English ambassadors appear, expecting friendly welcome (and reward?) for announcing the deaths of Hamlet’s old chums, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

The ambassadors’ arrival and their news might seem an odd distraction or an obvious bit of irony, but perhaps this touch is Shakespeare’s way of emphasizing, one last time, the theme of friendship and the enormous complexities that theme often involves. The closing reference to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern helps complicate any simple judgments we might wish to make. If we think of them as wronged friends, we must also think of them as Claudius’s inadvertent tools. If we think of them as Hamlet’s victims, we must also think of them as victims of Claudius and of fate. If we think of them as disposable fools whose deaths finally do not matter, we probably cheapen the play. We view Hamlet as a victim just as we hear of the old friends he has helped victimize. In this play, few matters (including friendship) are ever simple.

Horatio, the one-time outsider, now takes partial charge and also center stage. As Hamlet’s friend and as the only survivor who knows the whole truth, he is now positioned to serve as a friend both to Denmark (by explaining truly what has happened) and to Fortinbras (by legitimating the new ruler’s claim to power). By acting as Hamlet’s voice, Horatio will win friends for the new king and may even, ironically, become one of the new ruler’s closest Danish advisors. Fortinbras, meanwhile, speaks words of friendly tribute to Hamlet (5.2.400–05)—words which, like so many other friendly words in this play, can seem merely politic, truly sincere, or both at once. Even in these final lines Shakespeare refuses to simplify the friendship theme. The play closes with sounds of thundering cannons—sounds of war transformed into sounds of tribute, sounds of power transformed into sounds of love and honor, sounds of violence transformed into sounds of peace, sounds of hatred transformed into final peals of friendship.

2 “Friendship” does not appear, for instance, as a separate subject in the indices of either Randal F. Robinson, Hamlet in the 1950s: An Annotated Bibliography (New York: Garland, 1984) or Julia Dietrich, Hamlet in the 1960s: An Annotated Bibliography (New York: Garland, 1992). Inevitably it is discussed to one degree or another by various scholars whose work is cited in these books. In Robinson, for example, see entries 317 (Leo Kirschbaum) and 438 (Abbie Potts). In Dietrich, see such entries as the following: 103 (Curtis Watson); 651 (Heinreich Straumann); 665 (Fermin de Urmeneta); and 1033 (Howard Feinstein). Even more helpful is Bruce T. Sajdak’s Shakespeare Index: An Annotated Bibliography of Critical Articles on the Plays 1959–1983, 2 vols. (Millwood, New York: Krause International, 1992). The following items in Sajdak’s work are particularly helpful: U40 (Isadore Traschen); U238 (Howard Feinstein); U272 (Bridget Gellert); U345 (James I. Wimsatt); U364 (Robert Willson); U496 (Kristian Smidt); U376 (Joseph Meeker); U403 (Thomas Nelson); U494 (Andrew J. Sacks); U606 (Leo Rockas); U610 (Pierre Sahel); U714 (Iona Bell); U772 (Charles Haines); U793 (Michael Taylor). Although I do not agree with the arguments of all these scholars, I have found all their ideas suggestive.

Also helpful have been the following: Julia Lupton, “Truant Dispositions: Hamlet and Machiavelli,” Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies 17 (1987): 59–82, and (most recently) Keith Doubt, “Hamlet and Friendship,” Hamlet Studies 17 (1995): 54–62. However, none of the studies mentioned in this note, nor any others of which I am aware, undertake the kind of detailed, almost scene-by-scene approach to the theme of friendship I hope to offer here.

My original intent, when I first conceived this article, was both to theorize and historicize Shakespeare’s treatment of friendship in Hamlet, but as I worked on the piece, one problem kept arising: the sheer richness of the play kept intruding on any sustained effort to pull back from the work itself. I have opted here instead, therefore, to work my way minutely through the drama, saving explicit theorizing on Renaissance friendship for another forum. I do already offer some historical and theoretical comments about the topic in chapter 6 of Ben Jonson and the Poetics of Patronage (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 192–221. For a useful guide to general discussions of friendship, see J.L. Barkas, Friendship: A Selected, Annotated Bibliography (New York: Garland, 1985). Among the items listed by Barkas, the following have proven most helpful: 9 (Aristotle); 11 (Augustine); 23 (Robert R. Bell); 36 (Peter M. Blau); 41 (Lawrence A. Blum); 49 (Robert Brain); 63 (Cicero); 78 (Steve Duck); 116 and 117 (Erving Goffman); 124 (Andrew M. Greeley); 135 (George Homans); 188 and 189 (George J. McCall and J.L. Simmons); 194 (Gilbert C. Meilander); 208 (Friedrich Nietzsche); 222 (Plato); 225 (Plutarch); 227 (John M. Reisman); 263 (Jeremy Taylor); 311 (Sir Francis Bacon); and 504 (Montaigne). For more recent work see, for instance, Neera Kapur Bahwar, ed., Friendship: A Philosophical Reader (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993); Leroy S. Rouner, ed., The Changing Face of Friendship (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); and the special issue on friendship (edited by Peter Murphy) of the South Atlantic Review 97:1 (1998).


See “Timon of Athens: The Iconography of False Friendship,” Huntington Library Quarterly 43 (1980): 181–200. I am honored to acknowledge here the true friendship Cliff Davidson has always shown, not only toward me and many other colleagues (such as his long-time collaborator John S. Stroupe), but also toward the numerous scholars he has generously helped over the years. Cliff’s encouragement and assistance
Robert C. Evans

will be greatly missed but never forgotten.

One of the most valuable studies of Renaissance concepts of friendship remains the venerable study by Laurens J. Mills, One Soul in Bodies Twain: Friendship in Tudor Literature and Stuart Drama (Bloomington: Principia, 1937). Mills surveys (and quotes extensively from) all the standard sources. One of these is William Baldwin’s 1547 Treatise of Morall Philosophie, which was subsequently enlarged by Thomas Palfreyman and reprinted in 1620. This text quickly summarizes nearly all the most typical Renaissance ideas about friendship (mostly borrowed from classical precursors). These include the beliefs that friendship is a “vertue” rooted in virtue; that it involves “perfect consent in all things”; that “there is nothing giuen of God (except wisedome) that is to man more commodious”; that friendship makes “of two persons one”; that it is “small pleasure to hauve life in this world if a man may not trust his friends”; that friendship “is to be preferred before all worldly things”; that “where equality is not, friendship may not long continue”; that a “true friend is more to be esteeme, then kinfolke”; that one should be “slow to fall into friendship, but when . . . in [should] continue”; that one should not trust friends won during prosperity; that “friends lightly taken, are likewise lightly left again”; that the “injury of a friend is much more grieuous than the injury of an enemy”; but also (paradoxically) that there “is so little [obvious] difference between our enemy and our friend” that it is “hard to know the one from the other.” See the edition of Baldwin’s treatise edited by Robert Hood Bowers (Gainesville: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1967), 174–79.

For more recent discussions of Renaissance friendship see, for example, Lorna Hutson, The Usurer’s Daughter: Male Friendship and Fictions of Women in Sixteenth-Century England (London: Routledge, 1994), as well as Laurie J. Shannon’s “‘Soveraigne Amitie’: Friendship and the Political Imagination in Renaissance Texts” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1996) and the secondary works cited therein.

5 This is not the place to discuss the complicated texts of Hamlet. Suffice it to say that I have elected to use the Arden edition, prepared by Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982). I have also consulted other editions and have found particularly helpful The Three-Text Hamlet: Parallel Texts of the First and Second Quartos and First Folio, ed. Paul Bertram and Bernice W. Kliman (New York: AMS Press, 1991). Unless otherwise noted, any italics in quotations are mine and have been added to emphasize particular words.


7 See States, Hamlet and the Concept of Character, 152.

8 See Shannon, “‘Soveraigne Amitie’,” passim.

9 See Davis, Hamlet and the Eternal Problem of Man, 154.

10 See also Draper, The Hamlet of Shakespeare’s Audience, 22.

11 This encounter is greatly expanded in the folio version; see Bertram and Kliman,
12 See States, *Hamlet and the Concept of Character*, 149.


19 But see King, *Hamlet's Search for Meaning*, 82.


