I shall presently argue that it is seriously mistaken to see Hamlet as something of a skeptic about our knowledge of other minds. But I should like to point out that one can hardly be blamed for reading such a suggestion into his first extensive speech. What strongly tempts us in this direction is not merely that Hamlet denies the possibility, even in principle, of plucking out the heart of his own mystery, but that he gives us no grounds for exempting other people’s mysteries from the same iron law:

QUEEN. Thou know’st ‘tis common; all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.

HAMLET. Ay, madam, it is common.
QUEEN. If it be, Why seems it so particular with thee?
HAMLET. Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not seems.
‘Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forc’d breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passeth show
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

(i.ii.72-86)

One must keep in mind, for the sake of the Prince’s nomenclature, that the rhetorical tradition in which he has been reared assumes the validity of the science of physiognomy and hence of the literary notatio—the description of a person’s inward nature (or state) by means of outward signs that somehow unequivocally “denote” it.1 But at least in his own case, Hamlet argues here, notatio cannot succeed. “Forms, moods, shows of grief” cannot “denote me truly,” or at least they cannot do so “alone.” For such signs are “customary” and hence confined to what, as Hamlet has already willingly granted, is “common” or universal in human experience. And Hamlet’s mind, by the very fact of being his, is not universal but “particular.” To be sure, the Prince is careful to qualify the rigor of his negation; what signs cannot do “alone” they might still be able to do with help. But the qualification does little more than taintitize. The fact is that what Hamlet has within, in his uncompromising phrase, “passest show.” If we rule out clairvoyance, it is a mystery irrevocably beyond the plucking out. And the tacit corollary, as we said, seems to be that other minds than Hamlet’s, being equally unique and invisible, are equally enigmatic; and all attempts to penetrate them equally reduced to a futile indirection.

I. The Secrecy of Mind: Rival Traditions

Granted such a conclusion, Polonius’ theory of espionage—that one can “by indirections find directions out” (II.i.66)—is as much an object lesson in fatal arrogance as his personal claim to “wisdom” and “reach.” For as we watch him plying the craft of “lawful espial” (III.i.32) it becomes increasingly obvious that one indirection can lead only to another. The bait of falsehood he teaches Reynaldo to angle with is really good only for catching carps of rumor; the conversation on which he and Claudius eavesdrop, and of which he is so unhappy an interpreter, clearly does not interpret itself; and the sickly disarray of Hamlet’s visit to Ophelia has nothing to do with love—if (as a Rosalind would add) it ever does. The clues and symptoms available to Polonius, in short, fail to vindicate the natural history of human behavior that he so emphatically prefers to ethics and first philosophy, to inquiring “What majesty should be, what duty is, / Why day is day, night night, and time is time” (n.ii.87-88). And the preference is a hubristic prelude to the failure; rather than waste his time in schoolboy “expostulation” on the what and why of formal and final causality, the royal councillor has proudly offered his employers a look at the how, an opportunity to “find out the cause of this effect” by rehearsing a probable
“declension” of efficient causes:

And he repulsed—a short tale to make—
Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,
Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension,
Into the madness whereon now he raves
And all we wail for. (ii.ii.146–51)

To his undoing, Polonius does not distinguish in this regard between physical principles and the human mind. Both are hidden, and changes in either are heralded by natural signs, by a notatio, that will enable us to “gather and surmise” the underlying reason (ii.ii.108); in Hamlet's case, to

gather by him, as he is behaev'd
If't be th' affliction of his love or no
That thus he suffers for. (iii.i.35–37)

And it is worthwhile to remember that when Polonius announces his discovery of the “cause”—
or else this brain of mine
Hunts not the trail of policy so sure
As it hath us'd to do (ii.ii.46–48)
—his metaphor is as decorous for the pursuits of science as for those of “policy.” For it is the figurative root of terms, like indagatio, investigatio, and even methodus, very dear to commentaries on the study of second causes.

To be sure, the only sort of evidence that can serve as a “trail of policy” will be, in Claudius’ phrase (iii.i.1), the “drift of circumstance.” But as Claudius concedes, the councillor’s “positive” assertions have never been wrong, and on this record Polonius declares himself willing to stake his life: “Take this from this, if this be otherwise” (n.ii.156). The irony of the rhetorical forfeit is that Polonius will eventually be made to pay it in earnest, but rhetoric or not, the pledge that goes with it implies a confidence in the force of circumstantial evidence that rises to Faustian audacity:

If circumstances lead me, I will find
Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed
Within the centre. (iii.i.157–59)

In profundo veritas demersa. Even if the mouthless cave of truth in Democritus’ apothegm3 were to be taken literally, Polonius assures us, he would trust his “essays of bias” to guide him down to it; that the abyss in question is merely figurative is presumably an added reason for confidence.

What we are listening to, then, is far from simple rodomontade. The grandeur, by the standards of his age, of Poloniuss’ folly can perhaps be best appreciated by seeing how a more prudent and orthodox contemporary handles the same old saw:

And the great mocking-Master mockt not then,
When he said, “Truth was buried deepe below.”
For how may we to others things attaine,
When none of vs his owne soule vnderstands?
For which the Divell mockes our curious braine,
When, “Know thy selfe” his oracle commands.4

Selves, in short, are so difficult to apprehend that we are little the wiser about them when they happen to be our own. And in the human animal this difficulty is, if anything, compounded by the indulgence of a perverse talent. Nemo non est dissimulator, as the schoolboy tag has it.5 Man the mimic of creation, after his Fall, becomes man the dissembler. “The heart,” observes Jeremiah (xvii.9), “is deceitful above all things”—inscrutabile in the Vulgate—“and desperately wicked: who can know it?” Fittingly enough, it is the most versatile dissembler in the play who is most bitterly perplexed by the impenetrability of the human surface and whose despair provides an eloquent foil to the rote worldliness of his counsellor:

POL. We are oft to blame in this—
'Tis too much prov'd—that with devotion's visage
And pious action we do [sugar] o'er
The devil himself.
KING. [Aside] O, 'tis true!
How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!
The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word. (iii.i.46–53)

At least once, in his famous remark about style (ii.ii.90–91), Polonius’ implicit faith in the outward sign betrays him into a strange confusion. For it is clear that brevity cannot be the “soul” of any wit of which tediousness could be called “the limbs and outward flourishes,” and this not merely because brevity and tediousness are incompatible, but because both exist on a single plane: both, in fact, are “outward.” The “soul” of an utterance, whatever it might be, is not its length. One can hardly imagine Claudius making the same mistake, haunted as he is, even in contexts that would seem to warrant it least, by the
image of “the owner of a foul disease” who, “to keep it from divulging, let it feed / Even on the pith of life” (iv.1.21–22).6

It is all the more surprising, then, to notice the same confusion in the King’s account (ii.ii.5–7) of his nephew’s transformation; so I call it, Since not th’ exterior nor the inward man Resembles that it was—as if the change in the “inward” man were an object of direct observation rather than an inference from the “exterior.” But one must bear in mind that the instincts of the two politicians were not very likely, after all, to be any further apart than their training; that Claudius’ instructions to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are of a piece with Polonius’ to Reynaldo—to “gather” what they can from “occasion” (ii.ii.15–17); and above all, that during the Renaissance the commonplace consentit cum mente color enjoyed more than a proverbial currency. It was corroborated, as we have mentioned, by the science of physiognomy; and the theorem of metaphysics that things unnatural are not long lasting was clearly applicable to mental states dissembled. The hypocrite who cannot be outguessed can safely be outwaited.

Moreover, it was possible, by embracing the Neoplatonic doctrine of the cosmic soul,8 to go far beyond the pragmatic faith of a Claudius or a Polonius in the arts of the intelligencer. Like any other soul, that of the world was held to be present simultaneously to every part of her cosmic body, but especially to the bodies of other souls, with which last, by virtue of a common genesis, she forms a kind of sisterhood.9 The joint possession of a transcendent soul accounts in the physical sphere for the latent attractions that underlie the art of magic, and in the cosmic sisterhood for the innate sympathy—Ficino calls it the communio compassionis—of all thinking beings.10 Indeed, sympathetic affinity, not the movement of a physical medium, is the basis of all response or awareness, just as, according to Ficino, no intervening movement is presupposed when one chord vibrates of itself in reply to another, or when a mental image occurs at once and spontaneously to two good friends.11 All acts of perception, by the grace of the cosmic soul, are acts of clairvoyance. And, as Sylvester’s Du Bartas observes, since the cosmic soul contains the paradigm of all future events, natural, accidental, or voluntary, it is to her we owe our thanks for the gifts of those prophets.

Whose sight so cleerely future things did gather
Because the Worlds soule in their soule ensealed
The holy stamp of secrets most concealed.

The “prophetic soul” that dreams on things to come and inspires a man with second sight is ultimately not his alone; she belongs, in the phrase of Sonnet 107, to “the wide world.”12

But for much the greater part of Shakespeare’s audience these speculations would probably have seemed worse than idle. The common parishioner would know that God alone can compel us, in Claudius’ phrase, to give ourselves in evidence, and the educated man could add that not even the angels (except in the heterodox view of the Scotists) can penetrate the human conscience or the secrets of providence.13 As for the classical treatises on friendship, the rigor of their demands is badly compromised by the meagerness of their expectations. True friendship, says Aristotle, consists in loving not accident but essence. “The serious man stands in the same relation to his friend as to himself, for the friend is a second self. Consequently one’s friend’s existence is desirable in the same, or nearly the same, sense as one’s own. But it is because one is immediately aware of being good that existence is desirable, and that such existence is inherently pleasant. Therefore one must be immediately aware of one’s friend’s existence, and this would come about through living together and sharing discourse and thought.”14 On the other hand, Aristotle makes it clear that the medium of exchange indispensable to friendship is appearance, and that it is a coin as liable to counterfeit as any other. Cicero’s parallel remark makes the problem even clearer: “Not only is simulation vicious regardless of its object, for it adulterates what is true and removes the criterion of it, but simulation of friendship is the most repugnant of all, for it destroys truth, without which friendship can have no meaning.”15 To make matters worse, a warranted love of self, as both authors repeatedly maintain, is the necessary paradigm for love of others. But a warranted love of self presupposes a just estimate—“virtue loves itself,” says Cicero, “for it knows itself and understands how worthy of love it is.” Unfortunately,
however, self-knowledge falls under an interdict that we have already encountered in considering some lines of Sir John Davies: the human mind, according to the regnant psychology, is capable of a purely reflexive act only by special grace; "the best sense with her reflecting thought / Sees not herself without some light divine." The man in quest of friendship as the authorities define it is thus confronted with two problems that are formidable to say the least: the demand for intuition where only observation is possible and the vicious circle of ignorance that is generated by conceiving of the friend as a second self. And if friends cannot know each other, who can?

II. Hamlet as Spy: Unmasking the Hypocrites

We began by considering Hamlet's insistence that his state of mind, being as unique as what contains it, is no less ineffably private. On the strength of that passage one might expect him to be anything but cordial to his adversaries' faith in the technology of spying, much less to the a priori assurances of the Neoplatonists. But a harder look at the play as a whole disappoints this expectation. For the strange valediction with which it opens, to a sentinel relieved from duty "sick at heart," is no mere flourish. The hero of our play will be not only a man who might have made a soldier, "had he been put on," and who has effectively been relieved of his vigil by the time we bid him farewell but one also who, though he scorns to be troubled by "gaingiving" (v.ii.226), admits in the very same breath "how ill all's here about my heart" (1.223); who defies augury (1.230) precisely because he is far from dismissing it; who characteristically "prophesies" that his dying wish will be granted (1.366); and who, on hearing a suspicion dubiously confirmed, pays exclamatory homage to his "prophetic soul" (i.v.40). What these reflex utterances of the Prince convey is something more intimate than a philosophy. It is a habitual confidence in his intuitive powers that is all the more telling for being casually expressed; a confidence that is clearly visible beneath the jocular Scotism of his rejoinder to Claudius:

HAML. For England?
KING. Ay, Hamlet.
HAML. Good.
KING. So is it, if thou knew'st our purposes.
HAML. I see a cherub that sees them.

(tv.iii.48–50)

This easy sense of his own discernment colors the ideal of friendship that first appears in his sudden recognition of "Horatio!—or I do forget myself" (t.ii.161). To forget Horatio would be to forget Hamlet for the same reason that claiming to know another's excellence, taken strictly, is a form of boasting: "I dare not confess that, lest I compare with him in excellence; but to know a man well were to know himself" (v.ii.145–47). All that Hamlet can say without self-praise is that if any man is known to be well endowed ("known well"), that man is Laertes ("himself"). For the person one knows in the strict sense—and this is the basis of Hamlet's quibble—is oneself, in the first or second degree. Such a knowledge is pure introspection and therefore incomparably more certain than any mere report, however close to the source:

I would not have your enemy say so,
Nor shall you do mine ear that violence
To make it truster of your own report
Against yourself. (t.ii.170–73)

And the ability to elect one's alter idem seems to entail other powers as well. The soul becomes "mistress of her choice," Hamlet clearly implies, at the point where she can "of men distinguish" (III.ii.68–69).

It is, however, more typical of the Prince to refer the task (II.ii.178–79) of picking his one honest man out of ten thousand to a faculty other than intuition. Perhaps to our surprise, he appears to be in very cordial agreement with Polonius' view that men's "adoption" may be "tried" (i.iii.62); more than tried, he assures us in fact: "seal'd" with finality (II.ii.70). Such trial, to be sure, is no business for amateurs: "You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak" (III.ii.380–85). Guildenstern cannot pluck out the heart of a human mystery because he has not the "skill" (I.378) of eliciting a significant response in the first place; he cannot make me speak because he does not "know my stops." And even if he knew them well enough to rival the superhuman virtuosity of Lady Fortune, the will to concealment would still remain for him to subdue or circumvent. If Horatio, then, by force of will is "not
a pipe for Fortune's finger / To sound what stop she please" (iii.ii.75–76), Hamlet's mystery has little to fear from the tentative gropings of a Guildenstern.

On the other hand, the skill that Guildenstern admits he lacks, on Hamlet's premises, is very far from being a chimera. Its efficacy, in fact, is guaranteed by the ineluctable symmetry of the bond between body and mind. Hamlet makes his opinion on the matter very clear when he comes to consider a paradigm case of dissimulation, the histrionic act:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd
Tears in his eyes, distraction in 's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? (ii.ii.577–83)

Monstrous as it may be that the player can feign a passion, the fact remains that he does so only by generating in his soul "a dream of passion." Thus, whenever his "function" is "suiting with forms to his conceit," one may safely take it for granted that those forms emanate from the "working" of a soul that has already been "forced" to the same "conceit." This occurs even when the display is "all for nothing—for Hecuba." What is vastly more to the purpose is that the player's response to a genuine motive and cue, as Hamlet goes on to insist, would be altogether distinct from the result of forcing the soul. And it was a commonplace that the same psychosomatic limitation on dissimulating can operate quite as easily in the other direction. The seducer who pretends to be in love, says Ovid, is not after all so very dangerous; he will soon be what he pretends: fiet amor verus qui modo falsus erat. By the same token, a passion can be got rid of, says the physician of unrequited love, by the simple expedient of making believe one is rid of it: quod non es simula posilosque imitare furores: / sic facies vere, quod meditatus eris.17 Because of this reciprocity between the outward and the inward man, between "use" and "nature," it is wise to go through the motions of having achieved one's own reformation—to "assume a virtue, if you have it not" (iii.iv.160)—as a means to achieving it in earnest. "For," Hamlet assures his mother, "use almost can change the stamp of nature" (I. 168). No change in the human exterior, then, is ever quite meaningless. One can hardly wonder that Hamlet is emboldened by so hopeful a theory to rely at least as heavily as Polonius on the virtues of the diagnostic method.

Hamlet's interview with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern supplies an especially obvious example (ii.ii.291–322) of the principle of indirection involved: the discrepancy between the kind of information he purports to be soliciting from his schoolmates and the kind he ends by easing out of them. For his overt questions are patent throwaways. The first is, "Were you not sent for?" But he quickly admits that he is already sure of the answer: "You were sent for; and there is a kind of confession in your looks which your modesties have not craft enough to colour. I know the good king and queen have sent for you." Hamlet now makes Rosencrantz' equivocal reply ("To what end, my lord?") the basis of a second request for enlightenment: "That you must teach me." But he has no intention of having himself taught what he is already sure he knows. He spares them a breach of "secrecy" by speaking for them. Even here he forgoes an opportunity to test his assumption, for by exploring his loss of mirth with such memorable diligence he effectively avoids fulfilling his promise to tell them why they were sent for, and ends instead by changing the subject. What he really wants to know, of course, is whether they will "deal justly" with him by his high standards—whether their confession will be spontaneous or hesitant. Since he has been keeping an eye on them (as he tells us in an aside) he will have had all the answer he is after by the time he gets to his second question, and thus his final plea, "If you love me, hold not off," is more verdict than exhortation.

It will be noted that the Prince attempts to lull suspicion by being, as Rosencrantz reports, "nigard of question; but of our demands / Most free in his reply" (iii.1.13–14). Though, to be sure, he does not in fact lull suspicion—his interviewers have no difficulty in perceiving that there was "much forcing of his disposition" (I. 12)—his tactic of calculated loquacity is clearly far subtler than the frigid and obvious policy of noncommitment Polonius recommends to Laertes: "Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice; / Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgement" (i.iii.68–69). But once more, whatever Polonius' limitations as a theoretician for his son's benefit, his practice as explained to Reynaldo does not
differ in essentials from Hamlet's. That practice, in a word, is to use a neutral generality, a dummy statement or question, as bait for the unmentioned particular one is trying to elicit. By this method you are bound to come, in Polonius' phrase, "more nearer / Than your particular demands will touch it" (II.i.11-12).

As for any scruples that might have deterred the Prince from retaliating so adroitly in kind—and he mentions none—there was no lack of ancient authority to remind him that the wisdom of serpents was not unworthy of the embattled Christian. Even so absolute a partisan of truthfulness as Augustine is brought to admit, in the course of his invective Contra Mendacium, the permissibleness on occasion of prudently hiding the facts under a kind of dissembling, and Jerome produces the scriptural precedents for an avid posternity:

But that simulation is useful and to be assumed at the proper time let the example instruct us of Jehu king of Israel, who could not have laid low the priests of Baal had he not feigned himself a willing idolator saying Gather unto me all the priests of Baal: for if Ahab served Baal a little Jehu shall serve him much. And the example of David when he changed his face before Abimelech and was dismissed by him and departed. Nor is it to be wondered at that men though just should pretend falsely for the necessity of the time and the sake of their own and others' safety, when even our Lord Himself being without sin and without the flesh of sin put on the semblance of a sinful flesh so that in the flesh he might lay his ban on sin and make us, in Himself, the justice of God.18

One of Jerome's examples, as it happens, is especially instructive on the issue of an antic disposition: the experience of David who "was sore afraid of Achish the King of Gath. And hee changed his behaviour before them, and fained himselfe madde in their hands" (I Saml. xxi.12-13). Beside such sacred warrant for craft, and especially for madness in craft, one must place two parallel accounts, almost equally celebrated, of secular history: Solon's pretended madness in Plutarch and Livy's relation of Lucius Brutus' valor at the court of the Tarquin, "covering discretion with a coat of folly."19 The Renaissance was thus very well fortified by tradition against naiveté on this head, and Harington's Ariosto sums up the old apologetic faithfully enough in his defense of Bradamante:

Though he that useth craft and simulation
Doth seldom bend his acts to honest ends,
But rather of an evil inclination
His wit and skill to others mischiefe bends:
Yet sith in this our worldly habitation
We do not ever dwell among our friends,
Dissembling doubtlesse oftentimes may save
Men's lives, their fame and goods, and all they have.
If man by long acquaintance and great prove
To trust some one man scant can be allured,
To whom he may in presence or aloofe,
Unfold the secrets of his mind assured:
Then doth this damsell merit no reproofe
That with Brunello (to all fraud inured)
Doth frame herself to counterfeit a while,
For to deceive deceivers is no guile.20

This rather odd-looking species of guilelessness takes one form that is particularly worthy of note in view of the favor it finds with Hamlet. Once again we can call on a Tudor interpreter for clarification: "But that man may very easily find out the variable changes of a flatterer, as of the fish called the pourcuttle, who will but strain a little and take the pains to play the dissembler himself, making shew as if he likewise were transformed into divers and sundry fashions. . . . For then he shall soon see the flatterer to be inconstant, and not a man of himself . . . for that he receiveth always as a mirror the images of the passions, motions, and lives of other men."21 Hamlet's refinement on this device is to fix on as amorphous or subjective an issue as possible and then test the resistance to pressure of his subject's opinions. In Osric's case the theme is the weather:

OSR. I thank your lordship, 'tis very hot.
HAM. No, believe me, 'tis very cold; the wind is northerly.

OSR. It is indifferent cold, my lord, indeed.
HAM. Methinks it is very sultry and hot for my complexion.

OSR. Exceedingly, my lord; it is very sultry,—as 'twere—I cannot tell how. (v.ii.97-104)

The famous cloud that the Prince assigns to Polonius (III.ii.393-402) is perhaps a more delicious exercise, for it allows the minister to convict himself by his very adroitness at the game of graceful recantation: "It is—backed like a wasel." Hamlet, in short, invites, and may even tempt, us to greet his little experiments as so many proofs of his acuity: "They fool me to the top of my bent"; Q.E.D. But we are given little reason to cooperate; the competition in both cases is pit-
fully unequal. Even Polonius grudgingly acknowledges the disquieting \textit{notatio} of old age whose physical items Hamlet later calls to his attention with such relish:

\begin{quote}
It seems it is as proper to our age
To cast beyond ourselves in our opinions
As it is common for the younger sort
To lack discretion. \hfill (\textit{i.ii.114–17})
\end{quote}

These victories over the stupid or the super-annuated are suspiciously cheap. As we shall see, they may be Pyrrhic as well.

We have been considering indications that Hamlet shares Polonius' dubious addiction to the sort of worldly knowledge that went into the composition of many a Renaissance commonplace book, and that usually took the form of stereotypes not unlike the Theophrastan character. Surprising as this is, it is not entirely unprepared for. To be sure, we are not surprised at all to find Polonius, in his little aphorism on age and youth, using "common" and "proper" as synonyms, whereas we look twice when we come across kindred lapses in the young man who so eloquently insisted on the chasm between the "common" lot of "all that lives" and the irreducible particularity of his own bereavement. But the strangeness of these lapses persists only so long as we forget that the young man in question is a young scholar, if not a young pedant, and that if the old man pays homage to the ancient picture of the memory as a writing tablet in which "precepts" are "charactered" (\textit{i.iii.58–59}), the "table" of Hamlet's memory is an even more ambitious receptacle for "all saws of books, all forms, all pressures past," / That youth and observation copied there" (\textit{i.v.100–01}), and is in fact assisted by a physical article of the same studious description—perhaps the very one in which he is later discovered reading "words, words, words." There is a double irony, then, in the spectacle of a man who sneers at "these tedious old fools" (\textit{ii.ii.223}) and at the same time sees so clearly that the child actors who satirize their grown-up fellows "exclaim against their own succession" (\textit{ii.ii.368}). Half of the irony, of course, is that the Prince's own "succession" is not to be. But the other half is that the old fool he exclaims against—the man who also went to "university" and also plumes himself on being a "good actor" (\textit{iii.ii.106})—is very much his fellow enthusiast of edifying generalities.

As we have seen, the \textit{notatio} does not always fail Hamlet; as wit, certainly, he captures the trick of it no less adroitly than Overbury or the satirists:

He did comply with his dug before he suck'd it. Thus had he, and many more of the same bevy that I know the drossy age dothes on, only got the tune of the time and outward habit of encounter; a kind of yeasty collection, which carries them through and through the most fond and winnowed opinions; and do but blow them to their trials, the bubbles are out. \hfill (\textit{v.ii.195–202})

Hamlet has no difficulty in blowing the like of Osric to his trial, and thus far perhaps is not to be blamed for expecting Gertrude to see in the "outward habit" of Claudius a mystic resemblance ("like a mildew'd ear," \textit{iii.iv.64}) to his secret crime, or for reasoning from the elder Hamlet's manly form to his "wholesomeness," though none other than the ghost has already reminded him that "lewdness" can come a-courting "in a shape of heaven" (\textit{i.v.54}). Among Shakespeare's more admirable people, after all, the belief in such a relation dies very hard. "There is a fair behavior in thee, Captain," says Viola in \textit{Twelfth Night},

\begin{quote}
And though that nature with a beauteous wall
Doth oft close in pollution, yet of thee
I will believe thou hast a mind that suits
With this thy fair and outward character. \hfill (\textit{i.i.47–51})
\end{quote}

It may give us pause to notice how obliviously she undercuts this will to believe by asking the Captain to help her "conceal me what I am" (\textit{i.ii.53}); but when Antonio, later in that play, comes out unequivocally for the opposite view—"Virtue is beauty, but the beauteous evil / Are empty trunks o'erflourish'd by the devil" (\textit{iii.iv.403–04})—the circumstances plainly inform us that disillusion itself may be illusory; Antonio is a victim, not of mistaken character but merely of mistaken identity. Hamlet's optimism, for better or worse, is more tenacious; for even in disillusion he holds to the stereotyping faith of his tables. "Frailty thy name is woman" and if woman's beauty is not a sign of honesty then it must be a sign of the opposite: "Ay, truly; for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness" (\textit{iii.i.111–15}).

Hamlet's failures arise from the same hubristic optimism as his successes. It is especially ironic,
for example, that the only outward show he thinks impenetrable—his own—augmented with the mask of an antic disposition, should be so easily pierced by his mighty opposite, and in a metaphor that signalizes the ultimate failure of Hamlet’s one challenging effort at lifting his own mask:

KING. Love! his affections do not that way tend; Nor what he spake, though it lack’d form a little, Was not like madness. There’s something in his soul O’er which his melancholy sits on brood, And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose Will be some danger. (iii.1.170-75)

QUEEN. This is mere madness, And thus awhile the fit will work on him. Anon, as patient as the female dove, When that her golden couplets are disclos’d, His silence will sit drooping. (v.1.307-11)

Where Gertrude sees mere madness hatching dove’s eggs, Claudius correctly awaits the emergence of a hawk. Hamlet’s mimicry thus ends by failing of the total ambiguity that Ophelia’s genuine madness achieves only too well:

Her speech is nothing. Yet the unshaped use of it doth move The hearers to collection. They aim at it, And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts. (iv.v.7-10)

But the subtler irony of this miscalculation is that the success of Hamlet’s “disposition,” independently diagnosed by both Polonius and Ophelia as “ecstasy” (ii.1.102, iii.1.168), very nearly defeats the purpose of the Prince’s interview with his mother. For it is precisely from her own “ecstasy” that Hamlet hopes to save Gertrude by an appeal to rational choice, or rather to sense, which
to ecstasy was ne’er so thrall’d But it reserv’d some quantity of choice, To serve in such a difference. (iii.iv.74-76)

Yet, after the ghost’s interruption the Prince’s own medical record catches up with him: how to prove that one’s reforming zeal is not another of one’s fits—“that I essentially am not in madness” (l. 187)—when one can think of no outward show “that can denote me truly”? There is nothing for it but to retract this last opinion. Hamlet proposes an impromptu series of tests:

Eccstasy! My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time And makes as healthful music. It is not madness That I have utter’d. Bring me to the test, And I the matter will reword, which madness Would gambol from. (iii.i.139-44)

It is not reassuring that Hamlet’s favored norm here should be the pulse of the very woman he has just convicted of “ecstasy”; nor do Poor Tom and his fellows mark themselves out very distinctly by an uncommon reluctance to reword horrors. These tests of sanity are desperately inconclusive and, what is equally important, not at all atypical of Hamlet’s usual standard of precision.

It would appear that tests may vary widely in sensitivity, and the “Mousetrap” once again is no exception, as Hamlet’s own information on the subject should forewarn him. Trial by reenactment as it is defined by this information ideally consists in the circumstance

That guilty creatures sitting at a play Have by the very cunning of the scene Been struck so to the soul that presently They have proclaim’d their malefactions. (ii.i.618-21)

By the specified criterion, then, Claudius’ reaction will convict him if it involves a “present,” that is, an immediate, proclamation of guilt. Nor can Hamlet, on his own assumptions, be satisfied with very much less; for guilty creatures are not the only ones to be struck to the soul by “horrid speech” (l. 589). With something like The Murder of Gonzago at his disposal, for example, the declarer of “Rugged Pyrrhus” would not only “make mad the guilty” but

appal the free, Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed The very faculty of eyes and ears. (ll. 590-92)

In view of the indiscriminate potency of dramatic performance itself, Claudius’ guilt must at the very least “itself unkennel in one speech” (iii.ii.86); if not, Horatio is told—if Hamlet is forced to settle for less—

It is a damned ghost that we have seen, And my imaginations are as foul As Vulcan’s stithy. (ll. 87-89)

But—and this is the crucial point—Hamlet does settle for less, in advance; mere flinching on Claudius’ part will serve for a death sentence as far as his nephew is concerned: “If he but blench, I know my course.” Well before the actual performance, then, we find Hamlet effectively self-
convicted, if not of a false and foul imagination, at least of a willingness to act on the devil’s say-so with all the assurance of a celestial guarantee. And here one has to bear in mind the essential distinction between what Hamlet will accept as evidence, which does little credit to his desire for fairness, and what Claudius will eventually give him, which happens, no thanks to the Prince, to meet the standards he has been so ready to dispense with. It is interesting in this connection to observe that by the time the players are at work Hamlet has already adopted the less embarrassing assumption that “free souls” are impervious to the theater of cruelty: “‘Tis a knavish piece of work, but what o’ that? Your Majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not. Let the gall’d jade wince, our withers are unwrung” (ii.ii.250–53).

Far from being troubled by uncertainties, then, Hamlet navigates through the moral night of Elsinore by the light of a “reach” and “wisdom” (ii.i.64) in which he has a firm if quite unwarranted confidence. It is this confidence that induces him to spare Claudius while the latter is engaged in what Hamlet does not doubt is “the purging of his soul” (ii.iii.85). It is this confidence, for that matter, that animates his plea to Ophelia:

- Doubt thou the stars are fire,
- Doubt that the sun doth move,
- Doubt truth to be a liar,
- But never doubt I love. (ii.ii.116–19)

The logical form of this little poem is easy to mistake, so it is worthwhile to point out that the series of imperatives, like those of Donne’s familiar “Song,” embodies an a fortiori argument of the following type: (1) You might far more easily be unsure about these matters than about whether I love. (In Donne’s “Song,” you might more easily catch a falling star than find an honest woman.) (2) But it is impossible to be unsure about these matters. (3) Therefore, it is, if anything, doubly impossible to be unsure of my love. The second premise, of course, will not bear scrutiny. While it would indeed be a contradiction in terms to doubt—that is, to suspect—that truth is a liar, the other two statements are so far from being closed issues in this sense that they are (at the time of Shakespeare’s writing) the subject of noisy disagreement among savants. One recent writer contrives to save Hamlet from this intellectual gaffe by sacrificing his rhetorical point: the Prince is simply contrasting the indisputable fact of his love with the mere hypotheses of science. But a Pyrrhonian Hamlet is effectively ruled out by his equation of physical knowledge with the maxims of pure logic; that truth is not falsehood was not a subject of inquiry, and was not open to dispute. We recognize that the equation is false, but the fact remains that Hamlet makes it. It is not Hamlet who sees the weakness of arguing that his love is at least as certain as a cosmology that is not certain at all. He sees no such uncertainty. If anybody does, it is the audience. Hamlet is not perplexed by these obscurities. We are.

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Notes


2 As You Like It iii.ii.387–403. The point of Rosalind’s mockery is that there are no unequivocal “marks” (notae) of lovesickness.

3 Cf. Diogenes Laertius ix.72; Cicero, Academica, 1.44, ii.32.


5 Elegantiarum e Plauto et Terentio Libri Duo, Publilii Syri Sententiae, ed. Erasmus and Fabricius (1581), Sent. 169.


7 Elegantiarum, Sent. 327; cf. Sent. 311.

8 See Tommaso Campanella, La città del sole e poesie, ed. Adriano Seroni (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962), p. 64: “Il mondo è un animal grande e perfetto. . . . Se ignoriamo il suo amore e ’l suo intelletto, / né il verme del mio ventre s’assottiglia / A saper me.”

9 See Plotini Enneades cum Marsili Ficini Interpretatione, ed. Friedrich Creuzer and Georg Heinrich Moser (Paris: Didot, 1855), which supplies Ficino’s scholia as well as his translation. For the cosmic sisterhood, see Ennead iv.iii.7, 8, and esp. 6.

10 See Ficino’s scholia at iv.iv.6, 16; vi.iv.12.
Hamlet's Confidence

11 Scholium at iv.iv.4.
13 See The Sermons of John Donne, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1962), x, 82-83. See also Letters to Severall Personages by John Donne, ed. Charles Merrill, Jr. (New York: Sturgis & Walton, 1910), p. 94. For original sources see Aquinas, StTh I, q. 57, a. 4 and Duns Scotus, Quesiones in Libros, Sententiarum, ii, distinctio ix, q. 2, ad 1; iv, dist. x, q. 8, ad 3. It is, of course, highly unlikely that Shakespeare was directly acquainted with the literature of this controversy. However, the prestige and currency of lore about angels during his lifetime are notorious. On the general problem, cf. Bembo's celebrated affirmation in Castiglione's Courtier iv.ivii: "I fisionomi al volto conoscono spesso i costumi e talvolta i pensieri degli uomini." But it is a mistake to appraise it without reference to the same speaker's bitter acknowledgment in ii.xxix: "negli animi nostri sono tante latebre e tanti recessi, che impossibil è che prudenza umana possa conoscer quelle simulazioni, che dentro nascose vi sono." To be sure, Erasmus, the apostle of humanism, draws a happy moral from the parallel between the method of the natural theologian and that of the physiognomist: "EV. Credisne Deum esse? FA. Maxime. EV. At nihil minus videri potest quam Deus. FA. Videtur in rebus conditis. EV. Idem videtur animus ex actione" (Erasmi Colloquia, ed. Cornelius Schrevel, Amsterdam: Blauw, 1693, p. 399). But St. Paul, an apostle of somewhat higher standing, draws from the same parallel a moral that is both authoritive and considerably less happy (I Cor.ii.11).
14 Ethica Nicomachea 1170b5-12; cf. 1157a30-31, 1157b4-5.
15 Ethica Nicomachea 1155b26-27, 1165a10-11; Cicero, Laelius, 92.
16 Complete Poems, p. 26. What normally passes for self-knowledge in the rational soul is a humble inference from the nature of its own processes; as with other things not directly observable, "the work the touchstone of the nature is" (Complete Poems, p. 35). Serious people seek the friendship of the judicious, Aristotle tells us (Eth. Nic. 1159b22-23), precisely to confirm their opinion of themselves: "They are gratified because they put their trust in the judgment of those who pronounce them good."
17 Ars Amatoria, i. 618, Remedia Amoris, ll. 497-98.
19 Henry V ii.iv.38.