Background Reading for Playing with the Play within the Play in *Hamlet*
V

THE MULTIPLE MOUSE-TRAP

The parallel sub-plots

The play scene is the central point of Hamlet. It is the climax and crisis of the whole drama. Yet it remains almost wholly unintelligible to the modern reader and playgoer. Three points alone are clear: that Hamlet treats Ophelia in a very offensive manner, that the dialogue between the Player King and Queen has direct reference to the second marriage of Gertrude, and that the speech of the murderer leaves Claudius "marvellous distempered". For the rest, the dumb-show is usually omitted on our stage, the Gonzago-play seems long-winded and tedious, most of Hamlet's comments are delivered as the more or less incomprehensible ravings of pretended madness, and the actor who represents him is obliged to sustain the interest of the audience by the vulgar trick of wriggling across the boards to Claudius's feet like a snake. In short, everything is done to belittle and obscure the interlude upon the inner-stage, to slur over the cryptic utterances of the Prince, and to concentrate the whole attention of the spectators upon two faces, those of Hamlet and Claudius. These faces play an important part in the scene, and Shakespeare undoubtedly intended us to watch them carefully. But to make them the only thing worthy of notice, as is done in the modern theatre, is to reduce an incomparable piece of dramatic literature to the level of pantomime.

I would ask those who think they understand the play scene to read over Shakespeare's pages again, and then to find answers to the following questions: How is it that the players bring with them to Elsinore a drama which reproduces in minute detail all the circumstances of the King's crime? What is the dramatic purpose of the long conversation between Hamlet and the First Player immediately before the play begins? Why is the play preceded by a dumb-show? Why does not Claudius show any signs of discomfort at this dumb-show, which is a more complete representation of the circumstances of the murder than the play which follows it? What is Hamlet's object in making the murderer the nephew and not the brother of the king? Why should the courtiers, who know nothing of the real poisoning, assume later that Hamlet has behaved outrageously to his uncle and even threatened him with death? These are questions which vitally affect the scene as a whole, and without a satisfactory answer to each one of them it is impossible even to know what is happening. A few, on minor points, may be added by way of showing how far we are as yet from appreciating this, the most exciting episode in Shakespeare's greatest drama. What is the exact significance of Hamlet's "I eat the air, promise-crammed"? Why does he lead Polonius on to speak of the assassination of Julius Caesar? To whom and what does "miching mallecho" refer? For what reason does Shakespeare introduce the Prologue, with his ridiculous jingling posy? Why does Hamlet preface the speech of the murderer with that extraordinary remark, "The croaking raven doth bellow for revenge"?

1 Cf. pp. 164 sqq.
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Here are eleven queries about a scene of some 180 lines in length, and not a single one of them can be answered with any certainty on the accepted reading of the play. Is Shakespeare, therefore, a bungler, a slipshod dramatist, who leaves loose ends and banal obscurities thickly scattered over the central scene of his most famous drama? Previous chapters have shown that apparent obscurities may be explained and elucidated through the recovery of elements in the plot which have been lost or forgotten. Owing to its crucial character and its central position, the play scene is the point at which all the threads of the plot may be expected to meet. An examination, therefore, of the play scene should not merely confirm the clues already discovered but bring fresh ones to light.

We shall do well to start with a collection of problems which may be described as technical—problems that affect the construction of the play as a whole, and lead us into the workshop of the master-craftsman himself. Chief among these is the parallelism between the Gonzago-play and the circumstances of Claudius's crime. It is curiously detailed and precise. The garden scene, the afternoon nap, the nature of the drug, the method of the poisoning, the wooing of the queen, the seizure of the crown: all are duplicated. The Ghost's story and the Gonzago story are one, except in three apparently trivial particulars: the place of action is in the one case Elsinore and in the other Vienna; Baptista, unlike Gertrude, is not guilty of adultery; and Lucianus is the nephew, not the brother, of the king. Now it is surely clear that this coincidence is deliberate and purely structural; the two inner plots, so strangely alike, are two main pillars of the play, which run up into a great arch and meet in the play scene; remove them, or disturb their balance by alterations, and the whole drama would come toppling down. That the parallelism is fundamental, and has no bearing on the characters and the dramatic plot, is proved by the fact that we were not intended to dwell upon it at all. Once we begin to do so, we are faced with the fact that the players arrive at Elsinore with an item in their repertory which embodies a detailed account of the assassination of King Hamlet, an account which must have been written before that crime actually took place. And yet three centuries of spectators and readers have found no difficulty in swallowing the coincidence; they have been conscious of it, otherwise the play scene would have lost the last shred of its meaning, but they have seen nothing strange or incredible in it. In fact, the first critic to bring out the point clearly was Dr. W. W. Greg, in the article spoken of in my first chapter.

How it was all contrived will be seen if we run over the references to the Gonzago-play before the play scene. They are strikingly meagre. The idea of having a play was a sudden inspiration on Hamlet's part; as ever, when he acts, he acts on impulse. He knows nothing of the advent of the players at court until Rosencrantz informs him at 2.2.320; and they enter shortly after in the course of the same scene. The First Player, at Hamlet's invitation, then recites the Pyrrhus speech; and it is during this recitation that the Gonzago scheme takes root in Hamlet's brain, for, as the rest of the actors go out with Polonius, the Prince stops the First Player; asks him if he can play *The Murder of Gonzago*; tells him to have it ready by "to-morrow night"; and bids him "study a speech of
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some dozen or sixteen lines” which he will in the meantime “set down and insert in’t”. The working of Hamlet’s mind during all this is made clear by the “rogue and peasant slave” soliloquy which follows. What could not the actor effect, he asks,

Had he the motive and the cue for passion  
That I have? he would drown the stage with tears  
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,  
Make mad the guilty and appal the free.

And later we have the scheme revealed¹ in the words:

I’ll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father  
Before mine uncle, I’ll observe his looks,  
I’ll tent him to the quick, if a’ do blench  
I know my course.

In the following scene the King and Queen hear of the projected play and promise to attend; while, at the opening of the

¹ A friendly correspondent enquires “how it is that in 2.2.541 Hamlet asks the players to play The Murder of Gonzago (and to be allowed to insert certain lines), and only after the players are gone hits on the idea of so doing”. The reply is, that we are to suppose Hamlet “hitting on” the Gonzago scheme while the First Player recites the Pyrrhus speech and that Shakespeare communicates this to us by means of an expository soliloquy, a soliloquy, that is, which recapitulates Hamlet’s emotions as the Player’s recitation proceeds: his amazement at the force of the simulated passion, his shamed recollection of his own comparative lethargy and dulness, his hysterical and overwrought fury against his uncle, his sudden inspiration to use the players in order to bring the matter to a final test. Thus, though the soliloquy is actually uttered after the players have gone out, it is in effect a dramatic reflection of what has already taken place and as such is an interesting example of one use of the soliloquy convention, for which vide M. Bradbrook, Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy, pp. 113–36.

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next scene after that, we find the stage all ready for the play, and Hamlet giving the First Player his final directions how his inserted speech should be spoken. The players then go out to dress for the performance; and Hamlet has his conversation with Horatio, in the course of which he informs him

There is a play to-night before the king,  
One scene of it comes near the circumstance  
Which I have told you of my father’s death,  
and bids him, when he sees that act afoot,  
Observe my uncle—if his occulted guilt  
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,  
It is a damned ghost that we have seen.

Immediately after this the play scene itself begins.

Thus, before the play scene opens, the audience in the theatre knows nothing of the interlude except that it is called The Murder of Gonzago, that it is “something like the murder” of the late king, and that Hamlet himself has inserted a short speech in it, which will presumably make the likeness still clearer. Obviously we are here confronted with a piece of dramaturgy. The idea of having a play within the play, we can imagine Shakespeare saying to himself, is attended with certain difficulties. To serve its dramatic purpose, the actors’ play must come as close as possible to the situation at the Danish court; for not only has Hamlet to catch the King’s conscience, but I have to catch and rivet the attention of my audience. “Something like” will not do at all; it must be identical or, at least, differing only in such a way as will indicate that it is another story, without impairing the overwhelming dramatic effect of its similarity upon the minds of
Claudius and my spectators. But if the differences are small, as they must be for the scene to effect its purpose, might not the audience begin asking themselves how it comes about that the actors should have a play, the plot of which is to all intents identical with what had taken place at Elsinore? To avoid such questions it will be necessary to cover up my tracks, to throw them off the scent. They shall be told that the Gonzago story is “something like the murder” of the late king, that “one scene of it comes near the circumstance” of the actual poisoning, that Hamlet has adapted it; but they shall know nothing more about the matter until they see the play itself. Thus they will be prepared for similarity, part of which they will assume due to Hamlet’s adaptation, while in the excitement of the play scene itself, when the almost complete identity of the two plots breaks upon them for the first time, their minds will be far too busy with other things to be enquiring where the actors got the play from.

The problem of the dumb-show

The parallelism between the Gonzago-play and the circumstances of Claudius’s crime, as revealed by the Ghost, is therefore part of the architectural scheme of the play as a whole, which Shakespeare never intended us to observe. He throws the audience off the scent by keeping them in ignorance of the details right up to the play scene. But he does more than this. Like an honest craftsman he conceals his structural design, not so much by covering it up as by letting his lines run off into all kinds of tracery and foliation, which catch the eye of the onlooker and, once again, prevent him prying into the secrets of the structure. The key-stone of the Ghost-Gonzago arch is the dumb-show of the play scene, framed with the most beautiful and delicate carved work. Nevertheless, the dumb-show itself is no mere ornamental flourish; it is as essential to the stability of the edifice as the arch of which it is the key-stone. For remove it, and what happens? The play scene is ruined. The players’ play without the dumb-show consists of seventy lines of dialogue between a king and a queen about second marriage, followed by six lines uttered by an entirely unexpected character, who thereupon without warning of any kind proceeds to poison the sleeping king. It is not a play; it is not even a scene; it is a piece of a scene, terminated by Claudius at the very moment when the only action which occurs in it is about to take place.

There are several reasons why Shakespeare was obliged to truncate and obscure his players’ play in this fashion. In the first place, as I have just said, it could not be given as a whole because it was to be interrupted before the end. It was necessary, again, to confine most of not all the dialogue to the theme of second marriages, because, as we shall see, part of Hamlet’s intention is to test his mother. But the chief reason was that there was Claudius to think of. The play is a Mouse-trap, the jaws of which must snap upon the imprisoned victim suddenly, unexpectedly, overwhelmingly. Had there been too much parallelism in the spoken play, or indeed any clear hint of the coming murder, the King would have seen the trap, and would either have prematurely taken fright or have had an opportunity of screwing himself up to endure the spectacle of his crime and so perhaps have avoided giving
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himself away in Hamlet’s eyes. He must be lured gradually and unconsciously into the trap, and then caught—squealing. In other words, the audience must feel satisfied that he knows nothing of what awaits him, until the jaws snap; if they do not feel this, the sport of the great Claudius-drive will be spoilt.

He must know nothing, but they must know everything. How, then, was Shakespeare to make the parallelism plain to the spectators? Neither before nor during the play can he tell them what is going to happen. Yet somehow he must take them into his confidence, for, unless the identity of the Gonzago story and the speech of the Ghost is made absolutely clear, the dramatic effect of the play scene may altogether miscarry with the generality. Not only will they fail to anticipate the climax and so miss the keen pleasure of watching, with Hamlet, the unconscious Mouse drawing nearer and nearer the trap; they will not fully understand what is taking place at all. It seems at first sight a pretty dilemma; how did Shakespeare get out of it? Stage-craft offered him the means of escape. He put the whole plot into a dumb-show. “Belike this show”, remarks Ophelia, who gives us the clue not for the last time in this scene, “imports the argument of the play.” It does; and it imports so successfully that we do not notice anything wrong about the play while it is being acted. The dumb-show is, as it were, a flash of revelation, which discloses to even the stupidest member of the audience all the facts he needs to know at the earliest possible moment of the scene; and then fades as suddenly as it has come.

That such was the technical purpose of the dumb-show is borne out by the fact that there appears to be no other example in Elizabethan drama of a dumb-show setting forth an argument. The device, which was a common one and by no means growing old-fashioned by the date of Hamlet as some suppose, was normally employed either (i) to foreshadow the contents of a play (or an act) by means of a symbolical or historical tableau, as when for example, to quote Creizenach, “in The Spanish Tragedy the fearful termination of the wedding feast is prefigured in dumb-show, in which torch-bearers enter, followed by a black-robed Hymen who blows out their torches”; or (ii) to save the dramatist the trouble of composing dialogue for part of the action by representing it in pantomime, which was often then “explained by some one acting as intermediary between performers and audience, this person being usually designated as Chorus, but sometimes as Presenter”. The dumb-show in Hamlet belongs to neither category; it is an anticipation in full action of the spoken scene that follows, and as such would be entirely superfluous in any ordinary drama. For his Gonzago-play Shakespeare could not do without an argument in pantomime; and he is careful to inform the spectators, through the mouth of Ophelia, that the show is intended to perform this unusual function lest any doubt should linger in their minds about the parallelism. He also makes amusing use of the convention of the presenter, as we shall see later.

It may here be objected that a dumb-show which is generally omitted on the modern stage can hardly be as dramatically essential as I claim. The omission, however, is only feasible because the modern producer thinks he can

1 Creizenach, English Drama in the Age of Shakespeare, pp. 388–90; cf. also Hunter apud Furness, Variorum Hamlet, note 3.2.127.
safely assume that the bulk of his audience “know their Hamlet” before they enter the theatre, having read the play at school or elsewhere; that in fact they already possess the information which the dumb-show was designed to communicate to them. Moreover, the assumption is sometimes incorrect; and I have myself, sitting in the gallery, where Shakespearian criticism is always interesting because at its most fearless and unliterary, overheard a discussion between two spectators who were mystified by the Gonzago-play simply because the story of Hamlet was new to them and the producer had deprived them of the assistance which Shakespear provided. Hamlet was not written for ex-pupils of modern secondary schools, but for Elizabethans, many of them illiterate, who came to the theatre without any previous knowledge of the play, and for whom the outline of the story could not be made too plain. For it is the outline we are here concerned with; subtler dramatic points, intended for the “censure” of the judicious, might pass over the heads of the groundlings, as Shakespeare knew well enough.

But, I hear others object, did not Shakespeare find the dumb-show in the old Hamlet and just take it over as it stood without much thought about it one way or another? And is not, therefore, all talk of design on his part beside the mark? The answer to this is, first, that we do not know what the old Hamlet contained. The Bad Quarto text of 1603, it is true, gives us an argument-dumb-show before the Gonzago-play, but that tells us little, since it probably means nothing more than that the pirate was setting down what he remembered of the performance of Shakespeare’s Hamlet at the Globe. And, if we enquire of the late and very corrupt Der bestrafte

Brudermord for evidence, we find something still less helpful, viz. a dumb-show without any spoken play to follow. Even, however, if we grant the premiss, if we assume that Shakespeare did borrow both dumb-show and Gonzago-play from his predecessor, from Kyd or some other, there still remains a second reply to the objection. A revising dramatist, who takes over material from the play he is working upon, accepts thereby responsibility for it. And that Shakespeare accepted the responsibility consciously is shown by the comments of Hamlet and Ophelia on the dumb-show immediately it is finished, which prove it to be an integral and deliberate part of his text. This being so, it is incredible that he, a practical man of the theatre, would have retained so elaborate a stage-business, which involves the provision of “a bank of flowers” together with pantomime by six or seven players, unless he attached some dramatic significance to it. Those who see no need for the dumb-show are, in effect, charging Shakespeare with a surprising lack of consideration for his fellows at the Globe. They do more; they impute gross carelessness, since if they are right he must have borrowed the dumb-show from the old play without noticing that it creates an exceedingly awkward dramatic situation for his two principal characters.

I come here to the most powerful of all objections to my justification of the dumb-show. Surely it is absurd to suppose—so the objectors urge—that Shakespeare adopted or retained this device in order to avoid divulging the point of the spoken play to Claudius, when Claudius sits watching the device itself which includes every circumstance of his crime, poisoning through the ear and all? This is the crux from which,
as explained in Chapter 1, the whole present enquiry set out, the crux to which Dr Greg first directed the serious attention of critics and on which he himself erected a new and comprehensive theory of Hamlet. Without any doubt whatever Claudius remains on the stage while the dumb-show is proceeding; yet, though he rushes shrieking from the room when the murder is later repeated in dramatic form, he is apparently quite unconcerned by its mimic representation. There are people who will believe any crudity or carelessness of Shakespeare; but he cannot possibly have been unaware of this seeming inconsistency, as those who explain the dumb-show as unconscious borrowing are bound to assume. He must have been perfectly cognisant of the dramatic issues involved, and have seen the difficulty about Claudius and the dumb-show three centuries before Dr Greg. There is, therefore, we may be sure, some satisfactory way out of it, if only we can discover it.

Dr Greg’s own solution, outlined above,¹ may be thrown into the form of the following syllogism: inasmuch as the King watched the dumb-show unmoved, he cannot have recognised it as a representation of his crime; and, if the dumb-show did not represent the crime, then the story of the Ghost must be false. I have dealt with this theory at length elsewhere,² and need not here repeat my arguments. I must, however, point out that the syllogism is impregnable as it stands, and that if we are to escape the conclusion we have to rebut the premiss. There are only two ways of doing this: we must show either that the King was not watching the
dumb-show (which we shall later find is the true solution), or that he was not unmoved as he watched it. The second alternative, which is the explanation most widely entertained by critics who have given any thought to the matter, has been wittily described by Dr Pollard as the “second tooth” theory, since it implies that Hamlet deliberately tests the King twice, in the dumb-show and then by means of Lucianus, and that Claudius is sufficiently strong-nerved to stand the first trial but breaks down under the second.³ Mr Granville-Barker, who accepts this interpretation, tells me that it is quite actuall on the stage, and on such an issue there is no higher authority. Yet, if a layman may be so daring, I cannot help thinking that the double test is less dramatically effective than the single one, especially if the minds of the audience (but not the mind of Claudius) have been prepared for the test of Lucianus, by means of the dumb-show, which intensifies their excitement because it informs them exactly what the dénouement will be, in the manner described above. Indeed, I suspect that “barren spectators”, whose needs Shakespeare always had to bear in mind, would fail altogether to see the point of this double-trial, would be puzzled at the King enduring the dumb-show and wonder why, having passed that test, he should fly from the second enactment of the poisoning.

But we do not need to stand upon disputable points, since we have grounds far more relative. The real weakness of the “second tooth” theory is that there is not a word in the text


that can be quoted in support of it. It gets us out of the difficulty, it is true, but there is nothing to show that this is the way Shakespeare intended us to get out of it. It would, I think, be going too far to say that an interpretation entirely lacking in textual support should be ruled out as illegitimate, but it must assuredly be considered very hazardous; more especially as Hamlet refers several times to the test before and after it takes place, without hinting in any way that the dumb-show is part of it. On the contrary, everything he says clearly shows that he has nothing in mind but the speech, his speech, and that it is this which is to "catch the conscience of the King". He asks the First Player to study "a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines" (2.2.544); and the opening words of 3.2—"Speak the speech I pray you as I pronounced it to you"—show him coaching the same player in the delivery of his lines before the play begins; while in his injunction to Horatio to be keenly on the watch he is even more explicit. Let me repeat his words:

There is a play to-night before the king,
One scene of it comes near the circumstance
Which I have told thee of my father's death.
I prithee when thou seest that act afoot,
Even with the very comment of thy soul
Observe my uncle—if his occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
It is a damned ghost that we have seen.

"One scene...that act...in one speech"; such reiterated insistence upon a single point in the coming performance seems almost designed to make it impossible for the audience to entertain "second tooth" notions; and I suspect that this was actually Shakespeare's intention. In any event, our expectant attention having been wholly directed upon a speech, the dumb-show takes us completely by surprise. Equally pointed are Hamlet's words after Claudius and the court have departed in confusion:

Hamlet. O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?
Horatio. Very well, my lord.
Hamlet. Upon the talk of the poisoning?
Horatio. I did very well note him.

Not, be it observed, "upon the poisoning", which might be taken as covering the dumb-show, but "upon the talk of the poisoning", which points to the speech of Lucianus and to nothing else. Yet, had Shakespeare meant us to accept the dumb-show as Hamlet's first attempt to tent his uncle to the quick, how easily he might have warned us of the fact! A couple of words would have been enough. The "double tooth" theory will not work: not merely is it unsupported by any authority in the text, but the references in the text to the testing of the King are indisputably confined to the speech of the murderer. Nor is this all, for I have now to prove, and prove from the text, that Hamlet cannot have planned the dumb-show, inasmuch as he disliked dumb-shows in general, is as completely taken aback by this one as we are ourselves, and is withal exceedingly annoyed at it.

Miching mallecho

Shakespeare needed a dumb-show for technical reasons, but he had to furnish a dramatic explanation for its presence. He had, that is, to lead the audience to attribute it to someone in
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the play. Clearly there are only two possible alternatives: either it is performed at the express command of Hamlet, the master of the ceremonies, or the responsibility for it rests upon the shoulders of the players alone. A brief review of the Prince's relations with the players will help us to see which alternative is to be preferred.

After his disillusionment with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet is delighted to welcome the players to Elsinore. He selects immediately a rather bombastic passionate speech from a Dido and Aeneas play, and bids the First Player recite it. This is done with such fire and effect that Polonius at any rate is greatly impressed; the actor is evidently a vigorous elocutionist, and though Hamlet's comment is restrained—"Tis well" is all he says—he appears well satisfied. The arrangements for the performance of a play are then made; and, when the First Player next appears, Hamlet is giving him careful instructions how the all-important "dozen or sixteen lines", inserted by his own hand, are to be delivered. Commentators have dwelt much upon this conversation, since it seems to let us into Shakespeare's own views about the methods of his craft; but in so doing they have overlooked its connection with the Hamlet story. To begin with, Hamlet's words show that his inserted speech, which is of course now written, is to be one of "passion", and that the passion referred to is not love but anger or crime—the passion of the torrential, tempestuous, whirlwind species, which the Herods and the Termagants of the old plays had so grossly exaggerated. They show, furthermore, that, despite his general approval of the rendering of the Pyrrhus speech, Hamlet is nervous, very nervous, about the First Player's capacity to recite his lines properly. This is natural, of course, seeing that the speech is to be the chief instrument in his unmasking of the King. Yet Hamlet, it is quite obvious, is not thinking primarily about Claudius at all; he is thinking of his lines. He wants full justice done to his essay in the art of drama. Note, too, what it is particularly that he fears:

If you mouth it as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand thus, but use all gently... O, it offends me to the soul, to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise: I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erroding Termagant, it out-herods Herod, pray you avoid it... O there be players that have seen play—and heard others praise, and that highly—not to speak it prophanely, that neither having th'accent of Christians, nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed, that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably.

Surely all this sheds a very remarkable light upon what happens immediately after in the play scene? First of all we have one of those dumb-shows that Hamlet thinks fit for groundlings alone—here, alas! only too explicable. Next we have a ridiculous prologue-jingle which Hamlet treats with undisguised contempt. Is it possible to hold him responsible for either of these effects? 1

Critics have seen that the dumb-show creates difficulties in

1 I think it probable that Shakespeare himself held such stage-tricks in contempt. He certainly laughs at them in the comic dumb-show and presentation which precedes the Pyramus and Thisbe play in A Midsummer-Night's Dream.
regard to Claudius; they have not seen that it creates difficulties quite as great in regard to Hamlet himself. For what is he to make of this premature exhibition of his mouse-trap in all its naked outline? If he has not ordered it, will he not be vexed at its appearance? The dialogue that follows it between Ophelia and himself makes it quite clear, or at least should make it quite clear if only people would read Hamlet with their eyes open, that he is very angry indeed; and his comment, "Marry, this is miching mallecho, it means mischief", shows upon whom he fastens the blame. But let us have the dialogue before us, that we may know exactly what we are dealing with.

Ophelia. What means this, my lord?

Hamlet. Marry, this is miching mallecho, it means mischief.

Ophelia. Belike this show imports the argument of the play.

Enter Prologue.

Hamlet. We shall know by this fellow. The players cannot keep counsel, they'll tell all.

Ophelia. Will a' tell us what this show meant?

Hamlet. Ay, or any show that you will show him—be not you ashamed to show, he'll not shame to tell you what it means.

Ophelia. You are naught, you are naught, I'll mark the play.

Prologue. For us and for our tragedy,
Here stooping to your clemency,
We beg your hearing patiently.

Hamlet. Is this a prologue, or the posy of a ring?

When we bear in mind the convention of dumb-shows and presenters, explained above, the situation expressed in these lines can hardly be disputed. After the dumb-show a

\[1\] Vide p. 147.

chorus or presenter might be expected; and, when the traverse on the inner-stage hid the dumb-show and a player thereupon appeared before it, Shakespeare's audience would naturally take him for a presenter, come to explain the show that had just finished. Our text, it is true, reads "Enter Prologue", but Hamlet is a stage-play not a book, and neither the Prince of Denmark nor seventeenth-century spectators would recognise the player as a prologue. On the contrary, Hamlet's words "We shall know by this fellow" make it clear that he takes the player for a presenter who will explain "what this show meant"; in other words, that the audience (including Claudius) will now learn all about the play that was to follow. In short, Hamlet sees that his speech is about to be rendered superfluous, and the spring of the mouse-trap released before the moment has arrived. His anxiety is evident in the sentence that follows the one just quoted: "The players cannot keep counsel, they'll tell all!" It is evident too, surely, in the dialogue that takes place immediately after the dumb-show, which exhibits Ophelia's attention concentrated upon the meaning of the pantomime and Hamlet's upon something quite different, viz. the conduct of the players, conduct which "means mischief". For the words "miching mallecho" I take to refer, not to the crime of Claudius, as most commentators seem vaguely to imagine, but to the skulking iniquity of the players, who have introduced this unauthorised and ridiculous dumb-show, and so have almost ruined the whole plot. "Mallecho" is a Spanish word, current in England at the time, meaning misdeed or wickedness, while

\[1\] Dowden quotes Shirley, Gentleman of Venice: "Be humble, Thou man of mallecho, or thou diest."
"miching" means at once lurking like an enemy or a treacherous dog, in order to attack from behind, and playing truant like a schoolboy; both meanings being apt to the First Player, who had received his lesson from Hamlet before the interlude began and was now playing him false. Yet, all's well that ends well; the dumb-show, as we shall see, passes unnoticed by the King, and the presenter, who would have "told all", turns out to be only a silly prologue.

Should any reader doubt the foregoing interpretation, let him ask himself why Shakespeare introduced the prologue. Is it possible to explain the "posy" upon any other reading than that just given? Shakespeare could not have penned a seemingly idiotic jingle like this without some deliberate purpose in mind. It is a gimcrack from the players' box of tricks; and Hamlet's question, "Is this a prologue, or the posy of a ring?" vents at once his scorn and his relief.

Thus the dialogue between Hamlet and Ophelia which follows the dumb-show means that the show itself is entirely unexpected by him and exceedingly displeasing. This explanation, however, carries with it a point of greater significance than any yet noticed. Hamlet's anxiety concerning what the supposed presenter may reveal, his cry "The players cannot keep counsel, they'll tell all!", would be pointless if Claudius had been watching the dumb-show, which reveals every circumstance of his crime and "tells all" with a vengeance. In a word, that anxiety is altogether incompatible with the "second tooth" theory. Not only does Hamlet not plan to test his uncle twice, but his uncle has not been subjected to a first test at all. We are, accordingly, thrown back upon the alternative theory; the only other way, as we have seen above, in which the apparent indifference of the King to the dumb-show can be accounted for, viz. that the show has somehow escaped his notice. That this is the true state of affairs is, indeed, clear from another passage of the text not yet quoted. "Belike this show imports the argument of the play," little Ophelia had remarked to Hamlet. The interlude then proceeds, and at the end of the dialogue between Player King and Player Queen, Claudius, who has grown restive under the glaring references to second marriages, rounds on Hamlet at the latter's pointed question to his mother and sharply enquires, "Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?" The query, unconsciously repeating Ophelia's word, unheard by the questioner because spoken aside to Hamlet, makes it certain that the King cannot have seen the dumb-show, which is the argument of the play, as every member of the audience is now aware. In short, the repetition of the word "argument" was designed by Shakespeare to underline for us the King's ignorance of the dumb-show. And "no offence"! Is it really credible for a moment that, if he had sat watching that detailed revelation of his crime in pantomime a minute or two earlier, he could have uttered those words—to Hamlet of all people?

The King was not looking at the dumb-show; he was doing something else. What was he doing? Halliwell-Phillipps long ago suggested that he missed seeing the show because he was talking to the Queen while it was going on. This is in part the true explanation, but it is not satisfactory.

1 O.E.D. cites a good illustration from 1609: "A miching curre, biting her behind, when she cannot turne backe."
as Halliwell-Phillipps states it, inasmuch as he says nothing about the subject of the conversation, is unable to show how the business is made clear to the audience—an essential point—and fails to observe that the episode forms one of the most exciting issues of the play scene. It will be convenient to defer a full exposition of the matter until the mechanism of the play scene is all in order. Here I need only register my belief that the King’s conversation begins, not with Gertrude, but with Polonius, when, as Hamlet supports the love-distraught theory by throwing himself at Ophelia’s feet, the old man exultantly exclaims “O ho! do you mark that?”; that its subject is Hamlet’s behaviour to Ophelia and the standing dispute between King and Chief Councillor concerning the cause of his madness; and that the Queen is forced to join in, in order to hide her own confusion, by Hamlet’s cruel sally: “for look you how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within two hours”. It is conjecture, of course, but conjecture based upon the text, growing naturally out of the general dramatic situation, and withal—or so I venture to hold—the only possible way of playing the scene, if the previous lines of my argument are sound.

Leaving that, however, for later treatment, we must return to the players, for there are still points to be cleared up about them. Once the interlude is under way they give Hamlet no further trouble until Lucianus enters with his “vial”. He comes on at line 242 and he begins to speak at line 255. What is he doing all the time? He is acting the stage-villain, making mouths, grimacing, strutting about the boards; in short, he is doing those very things which Hamlet had strictly enjoined the First Player to avoid. The Prince is stung to anger, this time more violent than before. “Begin, mur-

derer!” he shouts at him; “Pox! leave thy damned faces and begin! Come—the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge.” The first sentence is obvious enough in intention; but what does Hamlet mean by the “croaking raven”? Richard Simpson showed that the phrase is a telescoped version of the following two lines from The True Tragedy of Richard the Third:

The screeching Raven sits croaking for revenge.
Whole heads of beasts comes bellowing for revenge.

But no one seems to have observed the point of the quotation in Hamlet’s mouth. The True Tragedy, an old chronicle play belonging to the Queen’s company of actors, is an extreme example of Elizabethan rant, the speech from which these lines are quoted being a particularly outrageous specimen of its quality. Miss Bradbrook (Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy, p. 99) describes it as “probably the most prodigious piece of epiphora in the English drama” and again as “a part to tear a cat in and worth the delay in the action”. Here are the most striking lines (Malone Soc. reprint II. 1880–1893):

Meethinckes their ghoasts comes gaping for revenge,
Whom I haue slaine in reaching for a Crowne.
Clarence complaines, and crieth for revenge.
My Nephues bloods, revenge, revenge, doth cri,
The headlesse Peeres comes pressing for revenge.
And every one cries, let the tyrant die.
The Sunne by day shines hotely for revenge.
The Moone by night eclipseth for revenge.
The stars are turned to Comets for revenge,
The Planets chaunge their courses for revenge.
The birds sing not, but sorrow for revenge.
The silly lambs sit bleating for revenge.
The screeking Rauen sits croaking for revenge.
Whole heads of beasts comes bellowing for revenge.
And all, yea all the world I think,
Cries for revenge, and nothing but revenge.

DWH
clear. He is exhorting the player, in bitter sarcasm, to bellow the critical speech of the evening in the robustious, ranting manner of the old chronicle plays—in short, to "o'er-do Termagant and out-herod Herod".

And who is this Lucianus? Who but the First Player himself? Hamlet had entrusted him with his "speech", and had (politely) warned him not to mouth, bellow, or strut as he delivered it. Surely we need not hesitate to assume that the warning and the sarcasm were addressed to the same person? The assumption, however, brings us up against the vexed problem of the identification of Hamlet's inserted speech, over which much paper and ink have been expended. The speech, as we have seen, was one of passion, and the only other lines in the Gonzago-play which would answer to this description are those of Baptista, which would be spoken by the boy in the cast. Moreover, it is the words of the murderer which cause Claudius to brench, and there is therefore a strong presumption that they were Hamlet's contribution. It is to them that he directs Horatio's close attention before the play begins, and to them also that he refers in his glee after the play is over. Lastly, they are the only words in the interlude which point directly at the crime of Claudius:

Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing,
Confederate season, else no creature seeing,
Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,

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The "secure hour", the foul nature of the drug, its swift effect upon the "wholesome" body: all are the same. These considerations, taken in conjunction with our unmasking of the First Player, should leave no doubt upon the matter. The poisoner's speech is Hamlet's echo of his father's words, and the poisoner is the rascally leader of the Gonzago troupe.

Need we hesitate any longer to assume that Shakespeare made the players his scapegoat for the dumb-show? I would go further. The temptation to guy some rival company of actors in this by-play must have been almost irresistible; and my belief is that Shakespeare did not attempt to resist it.¹

¹ Vide Appendix C, "The Identity of the Gonzago Troupe".
We have now dealt with seven of the eleven questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, not to mention one or two additional problems which have cropped up on the way. Those that remain, however, are perhaps the most important of all. Let me recall them to the reader. What does Hamlet mean by his remark to Claudius “I eat the air, promise-crammed”? Why does he remind Polonius of his enacting Julius Caesar “once i’th’university”? What is his object in making the murderer of the Gonzago-play the nephew and not the brother of the king? And, lastly, why should the entire court, who know nothing of the real poisoning, assume later that Hamlet has behaved outrageously to his uncle and even threatened him with death?

Only one of these problems has, I think, been previously discussed, the last; and only one critic has discussed it. Dr Bradley alone has perceived that something needs clearing up in the attitude of the court after the play scene. He writes:

The state of affairs at Court at this time, though I have not seen it noticed by critics, seems to me puzzling. It is quite clear [and here he refers to passages which will presently be noted] that everyone sees in the play-scene a gross and menacing insult to the King. Yet no one shows any sign of perceiving in it also an accusation of murder. Surely that is strange. Are we perhaps meant to understand that they do perceive this, but out of subservience choose to ignore the fact?\(^1\)

The evidence on which he relies for the existence of the “state of affairs” which he finds so puzzling consists of four passages which merit close attention. The first are the words


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that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern use of the King and Queen immediately after their exit in the play scene. The King, they tell Hamlet, “is in his retirement marvellous distempered”, and the cause of the distemper they take to be “choler”; while as for the Queen she is “in most great affliction of spirit” and Hamlet’s “behaviour hath struck her into amazement and admiration”.\(^1\) Secondly, we find the two sycophants in the following scene closeted with Claudius himself, and discoursing to him, to quote Dr Bradley again, “on the extreme importance of his preserving his invaluable life, as though Hamlet’s insanity had now clearly shown itself to be homicidal”,\(^2\) and discoursing thus in reply to words of his, which are themselves plain enough—

I like him not, nor stands it safe with us
To let his madness range. Therefore prepare you,
I your commission will forthwith dispatch,
And he to England shall along with you.
The terms of our estate may not endure
Hazard so near’s as doth hourly grow
Out of his brawls.\(^3\)

He is suggesting to his two listeners that Hamlet is suffering from homicidal mania; and they accept the suggestion.

Thirdly, the Queen sends for Hamlet; and Polonius coaches her for her part as they await his coming:

Tell him his pranks have been too broad to bear with,
And that your grace hath screened and stood between
Much heat and him.\(^4\)

\(^{1}\) 3.2.301, 3.2.312–7, 327–8; “amazement and admiration” may be paraphrased “bewilderment and astonishment” in modern English.


\(^{3}\) 3.3.1–7; Qa prints “browes”; perhaps “braves” was the word Shakespeare wrote.

\(^{4}\) 3.4.2–4.
The Multiple Mouse-trap

What pranks are these which Gertrude has so much difficulty in excusing? They clearly concern Claudius very nearly—"Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended" are her first words—and equally clearly they are pranks of a dangerous character. For the Queen, as Dr Bradley notes, is almost as frightened as her husband. "When, at the opening of the interview between Hamlet and his mother, the son, instead of listening to her remonstrances, roughly assumes the offensive, she becomes alarmed; and when, on her attempting to leave the room, he takes her by the arm and forces her to sit down, she is terrified, cries out 'Thou wilt not murder me?' and screams for help,"—a scream which Polonius, who is as jumpy as the rest, echoes from behind the arras, very unhappily for himself. Gertrude's terror cannot be due to her son's madness alone, since half an hour before she feared him so little that she had begged him to come and sit beside her to watch the play. What has happened meanwhile to alarm her? Certainly it has nothing to do with the discovery of Claudius's crime. Of that she is entirely ignorant, as is proved by her words to Hamlet later in this same scene. Nor can it be supposed for a moment that Rosenkranz and Guildenstern have guessed the secret, as Dr Bradley in his perplexity half-heartedly suggests, and that "out of subservience" they pretend "to ignore the fact".

Fourthly, a few scenes later Claudius has to persuade Laertes that he is himself personally not in any way responsible for the murder of Polonius. The proof of his innocence is given off the stage in the presence of witnesses chosen by the dead man's son; but something of its character is revealed by subsequent references which show that the King's main line had been to convince him

That he which hath your noble father slain
Pursued my life.

And his success is manifest from Laertes's reply:

It well appears: but tell me,

Why you proceeded not against these feats,
So criminal and so capital in nature,

As by your safety, greatness, wisdom, all things else,
You mainly were stirred up.

What then were

So criminal and so capital in nature,

of which Hamlet had been guilty, as the King has proved to Laertes by witnesses? They include, of course, the murder of Polonius, but clearly they also involve the person of Claudius himself. When had that person been threatened? What does it all mean?

On the face of it, the problem seems capable of a very simple solution. The foregoing suggestions of Hamlet's homicidal mania, of his being a menace to the throne and withal a dangerous lunatic, may all be traced to King Claudius. We are not told his reasons, but tyrants do not give reasons; their words are enough. And Claudius, so the argument might run, aware that Hamlet knew his secret, would stick at nothing to discredit him in the eyes of his mother and the court. Are we not informed, indeed, that he invents "bugs and goblins" in Hamlet's life in order to blacken his character with the King of England? And if he

2 4.5.201-18; 4.7.1-29.
3 5.2.22.
says, as he virtually does say in the speech just quoted from the opening of 3.3, that his nephew is bent upon his assassination, will not any sycophant of the court accept his statement in words very similar to those used by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Hamlet’s motives required no explaining. He was the dispossessed heir, as everyone knew, gone mad from “ambition adust”; what more need be said?

The argument, based on the passages cited by Dr Bradley and above enumerated, looks plausible enough, until confronted with another passage, which Dr Bradley has strangely overlooked. Before Claudius says anything at all to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about Hamlet’s murderous intentions, his nephew has himself hinted at them in unmistakable fashion to the two spies immediately after the play scene is over:

Rosencrantz. Good my lord, what is your cause of discomfit?
Hamlet. Sir, I lack advancement.

Rosencrantz. How can that be, when you have the voice of the king himself for your succession in Denmark?

Hamlet. Ay, sir, but “While the grass grows”—the proverb is something musty.

In short, the heir to the throne does not propose to wait his turn, but to anticipate the course of nature by action. It is Hamlet, then, and not Claudius, who first broaches the subject of assassination, and of ambition as the motive therefor. And his words, harking back as they do to the King’s proclamation of Hamlet as his heir in full Council at the beginning of the play, are clearly also connected (as the pirate of the First Quarto unconsciously testifies 1) with the previous

1 Vide pp. 120–21.

talk about ambition with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at 2.2.245–68, and with the threats in the nunny scene of ambition and revenge; threats of which the royal eavesdropper is quick to see the point, as his subsequent speech shows. Finally, they give the clue to the four problems of the play scene which still remain to be solved, and to which we may now return.

“How fares our cousin Hamlet?” solicitously asks Uncle Claudius, as he enters to attend the play. “Excellent i’ faith,” retorts Hamlet, “of the chameleon’s dish, I eat the air, promise-crammed—you cannot feed capons so.” It is a pregnant quibble, as we shall see later, with more than one meaning; but the surface sense is patent enough. “I am tired,” says Hamlet, “of being fed with mere promises of the succession.” And the theme of his talk with Polonius immediately after is the death of tyrants. But hints are not sufficient to justify the attitude of Claudius, Gertrude and the courtiers when the play scene is over, an attitude which implies that Hamlet has threatened his uncle in a fashion so obvious that all have seen it. We must, then, examine the interlude itself and discover, if we can, this strange menace, a menace which, as is now becoming obvious, will alone explain the passages that have caused Dr Bradley such perplexity, together with others he has passed over.

Assuming, as we ought, that none of those present at the Gonzago-play, save Hamlet, Horatio and Claudius, know anything of the murder of King Hamlet, or even suspect it, let us ask ourselves how this play would strike the other spectators, the rest of the court. The point intended for

2 Vide p. 135.
Claudius will be lost upon them, and though they will no doubt feel that the references to second marriages are offensive there is nothing menacing in those. But there is a point, a very menacing point indeed, which would require no explanation. First, the play is a drama of regicide, performed at the instigation of the rightful though dispossessed heir to the throne and in the royal presence itself. "No offence in't", indeed! An Elizabethan audience—the real audience—could not fail to catch the meaning of this, conscious as they were of the sensitiveness of royalty on such matters, more especially with the Essex rising of February 1601 fresh in their minds; a rising which had been preceded the day before by a performance of Shakespeare's Richard II in order to incite the people of London to rebellion and to show them that princes had been deposed and might be again. But the case was even worse than this; for who was the murderer of the play? Who but the nephew of the king, the Hamlet as it would seem of the Gonzago-allegory? In a word, Lucianus-Hamlet poisons Gonzago-Claudius before the assembled court! Could the courtiers, Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, the Queen herself, and the rest wonder that Claudius should break up the whole seditious business and leave the chamber? Or need we marvel that in the next scene Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should speak obsequiously but plainly of the dangers that threaten the majesty of Denmark?

But there is a still stranger thing to notice. The players' play gives no hint of the relationship between murderer and king; it is Hamlet himself who, chorus-like, supplies the information. Hamlet is therefore identifying himself with the assassin; and he underlines this in the passage about "the succession in Denmark" as he talks with Rosencrantz later. He wishes the court then to draw the deductions which, as we have seen, they did draw. In others words, he uses the play to threaten his uncle in a fashion which no one who sees it can mistake. It is a sudden dénouement, sudden like all Hamlet's actions, like his assumption of the "antic disposition" or his decision to have the Gonzago-play itself; and I think Shakespeare intended us to consider it unpremeditated. That is to say, Hamlet does not deliberately plan the identification before the interlude begins; it comes to him, as a stroke of genius, on the spur of the moment, when Lucianus enters. But it is

The flash and outbreak of a fiery mind,

which has already, as we have noted, been amusing itself, while uncle-father lurks behind the arras, with the notion of playing the rôle of "proud, revengeful, ambitious" nephew and of sparing "all that are married, save one". Reckless? But Hamlet, we have also seen, is always just about to kill the King—never more so than at this juncture!—so that recklessness is the natural consequence of his situation. Yet, as he says himself,

``Our indiscretion sometime serves us well, When our deep plots do pall."

1 In my note on Hamlet 3.2.243 I wrote: "Hamlet arranges two meanings to the Play." This seems to me, on second thoughts, prompted by conversation with Dr Pollard, to imply too much deliberation. Further, in the same note, I suggested that the identification should be made plain by dressing Lucianus in a black doublet like Hamlet's. This, which I still think would add great theatrical force to the episode, I now fear is dramatically inadmissible, since it infer previous instructions as to costume by Hamlet, which again implies deliberate planning.
If the interlude proved the Ghost honest, Hamlet intended to finish his uncle off immediately afterwards; that may be taken for granted. But what reason was there to give the world for the assassination? The Ghost's commands, the salvation of Gertrude, the family honour of the House of Denmark forbade any disclosure of the truth. The real meaning of the Gonzago story, the King's meaning, could not be revealed, because the Queen herself was involved. To what degree she was cognisant of the murder, or even an accomplice, Hamlet did not know; but however innocent she might be, a public exposure of Claudius would inevitably implicate his consort, who had also been consort of the murdered man. The crime of the King must at all costs be kept a secret. Hamlet was, therefore, obliged to furnish the court with some theory which would explain the Gonzago-play, account for the open discomfiture of his uncle which he hoped it would effect, and justify (or at any rate make explicable) the assassination that was to come after. His own rights gave him everything he required. He might have pleaded them in public or in Council after the deed was accomplished, but his sudden inspiration to hail Lucianus as his mimic shadow allows for a second interpretation of the play which it would occur to no one ignorant of his secret and Claudius's to call in question, and which would prepare the court for the execution to follow.

Hamlet's mouse-trap, then, catches both King and courtiers. For the former there is the talk of the poisoning and the act, the damning and unmistakable act, of pouring the leprous distilment into the ears of the sleeping man. For the latter

\[\text{Vide above, pp. 46-9.}\]

there is the spectacle of a monarch being done to death by his ambitious nephew. The two points are quite distinct and there is no danger of confusion between them. Claudius notices, of course, the description of Lucianus as "nephew to the king" and makes capital out of it later; but what Lucian says and does can leave no doubt in his mind that Hamlet has probed his secret to its deadly root. On the other hand, to Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Polonius and the rest, who have not been privileged to talk with King Hamlet's ghost, the play will suggest no reference to his death, which was due, as all men knew, to the bite of an adder.\(^1\) What they must see, because Hamlet takes care they shall not miss them, are the insults to the Queen in the allusions to the second marriage of widows, insults that leave them in a condition of horrified expectancy for what the mad Prince may do next. When, therefore, a murderer suddenly appears, who is announced as "nephew to the king", and then poisons him "for's estate", they cannot fail to understand for what purpose Hamlet had planned the play. The evening's entertainment is a complete success.

All the parts of the play scene are now in order, restored to their proper function according to what I believe was the design of the master craftsman. But we have not yet seen how the mechanism works. The test of our discoveries, the test which can alone ultimately justify them in the eyes of the world, is dramatic performance. Some day perhaps that test will come. For the present a bookman must do what he

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\(^{1}\) To suppose, as one of my friendly critics does, that the coincidence of a garden mise en scène for both deaths would arouse their suspicions is surely to find Scotland Yard at Elsinore.
The Multiple Mouse-trap

can. In a word, taking the text of the Second Quarto as my
guide, I shall describe the scene as I think Shakespeare in-
tended it to be acted, as it would be acted were I pro-
ducer and had instructed the actors in their parts. The
description will involve here and there a little repetition of
points already made above. But the reader will perhaps for-
give that, for the sake of a straightforward account, undis-
tracted by argument “about it and about”.

The play scene restored

Before attempting to interpret a scene in Shakespeare there
is one question which it is well to deal with first: In what
mood are the principal characters when it begins?

It is not difficult to guess the mood of Gertrude. She is
possessed by that indomitable placidity which seldom deserts
her. She is, of course, distressed at the madness of her son,
which she steadfastly attributes, whatever her husband or
Polonius may say, to “his father’s death and our o’er-hasty
marriage”; but she comes to the play with a glad heart, for
she sees hopes of Hamlet’s recovery in his interest in such
amusements. She is therefore entirely unsuspicous of his
intentions, and little guesses what he has particularly in
store for herself. Claudius also looks with favour on the idea
of the play. He is as delighted as the Queen when in the
preceding scene he hears from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
that Hamlet proposes to entertain them all, for it pleases him
to learn that his nephew’s mind is occupied with anything so
healthy and innocent. He has no suspicions of the play, and
no interest in it; he attends it simply to give Hamlet en-
couragement, “and drive his purpose into these delights”.
Moreover, he is thinking of other things. Hamlet’s talk with
Ophelia, which he has just overheard from his place of spying,
has finally convinced him that the Prince is suffering from
the disease of ambition, and that the disease may prove
dangerous to the reigning monarch. He determines therefore
to watch, not the play, but Hamlet, narrowly. With him
enters Polonius, the champion of the rival theory, who is not
in the least satisfied that the King is right, and has insisted on
a second seance behind the arras, in which Gertrude shall take
the place of Ophelia as decoy.\footnote{Cf. pp. 135-6.}

Next of the train appears Ophelia herself, “of ladies most
deject and wretched”, with the pallor caused by her recent
terrible experience still in her cheeks. All she knows is
that Hamlet, her lover, her idol, her god, is mad. After his
outrageous conduct to her in the lobby, she is prepared for
anything. Her task is to endure patiently, and to do what she
can by soothing words to calm the ravings of that once
“noble and most sovereign reason”. Behind her walk
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, commissioned no doubt by
his majesty to keep a watchful eye upon the Prince. At any
rate, in regard to Hamlet’s “madness” they share Claudius’s
theory.

And Hamlet himself? His mood seems calm and self-
controlled. He has just given the players the most precise
instructions about the delivery of his speech, instructions
which prove him to be far the time clear-headed and col-
lected. In the exquisite and touching conversation that
follows with Horatio, a conversation in which Hamlet carries

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\footnote{Cf. pp. 135-6.}
on and develops the doctrine of οὐδὲν διὰ τοῦ αὐτοῦ already enjoined upon the First Player, he is at his very best. It is his one perfectly serene and untroubled moment in the whole play. Note, too, the apparent deliberation of his plans for the interlude. He entrusts Horatio with the task of fixing his eyes upon the King’s face during the play, and agrees with him to compare notes afterwards. The trumpets and kettle-drums (Claudius cannot do without these heralds) cut short their talk, and Hamlet adds in a hurried whisper: “They are coming to the play. I must be idle. Get you a place.” It is Shakespeare’s final clue as to his state of mind. Horatio and he must separate, so as not to appear to be in collusion. Moreover he has a part to play in this scene: “I must be idle”, that is to say “crazy”. Hamlet is assuming his “antic disposition” consciously and of set purpose.

Indeed, he has much to do and to think of. Would his all-important lines be spoken clearly and incisively? Would the players perform the interlude as he had directed? If the play passed off well he has no anxiety about Claudius; for, had the Ghost spoken truth, there was no escape for the “conscience of the king”. But “the play’s the thing” for Hamlet, chiefly because it ministers to one of the cravings of his nature, his delight in plots and counter-plots. Claudius calls him “most generous and free from all contriving”; and he is so as regards men whom he trusts, like Horatio, or admires, like Laertes. But with men he hates he is very different. He takes a malicious delight in hoodwinking, fooling, and tripping up his enemies, and his love of such employment accounts in part for his delay in killing the King. He wants to play with him as a cat plays with a mouse. All this being so, how excellent a contrivance the Gonzago-play is! It will feed to the full his lust for delving a yard below Claudius’s mines; it will hoist the King with his own petar. I have little doubt that Hamlet desires not merely to convict Claudius by means of the play but to put him on the rack and watch him writhing.

Claudius, however, is not his only objective. He knows the Gonzago-play and knows that it ought to catch the conscience of his mother also. He is not certain whether she is an accomplice in the crime or not. That must be tested. He will tent her to the quick, too, about her second marriage. Incest and adultery are ignored; it would be dangerous to hint at these before the assembled court, and he will have an opportunity of dealing with the matter privately afterwards. This fits in admirably with the design of making the whole thing a mouse-trap for his uncle. The King must not realise until the last moment what the play is about. He must therefore be led off the scent in the earlier part, which will deal exclusively with Gertrude. But others must be put off the scent also; the court must guess nothing of what is really afoot. How that is to be managed he does not yet know; but some device will suggest itself to his active brain.

Lastly, this interlude is his show. He is master of the revels; he has selected the scene to be played, and has even written a speech, the critical speech of the evening. He will be exceedingly anxious that the whole thing should go off well—anxious from the purely artistic point of view. Hamlet is greatly interested in drama. The players are his old friends, and he welcomes them with delight before he has even begun to think of the Gonzago scheme. He is thoroughly at home
The play scene restored

with them, and has found in their advent "a kind of joy"
greater than anything he has experienced since we first saw
him in his "nighted colour" at the beginning of his history.
Hamlet is a patron of the stage, like Southampton, Essex, and
other of Shakespeare's friends at Elizabeth's court. But he is
more than this. He is an actor himself, and never so much at
ease as when playing a part. Throughout almost the whole
play we see him in some rôle or other. The part of madman
is, of course, his main disguise, but it has many varieties: the
distracted-lover variety, in two sorts at least, if not more;
the variety for "tedious old fools"; and the variety of a
subtler kind for his two schoolfellows, the sponges.

Nor can we doubt that this play-acting gives him intense
satisfaction. It keeps his mind off that

something in his soul,
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood—

and which comes uppermost whenever he is left alone. It
also aids him in his delving operations against Claudius and
his myrmidons. And never does he obtain a more magnifi-
cent opportunity than in the play scene of displaying his
great histrionic gifts, and such dramatic talent as he possessed;
for since all his dupes are now gathered together watching
him, he has to act all his parts at once. He "must be idle", of
course—that is his habitual mask in the presence of the
enemy; but he will use his madness to deadly purpose. He
will shoot his poisoned arrows now at his mother, now at
his uncle. He will fool Polonius, be love-distraught with
Ophelia, while Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the rest of
the court have to be hoodwinked. There is his part, too, in

the play itself to be considered; here he must be "chorus",
driving home the points so that not one of the varying
impressions he desires to create shall miss its mark. It is a
complicated and difficult task he has set himself, needing a
clear head and a steady pulse.

To imagine Hamlet thinking thus helps us to disentangle
the issues for ourselves; and at one time or other, no doubt,
all these matters are present to his mind. But that mind does
not really move in this pedestrian fashion at all. Had Shakes-
peare chosen to give us a glimpse of it between the nunbery
scene and the play scene, in the act—shall we say?—of com-
posing the "dozen or sixteen lines", we may be sure that it
would not have been "casting beyond" itself, like the brain
of Polonius, into what was about to happen or what it ought
to do in the coming crisis. It would dispatch the speech for
Lucianus, with the speed it later pens the "changing letter",
and would then turn to something quite remote from
the purpose, something we should never have expected.

Hamlet's brilliant handling of the successive situations in the
play scene must be set down to genius not calculation.

The court enters for the play, and Hamlet and Horatio
hurriedly break off their colloquy, Horatio taking up a
place close to the seat in which Ophelia will afterwards sit,
Hamlet remaining in the centre of the stage to receive the
King and Queen, as befits the host. The King, Queen and
Polonius enter first of the train, and Claudius, polite as ever
to his "chiefest courtier, cousin and his son", enquires how
he fares, eyeing him cautiously the while for further evidence
of his attitude towards him. He has not long to wait. Hamlet
The Multiple Mouse-trap
deftly catches up the word “fares” by the wrong end, and
replies: “Excellent i’faith, of the Chameleon’s dish, I eat the
air, Promise-crammed, you cannot feed Capsons so.” The
commas and capitals come from the Second Quarto, and
they indicate emphatic and deliberate utterance. The speech
is one of those right-and-left double-barrelled shots so dear to
the heart of sportsmen, hitting both marks. “Promise-
crammed” and the pun upon “air” persuade Claudius that
the rightful heir is still brooding over his wrongs; while
“capon” has a meaning for the King also, which he misses,
though we shall understand it at the end of the scene. On
the other hand, the shot pierces the centre of the Polonius
target, for “promise” can be taken as referring to Ophelia’s
broken troth, and “capon” denotes a young cock who is
deprived of all capacity of love-making, or (as the
popular jest of the time had it) a pullet stuffed with billets-
doux; either way the speech points to thwarted love, and the
lady’s father might take his choice. Altogether, it was a good
beginning to the evening.

The King parries the thrust at him by affecting not to
understand it, and Hamlet with an air of contempt turns
from him to his other quarry. But it is only to strike at
Claudius once again; for, why, as he fools the “capital call”
about his prowess as an actor, does he lead him to speak of
the scene in the Capitol, if not to remind his uncle and the
court of a famous precedent for the assassination of tyrants?
Nor must we miss Shakespeare’s tragic irony here. Polonius
will play the part of Caesar in real life, a few scenes later, when
the “brute part” is Hamlet’s. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,
we are also to remember, are listening intently to all this, and
will recall it in the light of subsequent events. The thwarted-
ambition theory is well afoot as the King moodily seats himself
in his chair of state. But Hamlet has many parts to play
in this strange eventful history, and it amuses him now to
give the old councillor a good run for his money. To enter
fully into the business, and all which it involves, we must
consider for a moment how the actors are arranging them-
sewes upon the stage.

The courtiers come in; and at once break into two groups,
flanking the entrance to the inner-stage, so that the real
audience may see the play properly. Claudius advances with
his party, which includes Gertrude, Polonius, Rosencrantz
and Guildenstern, and takes his seat right on the front of the
stage, to allow the audience to watch his face carefully
throughout the scene. On his inner side sits the Queen, like
him half-face to the audience, while a little behind him on
the outer side stands or sits Polonius. The chief of the group
on the other side of the stage, which includes Horatio, is at
present Ophelia, who sits opposite the King, because Hamlet is
to sit at her feet, and the audience will want to watch his face
also. Thus the characters of the play are drawn up in two
confronting camps, as it were, at the beginning of this, the
crisis of their history. For a moment, however, Hamlet is
left standing between them, with kin on the one hand and
kind on the other; and, seeing him without a seat, his mother
says: “Come hither, my dear Hamlet, sit by me.” She is in
a tender mood; her dear boy seems mending, and she wants
to pat his hand and affect an interest in this play with which
he is diversing himself. But Hamlet’s place is with Horatio,
opposite the King and keenly on the watch. He therefore
refuses her offer in words which give the thwarted-love theory an innings. "No, good mother," he says, making for Ophelia, "here's metal more attractive." The dramatic contrast between the two parties is complete; the anti-Claudius group now has its rightful leader. But the action and the words accompanying it give Polonius, the champion of the thwarted-love theory, his opportunity. "O ho!" he chuckles exultantly to the King, "do you mark that?" Claudius is strangely obtuse in regard to this matter; Polonius had been ready to wager his head upon the truth of his own theory; the nunnery scene had just confirmed it; and, if further evidence were necessary, here it is in absolutely unmistakable form.

Hamlet continues to play up to Jephthah in the conversation with his daughter. His language to Ophelia, outrageous as it is, is in keeping with the part of a love-distraught swain; and her gentle forbearance of his conduct shows that she regards him as a madman and sees nothing strange in the form which his dementia takes. Her father too, so far from being shocked, is actually gleeful, for every word that is uttered in this strain establishes his theory upon a firmer basis. And, as the conversation proceeds, the old man winks and nods in triumph to the King.

Hamlet, however, has yet another hare to start before the play begins, hare number three, the theory of his good mother. He lets it slip, partly to enjoy throwing the enemy into still greater confusion, partly to lead up to the dialogue of the Player King and Queen, which he imagines is just about to begin. This dialogue is to deal with the "O'er-hasty marriage" motive, and Hamlet wants to point the moral clearly beforehand, for he is prologue as well as chorus. "Look you," he cries, "how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within two hours"; and he continues fiddling on the same string for ten or a dozen lines. It is a fine piece of prologue work.

But Hamlet's "look you" is a direction, not merely to Ophelia and the court, but also to the audience in the theatre. At this point all eyes turn naturally and inevitably to the Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius group, to see how they will take the ruthless sally. In other words, beneath Hamlet's purpose there lurks another purpose of which he is completely unconscious, since it is the purpose of his creator, of the showman who is pulling the strings of the greatest puppet-play in all literature. It is essential to Shakespeare that his audience should be fully aware of what Claudius is doing at this critical moment, because it is the moment before the dumb-show appears. And what is he doing? Polonius and he have been watching Hamlet for several minutes past, but this last sally complicates the matter in dispute between them, and drags in the Queen also. For it is natural to suppose that Gertrude's cheerfulness will be not a little dashed by Hamlet's words and that, as he continues in the same strain, she should, affecting not to hear him, turn away and join in the whispered conversation between her husband and Polonius. So when Hamlet invites the audience to gaze at them, they see the three with their heads together in discussion, a discussion that perhaps grows half-audible as soon as he ceases speaking.
Each is arguing in support of his favourite theory; each is eager to follow up the false trail which most flatters his judgment. It is matter for an hour’s talk, especially with Polonius taking the lead. Thus they are not watching the inner-stage at all; the play is nothing to them; their whole attention is concentrated upon the problem of Hamlet’s madness. The dumb-show enters, performs its brief pantomime—a matter of a few moments only—and passes out entirely unnoticed by the disputants; and when the audience turn again to see how this silent representation of his crime has affected the King, they find him still closely engaged with Gertrude and Polonius. Shakespeare’s directions to his actors have gone beyond recall, and we cannot therefore be certain how he arranged this stage-business. But I am convinced that the foregoing comes near to his intentions. Halliwell’s theory that Claudius was whispering to his wife during the dumb-show is unsatisfactory, because it does not go far enough; but it contains the kernel of the truth.\(^1\)

The chief danger-spot being successfully past, it remained for Shakespeare to round off the business by explaining how the dumb-show came to be there and by preventing the audience from pondering upon it. This he does in the conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia which immediately follows.

In his talk with the First Player, barely half an hour before, Hamlet had made it quite clear that he had as little patience with “inexplicable dumb-shows” as he had with the strut-

\(^1\) In performance, as Mr George Rylands suggests to me, the three figures will actually remain still and without by-play while the dumb-show is proceeding; since the whole attention of the audience must be concentrated upon that.

tings and bellowings of the average actor. The appearance of the dumb-show, therefore, just when he had been carefully prologuing the play itself, was exceedingly annoying to him. But annoyance gives place to consternation when he sees that the pantomime is likely to divulge the whole plot of the play before it even commences. He glances anxiously at the King as the thing proceeds (glances which are not lost upon the audience), and observes to his relief that it has passed by him unnoticed. He fumes, however, at the stupidity of it all, and, when Ophelia asks him what the inexplicable show means, he replies in an exasperated tone: “Marry, this is miching mallecho, it means mischief.” She notes his anger, attributes it and the cryptic remark which accompanies it to a sudden freak of madness, and soothingly suggests: “Belike this show imports the argument of the play.” Ophelia has a double part to perform in this scene. As Hamlet’s lover she has to do what she can to calm his troubled spirit, to lend her small assistance in nursing it back to sanity. As Shakespeare’s puppet she has to provide the audience with clues. This remark exhibits her in both rôles.

As for “mischief”, there is mischief enough. The situation has been saved for the moment by the King’s unwatchfulness; but what may not the actors do next? For, as Hamlet guesses, there is worse behind. Yes, here comes a presenter, who confirms his blackest fears. He is on tenter-hooks. A dumb-show may slip by unobserved, but the spoken words of a presenter, who will present the mouse-trap all too carefully, cannot fail to reach the ears of Claudius. “We shall know by this fellow”, he cries in an anguished voice; “The players cannot keep counsel, they’ll tell all.” But wondering Ophelia,
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all unwitting of the true state of affairs, cannot leave Hamlet alone. "Will a' tell us what this show meant?" she persists, innocently touching him on the raw. "Ay, or any show that you will show him", retorts Hamlet savagely, breaking out into ribaldry, this time with too serious an intention, as she feels. "You are naught, you are naught", she reproves, hurt though still gentle; "I'll mark the play." But Master Presenter helps her not a whit towards the meaning of the show. To her surprise, Hamlet's joy, and the spectators' delighted amusement, he turns out to be—a prologue! And his three lines of silly jingle leave the cat still in the bag. Hamlet is safe, and he relapses into jocularity. "Is this a prologue, or the posy of a ring?" he enquires with mingled feelings of intense relief and an outraged sense of dramatic propriety. "'Tis brief, my lord", assents Ophelia, taking him back into her favour, as she notices, with relief on her side, that the storm-cloud has passed away from his mind as suddenly as it had come.

The subtlety of this is masterly in the extreme, but all the points would be readily grasped by the judicious among the audience, if the dialogue were acted as Shakespeare intended it should be. Hamlet's face of dismay at the appearance of the dumb-show, his furtive glances at the King as the pantomime is being played, the exasperation in the tone of his comment upon it, his despair when the presenter enters, his savagery as Ophelia rubs it in, and finally his relief as the presenter turns out to be nothing but a posy-prologue—all this, together with Ophelia's part therein, isactable enough. And Shakespeare's boldness is the equal of his subtlety. For he makes all his dramatic capital out of his principal difficulty, the difficulty of rendering the unconsciousness of Claudius natural and obvious. The whole business revolves round that, and the breathless question in the minds of the spectators throughout is: Will the King find out the plot too soon? The vicissitudes of Hamlet's mood are mirrored in theirs. Their anxiety is great until the dumb-show goes off, and the appearance of the presenter revives it in full force. And, when the tension is relaxed, the dumb-show has fallen naturally into its place in the scene, the stupidity of the players is fully appreciated, and the episode is so exciting in its doubled suspense that, while taking in the complete identity which the show reveals, the spectators bother no more about it, since all their thoughts are concentrated upon Claudius. Finally, this obsession with Claudius's doings drives still deeper into their minds the fact that he has not seen anything, so that by building upon his difficulty Shakespeare has completed his triumph over it.

The interlude itself now begins, opening with the seventy lines of dialogue between the Player King and Queen upon the subject of widowhood and second marriage, lines written in a deliberately archaic style in order to distinguish them from the rest of Hamlet. They are deliberately commonplace also, so as to provide a rest for the audience after the excitement connected with the dumb-show and the prologue. They are not devoid of interest because they support the o'er-hasty-marriage theory and reflect upon the Queen. But the interest is a secondary one, and Shakespeare has moderated the tempo, according to his invariable custom, in order that his spectators may get, as it were, a second wind before the murderer enters and the pace becomes hot again. Moreover,
after the dumb-show, which has told them just what to expect, the length and emptiness of the interlude add greatly to the tension. Yet the lines give them something to think about, something unconnected with the immediate action. For the Player King concludes with a long disquisition on the subject of human instability. It is leitmotiv once more and reflects on the problem of Hamlet’s character, though at this stage the audience will be hardly conscious of it. And, as so often happens in Shakespeare, what serves the purpose of dramatic irony has its direct dramatic point also, a point for Hamlet and Claudius. The name of the play is “The Mouse-trap”, and a mouse-trap is no use without bait. The spring of the machine lies in the speech of Lucianus at the end, but the problem is how to get the victim up to it and nosing round, so that when the trap is released he will be caught fast and squealing in its jaws. Somehow the interest of the King must be arrested and secured before Lucianus appears, must be secured by an object quite unconnected with the poisoning, since a glimpse of the spring will frighten away the game. Claudius missed the dumb-show; he must not be allowed to miss the play; he must be lured into the trap by a savoury bait. The second-marriage theme is the cheese for his majesty the mouse. Let us watch how Hamlet pushes it under his nose, how the victim sniffs at it, and finally how he swallows it.

“‘Tis brief, my lord”, says Ophelia. “As woman’s love”, caps Hamlet; and his retort, which may be taken as a reflec-

1 This important point, which lends additional support to my theory of the dumb-show, I owe to Mr George Rylands.

2 Cf. below, pp. 261-2.

The play scene restored

The first twenty lines afford plenty of opportunity for this pondering, since they contain nothing to interest either Claudius or anyone else. But the nine that follow, with two snap-couplets on marrying second husbands and killing first ones, spoken, we must suppose, with all the passion which the Player Queen should give them, ought to arrest attention. The reference is carefully confined to the Queen; it is wives, and not second husbands, which are hinted at as possible murderers. Hamlet is testing his mother as to her complicity in the murder; and his aside “That’s wormwood, wormwood” suggests a start or a flinching on her part which would seem to him evidence of guilt. But Claudius also begins to sniff at this; for a faint aroma of the cheese is now perceptible. A long gnomic passage follows, in which the interest is again relaxed, though it has its point, just noted, for the audience. But the scent grows strong once more in
the last two lines of the speech, and the Player Queen's violent oath of fidelity, together with Hamlet's comment, "If she should break it now!" brings the game right up to the bait. Player King sleeps, Player Queen leaves him, and Hamlet turns—not to Claudius, that would never do—but to Gertrude, with "Madam, how like you this play?" The inference is glaringly obvious, and she stammers "The lady doth protest too much methinks", trying to put the best face she can upon it, conscious that the eyes of the court are looking at her. Hamlet, who is almost as anxious that she should see it as that Claudius should, does his utmost to drive the point home. "O, but she'll keep her word", he mocks wickedly. This brings uncle-mouse fairly into the trap with the cheese in his mouth. The suspicions of Claudius are fully aroused, not about the murder—he has no inkling of that as yet—but about the second-marriage theme. What new mad prank is Hamlet up to? He arranged this play, and must be held accountable for it. "Have you heard the argument?" he asks his nephew sharply. "Is there no offence in't?" His attention is thoroughly secured; he will now watch the play out. The bait has been swallowed whole; and the first part of Hamlet's task is accomplished.

Too much "o'er-hasty marriage" business, however, may frighten the mouse before the spring is released, and if so the trap will be empty after all. Hamlet must both soothe the King and give a fresh turn to his thoughts. The chorus-talk becomes here extraordinarily brilliant and audacious, for it rivets the victim's attention by dazzling him with glints of steel—the steel of the spring itself! "No, no," replies Hamlet to his uncle's last question, stroking his prey with a gentleness which conceals exquisite malice, "they do but jest, poison in jest, no offence in't world." "Poison!" the word grates harshly on the ear of Claudius, as it was meant to do. Hamlet is playing prologue again; he is preparing the King's mind for Lucianus and his vial; he is flashing the vial in his face, but so swiftly that he cannot see what it is. The flash is disconcerting, but Claudius has no suspicion of the truth, and his thoughts are still occupied with second husbands as he asks for more information: "What do you call the play?" The answer is rapped out suddenly: "The Mouse-trap, marry how trapically." 1 Hamlet knows the quarry is caught, and he cannot resist the temptation to give vent to his glee, to cry "marry trap" like a boy who has won the game. 2 "The Mouse-trap" makes the King start, he knows not why; perhaps there is something in Hamlet's manner to cause it; a strange being, this nephew of his! "Marry how trapically" he does not catch, or, if he does, Hamlet hastily covers it up by giving it a "tropical" twist in the context that follows.

The rest of the speech, with its talk of Vienna, Gonzago and Baptista, is reassuring enough, and contains nothing more about second marriages. It is prologue work again, however, though King Mouse is unaware of the claws in the soft paw which is caressing him, oh! so gently. "'Tis a knavish piece of work, but what of that? your majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not—let the galled jade wince, our

1 "trapically" is the reading of Q1; Q2 and F1 give us "tropical". But in the pronunciation of the time the two words were much alike; cf. G. D. Willcock, "Shakespeare and Elizabethan English" (A Companion to Shakespeare Studies, p. 119. Cf. also note in my Hamlet).

2 Cf. The Merry Wives of Windsor, 1.1.135-6: "I will say 'marry trap' with you", i.e. I will give you tir for tar.
withers are unwrung.” How sweet these words and this moment must be to Hamlet! The bait is swallowed; the mouse sits, still unconscious, in the very jaws of the trap; and the spring is about to go off! Nothing now can save the King.

Yet the Prince keeps his head admirably through it all. He has others to catch as well as Claudius; and as the murderer enters he realises how they may be caught. In a loud voice, so that all can hear, he suddenly announces: “This is one Lucianus, Nephew to the King.” I give the sentence from the text of the Second Quarto, which with its comma, denoting a slight pause, and its emphasis-capital for the essential word, beautifully exhibits the force which Shakespeare intended the actor to throw into his pronunciation of the all-important “Nephew”. By this time the courtiers are as keenly intent upon the play as Claudius himself. The attacks upon the Queen have not escaped their notice; the cause of Hamlet’s madness is, we must suppose, as hotly discussed among them as by their principals; and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have doubtless whispered the word “ambition”. When, therefore, a new character enters and is described by the master of the ceremonies as the nephew of the King, they ask whether he may not be intended for Hamlet himself. And they watch the doings of this actor with bated breath; for it is now clear to all that the interlude has a direct bearing upon the royal house, and has been selected by the mad Prince for that very reason. “You are as good as a chorus, my lord”, breathes Ophelia. She speaks truth; it is the acme of his chorus-work.

Lucianus has a little business to perform before the speech; he has to take off the King’s crown, kiss it, and place it on his own head. Hamlet knows this, and occupies the interval with “idle” love-talk with Ophelia, in which his scorn for “presenters” is once again evident. They are his last words to her before they separate for ever. His mind is completely at ease. All his game are now in the trap—all except the Queen perhaps, and he can deal with her later. It only remains to begin those lines of his, those precious lines of which he is so proud, and the gin will go off, the jaws will snap, and the imprisoned prey will writh in the anguish that Hamlet longs to see.

But Shakespeare has his master-stroke to play in this scene. There must be a hitch, at the eleventh hour, to raise the excitement of the audience to the highest possible point. The actor is very long with his crown-business. What in Heaven’s name is he doing? Hamlet looks up, and the sight he sees freezes a half-spoken sentence to Ophelia on his lips. This First Player, in whom after the Pyrrhus speech he had put his confidence—confidence grossly abused by the insertion of the dumb-show and the prologue—has once again flown straight in the face of his express commands. He is strutting and fretting about the stage, making the ludicrous grins of the conventional murderer, and sawing the air with the hand which holds the vial. He has caught, actor-like, the electric feeling of his audience, and is determined to make the most of his opportunity. All Hamlet’s irritability is revived. Is this periwig-pated ruffian going to ruin everything after all, as

1 This is what the murderer does in the dumb-show and Lucianus should, I suppose, go through the same performance, only more elaborately.

2 The punctuation of the Second Quarto, which marks a long pause after “husbands”, again brings out the point delightfully.
he so nearly ruined it at the beginning of the play? Is he going to tear the passion to tatters, to the very rags, to split the ears of all present, so that the very point of the whole evening may be missed, and the Mouse-trap fail to catch its prey? The situation is intolerable; something must be done, and that quickly, to bring the rogue and peasant slave to his senses. After a brief moment of speechless indignation, Hamlet bursts into bitter sarcasm. "'Begin, murderer!''' he shouts at him—"murderer of the Play, and now about to murder my lines. 'Pox! leave thy damnably faces and begin.' Come, tear the speech to tatters in your own sweet style. O'er-do Termagant and out-herod Herod! Let's have it in the fashion of the good old ranting chronicle plays. Quick, fellow: 'the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge'; that's your mark!"

The audience has had its third moment of breathless suspense. But all is well. Whether consciously or unconsciously, "revenge" is more prologue-work in Hamlet's mouth, and sounds ominously in the ears of both Claudius and the court. Hamlet, however, is not thinking of anything but the play, and the speech to the player is mock-prologue this time. Lucianus pulls himself together; the quotation from the old chronicle reminds him of Hamlet's words half an hour before; and he speaks the lines clearly and trippingly on the tongue, so that their full effect is felt. The court sees the point of the drama at last: the Player King is Claudius, and crazy Hamlet is threatening to murder his uncle and seize the crown. Claudius also sees the point, his point. The jaws of the deadly trap hold him in a vice. The words "mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected" bring back to his vision in dreadful detail that scene four months before, when he too was bending over a sleeping king, about to poison him with "cursed hebona in a vial". His face grows livid, he clutches the arms of his seat, his eyes start from his head. He has forgotten everything, everyone, except the hideous spectacle before him. Yes, the murderer is pouring the poison into the ears of the sleeper. The secure hour, the kind of poison, the flowery bank, the dozing king are the same. Just so, that is the way it should be done, that is how he poisoned his brother on that afternoon in the palace garden. It takes the voice of Hamlet to bring him slowly back to his senses. At first he can hardly follow the words. But he must force himself to listen; it is vital to hear what this incomprehensible, this fearful, this omniscient nephew of his is saying: "Gonzago...story extant...Italian." The words are meaningless, pointless, in their bland suavity. But what follows is not: "You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife." Murderer, wife! wife, murderer! second husband, poison! The thing is clear. The plot of the interlude is his life's history. Hamlet knows all! Claudius is not safe; anything may happen. He pulls himself to his feet, and, squealing for light, he totters as fast as his trembling knees will carry him from the terrible, the threatening room. King Mouse has become a shambling, blinking paddock.

The play has made mad the guilty, but it has also appalled the free. As the murderer, the nephew, begins to administer his sham poison, a murmur of horror and indignation runs round the assembled court. Hamlet affects surprise at this and the now visible distemperature of his uncle. His cue is still "our withers are unwrung". His urbanity is imperturb-
The Multiple Mouse-trap

able. "You are mistaken, gentlemen," he seems to protest. "His name's Gonzago", as I told you before. 'The story is extant, and written in very choice Italian.' It has nothing whatever to do with Claudius or Denmark. Why all this fuss? You are spoiling the play. There is more to follow. 'You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife.' But courtiers as well as King have had enough. As their master rises at the outrage—quite properly, as they think—they break up in confusion. Hamlet sees all his enemies in full flight, a panic-stricken mob. He no longer conceals his malice, as he hurls his last shaft into the midst of them. "What! frightened with false fire!" he shouts through the clamour, though still his meaning is a double one. The Queen, good lady, ever sympathetic with those in distress, convinced like the rest that her son has "much offended" the King, sees that he is ill, and follows him out with the solicitous enquiry: "How fares my lord?" It is the very question which Claudius had asked Hamlet at the beginning of the scene. Hamlet may "eat the air" chameleon-like, but capon-Claudius is stuffed now and ready for the carving: he has had a bellyful of "fare". Polonius also has eaten of strange meat. But he is a politician, and has at last grasped the intentions of Hamlet. His daughter has been made a screen; the thwarted-love pose was a cloak for ambition; Claudius was right all the time. He sternly commands the play to stop, and hurries after the royal pair to consult with them, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as to the steps to be taken in view of this menace to the throne. Ophelia too, like a frightened bird, has fluttered off with the throng.

And so at last Hamlet is left alone with Horatio. He throws himself exultantly into his uncle's state seat, and chants a wild ballad snatch. Oh! the relief, the triumph, the infinite glee of that moment! He is back in the green-room of his mind, with the friend of his heart to praise him, and behind him a marvellously successful performance of histrionic art. All his disguises, his complicated and interwoven parts, drop from him. He is free, free to revel in the retrospect and to give full vent to his feelings of rapture: "Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers—if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk with me—with two Provincial roses on my razed shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of players, sir?" He is thinking of his acting, his lines, his admirable stage-management which saved the situation when all seemed lost. It is a characteristic outburst. Hamlet's first thoughts are of his amazing dramatic success, exceeding his wildest dreams. It is only afterwards that he remembers his uncle.
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Queen, good lady, ever sympathetic with those in distress,
convinced like the rest that her son has "much offended" the
King, sees that he is ill, and follows him out with the solici-
tous enquiry: "How fares my lord?" It is the very question
which Claudius had asked Hamlet at the beginning of the
scene. Hamlet may "eat the air" chameleon-like, but capon-
Claudius is stuffed now and ready for the carving: he has had
a bellyful of "fare". Polonius also has eaten of strange meat.
But he is a politician, and has at last grasped the intentions of
Hamlet. His daughter has been made a screen; the thwarted-
love pose was a cloak for ambition; Claudius was right all
the time. He sternly commands the play to stop, and hurries
after the royal pair to consult with them, Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern as to the steps to be taken in view of this menace
to the throne. Ophelia too, like a frightened bird, has
fluttered off with the throng.

And so at last Hamlet is left alone with Horatio. He throws

The play scene restored

...himself exultantly into his uncle's state seat, and chants a wild
ballad snatch. Oh! the relief, the triumph, the infinite glee of
that moment! He is back in the green-room of his mind,
with the friend of his heart to praise him, and behind him a
marvellously successful performance of histrionic art. All
his disguises, his complicated and interwoven parts, drop
from him. He is free, free to revel in the retrospect and to
give full vent to his feelings of rapture: " Would not this,
sir, and a forest of feathers—if the rest of my fortunes turn
Turk with me—with two Provincial roses on my razed shoes,
get me a fellowship in a cry of players, sir?" He is thinking
of his acting, his lines, his admirable stage-management which
saved the situation when all seemed lost. It is a characteristic
outburst. Hamlet's first thoughts are of his amazing dramatic
success, exceeding his wildest dreams. It is only afterwards
that he remembers his uncle.