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Hamlet vs Claudius: A Structural Analysis of Hamlet's "Tardiness"

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1. Introduction

In 1.5, when the Ghost talks about how he was killed, Hamlet is very eager to take his revenge:

HAMLET Haste me to know't that I with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love
May sweep to my revenge. (1.5.29-31)¹

He, however, never contrives any plot for revenge in the course of the play. In 3.3 even when all the circumstances for killing Claudius are convenient for him, except that he is at prayer, Hamlet sheathes his sword. At the end of the play, he at last exacts his revenge, but it is not the consequence of his precise arrangement for the murder, and the fulfilment appears only accidental. Thus, Hamlet's indecisiveness and lack of action in taking his revenge have always annoyed the audience, the readers, and the critics.

In this essay, I shall propose a paradigm which will explain Hamlet's "tardiness" by analysing the conflict between Hamlet and Claudius. Revenge involves an inherent contradiction: to exact revenge prompted by a murder, one also must commit another murder. On the other hand, the play begins with the infected state of Denmark, aiming for its purga-

tion, and the process should exclude the vicious nature of a murder. Thus, Hamlet must pursue revenge in this restricted circumstance. In the course of the play, the intention of Hamlet and Claudius to kill each other, and their fear of being killed, grows greater and more serious as the plot develops. To examine the process, which gradually increases in gravity, gives a possible explanation for Hamlet's "tardiness".

2. Hamlet's Causes for the Revenge

Hamlet decides to avenge his father after being commanded to do so by the Ghost, but he himself has got his own causes for taking revenge. *Hamlet* is a revenge tragedy, but unlike the other revenge tragedies the murder which brings about the revenge has already been committed before the play begins. And this affects the play's structure and the mental condition of Hamlet as well.² The play begins with the corruption of Denmark caused by the murder of Claudius. This rotten state of the outer world, Denmark, has also infected Hamlet's inner world.³ In this section, I shall argue how deeply Hamlet is wounded by the murder, and how he is to gain his purpose of life again by aiming for revenge. He is also wounded by his mother's betrayal of his father. Because of his disgust by her way of loving, he suspects his own feeling for Ophelia. These factors indicate that he has got his own causes for revenge putting aside the command of the Ghost.

2.1 Hamlet's Own Cause for Revenge

When the play starts, Hamlet totally loses the purpose of his life. In this section, I shall first peruse how deep his inner wounds are at the beginning of the play. Then, after he is informed by Horatio and Marcellus about his father's ghost, he gradually finds out the meaning of

his life. At the end of Act 1, he at last learns that he has restored his life in order to avenge his father.

In 1.2, where Hamlet appears on the stage for the first time, he talks about his desire for suicide in a rather strange fashion:

HAMLET O that this too too sallied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. (1.2.129-32)

Here he uses three similar verbs, "melt", "thaw", and "resolve". His desire for suicide is not expressed in an active way such as to kill himself, but in a passive way of dissolution which is repeated three times, and thus his spiritless situation is emphasized. Then he reveals something about the reason for his desire for "self-slaughter":

HAMLET How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. (1.2.133-37)

In the world in which he lives, weeds grow in abundance, give out a stinking smell, and they overwhelm other things. At this stage of the play, Hamlet is not told about Claudius' murder of his brother. "Things rank, and gross in nature" must be the situation of Denmark after his father's death, governed by his uncle. He continues and condemns his mother's transformation which must be another reason for his desire for suicide. I shall deal with this theme in the next section. His soliloquy is concluded by the words, "But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (1.2.159). At this stage he cannot find any meaning to live in this world, and his body itself is useless for him. What is important here is that he has lost his purpose of life before he knows the truth about his

father's death. Putting aside the command of the Ghost as a different matter, he is wounded so deeply as to lose the reason for his own existence.

Thus, the play begins with his spiritless situation. But soon he is informed by Horatio and his friends that they saw the ghost of his father. Then Hamlet himself meets the Ghost and is commanded to avenge the murder. In this process, he gradually finds out the meaning of his life as a revenger.

The next passage is when Hamlet hears about the ghost of his father:

HORATIO My lord, I think I saw him yesternight.

HAMLET Saw, who?

HORATIO My lord, the King your father.

HAMLET The King my father?

HORATIO Season your admiration for awhile

With an attent ear till I may deliver

Upon the witness of these gentlemen

This marvel to you.

HAMLET For God's love let me hear! (1.2.188-94)

His inquiring forms show that he is interested in the Ghost, and this is the first step in finding the meaning of his life. After Horatio talks about the previous night's watch, he asks questions one after another:

HAMLET Armed, say you?

HORATIO, MARCELLUS, BERNARDO Armed, my lord.

HAMLET From top to toe?

HORATIO, MARCELLUS, BERNARDO My lord, from head to foot.

HAMLET Then saw you not his face.

HORATIO O, yes, my lord, he wore his beaver up.

HAMLET What looked he — frowningly?

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HORATIO A countenance more in sorrow than in anger.

HAMLET Pale, or red?

HORATIO Nay, very pale.

HAMLET And fixed his eyes upon you?

HORATIO Most constantly.

HAMLET I *would* I had been there.

HORATIO It would have much amazed you.

HAMLET Very like.

Stayed it long?

HORATIO While one with moderate haste might tell a hundred.

MARCELLUS, BERNARDO Longer, longer.

HORATIO Not when I saw't.

HAMLET His beard was grizzled, no?

HORATIO It was as I have seen it in his life:

A sable silvered. (1.2.224-40. Emphasis added.)

The sequence of questioning forms shows his strong interest in the Ghost, and it provides a contrast to his former lethargic condition. Their conversations with a rhythmical tempo, and the pairs of short questions and their answers, also express his eagerness and enthusiasm. Moreover, the significant word is "would" in l. 233. This is the moment when he first shows his own "will" to live.

His strong interest in the story of the ghost causes him to energise himself:

HAMLET If it assume my noble father's person

I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape

And bid me hold my peace. (1.2.242-44)

And he shows his will again at the end of this scene:

HAMLET My father's spirit — in arms! All is not well;

I doubt some foul play. *Would* the night were come.

Till then sit still my soul — foul deeds will rise

Though all the earth o'erwhelm them to men's eyes.

(1.2.253-56. Emphasis added.)

He doubts something about the way of his father's death, so he strongly wishes that the night comes soon.

It is now necessary that we consider the structure of the play. Before the play starts, the murder has been committed. The play, therefore, begins with its rotten state aiming for the purgation as the next speeches succinctly show:

MARCELLUS Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

HORATIO Heaven will direct it. (1.4.90-91)

When Hamlet meets the Ghost and is beckoned by him to withdraw together to some more convenient place, his change is shown in his eagerness for bodily strength:

HAMLET My fate cries out

And makes each petty artery in this body

As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve. (1.4.81-83)

This strong wish of his is effectively contrasted with his former condition, in which he wished his body would melt away. Now he sees it is his "fate" to listen to the Ghost's story. In 1.5, after he is commanded by the Ghost to exact revenge, he wishes for an even stronger bodily construction:

HAMLET Hold, hold, my heart,

And you, my sinews, grow not instant old

But bear me swiftly up. (1.5.93-95)

"Hold, hold, my heart" offers a clear contrast to his former words, "break, my heart." (1.2.159) In this way his resolution becomes solid, and he understands that it is his fate to undertake his revenge:

HAMLET The time is out of joint; O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right! (1.5.186-87)

He now learns that his life, which had been nothing to him, is for the revenge and for the purgation of the world. At the same time, his speech implies at a deeper authorial level that he must lose his life when the revenge is fulfilled.

When the play opens, he is so deeply infected as to lose the meaning of his life. This is a fundamental matter for him which concerns his bodily existence. Thus, he has already got the seed of revenge before he is ordered by the Ghost. And the confrontation with the Ghost and the information given by him make his motivation for the revenge firmer.

2.2 Hamlet's Disgust at his Mother's Marriage and its Influence over his Way of Loving

Claudius' murder of Old Hamlet and his marriage with Gertrude also influence Hamlet's relationships with his mother and his girlfriend. As for this subject, too, the structure of the play affects the way that the inner worlds of the characters are depicted: the damaged state after the murder is contrasted with the former wholesome happiness, shedding ugly light to the later situations.

In 1.2, Hamlet reflects the happy married life of his parents:

HAMLET But two months dead — nay not so much, not two
—

So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,
Must I remember? Why, she should hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown

By what it fed on.

(1.2.138-45)

His father's love for her mother is expressed rather hyperbolically: "he might not beteem the winds of heaven / Visit her face too roughly." She enjoyed his love for her, and her increasing love for him is compared to "appetite" (another hyperbolic expression). Hamlet as their son had appreciated their love as such, and his extravagant statement serves to show his lament and despair effectively.⁴ And the short period to the next marriage and his uncle's meanness also make Hamlet's lamentation greater:

HAMLET

And yet within' a month

(Let me not think on't — Frailty, thy name is Woman).

A little month, or e're those shoes were old

With which she followed my poor father's body,

Like Niobe, all tears. Why, she —

O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason

Would have mourned longer — married with my uncle,

My father's brother (but no more like my father

Than I to Hercules). Within a month,

Ere vet the salt of most unrighteous tears

Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,

She married. O most wicked speed! To post

With such dexterity to incestuous sheets,

It is not, nor it cannot come to good:

But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue. (1.2.145–59)

Here Hamlet expresses his mother's weakness as a universal feature of women: "Frailty, thy name is Woman." Obviously his mother's betrayal of his father influences Hamlet's way of loving Ophelia.

When Ophelia first talks about her relationship with Hamlet to her father in 1.3, it shows a quite wholesome condition:

OPHELIA He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders
Of his affection to me. (1.3.98-99)

OPHELIA My lord, he hath importuned me with love
In honourable fashion. (1.3.109-10)

OPHELIA And hath given countenance to his speech, my lord,
With almost all the holy vows of heaven. (1.3.112-13)

In 1.2, however, Hamlet confesses his state of mind as "How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (1.2.133-34). Ophelia's remark must reflect, therefore, the situation before Hamlet's father's death and his mother's marriage with his uncle. But when she meets Hamlet next, she is terrified with his great change, which is rendered in her report form to Polonius:

OPHELIA My lord, as I was sewing in my closet
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle,
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors, he comes before me. (2.1.74-81)

The audience knows that this behaviour of Hamlet reflects his "antic disposition" to camouflage his purpose (1.5.170). The defilement of his outward appearance, such as his doublet, his hat, and stockings, remains within his control: however, "Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other" discloses his inner shock which cannot be intentionally covered up. "As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors" reminds the audience of the Ghost's order to Hamlet. Here Ophelia knows nothing about Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost and the effect it had had on Hamlet. She, however, does perceive the remarkable change in her

sweetheart. And she also knows that it is so serious a matter for him which concerns his existence:

OPHELIA He raised a sigh so piteous and profound
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
And end his being. (2.1.91-93)⁵

In this way, Gertrude's betrayal of her husband harms Hamlet's way of loving. He doubts his own love for Ophelia and her love for him.

When the play develops, we see his deeper wounds concerning love. The next passage is when he is summoned to his mother:

HAMLET Soft, now to my mother.
O heart, lose not thy nature. Let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom —
Let me be cruel, not unnatural:
I will speak daggers to her but use none.
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites.
How in my words somever she be shent
To give them seals never my soul consent. (3.2.382-89)

"Speak daggers to her but use none" shows his suppressed intention to kill her. He knows it himself, and at the same time the rational part of him soothes him and says that the daggers should not be actual ones, but only verbal ones.

This rage which he feels to his mother continues when he visits her:

HAMLET Come, come, and sit you down. You shall not budge.
You go not till I set you up a glass
Where you may see the inmost part of you.
QUEEN What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me —
Help, ho! (3.4.17-21)

As a result of his robust attitude, Gertrude also recognises his murderous intention: "Thou wilt not murder me."

As I have argued in this section, the murder of Hamlet's father has been already done before the play begins. The play, therefore, sheds retrospective light on the former state of 1) Hamlet's mind, 2) the relationship between his father and mother, and 3) the relationship between him and Ophelia, all of which had been in wholesome conditions. His parents' love, which had seemed ideal to him, and his mother's marriage with his ugly uncle, give him a great shock. He, therefore, cannot believe in his love for Ophelia. As the play develops, he even reveals his murderous urge to his mother. In this way, with regard to love he also has his motivation for revenge.

3. Claudius' Nature as Hamlet's Opponent: Wicked and Able

When we treat the theme of the conflict between Hamlet and Claudius, it is necessary to consider Claudius' nature as Hamlet's opponent.

Before the play begins, he has already done three wicked deeds. 1) He murdered his brother but the fact is known to nobody. 2) Although Hamlet should be the most appropriate person to succeed the throne, he became the King by election. 3) He had seduced the former king's wife, and succeeded in marrying her. The following is his first speech in the play, and he covers up his every wicked deed in fair wording:

KING Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death
The memory be green, and that it us befitted
To bear our hearts in grief, and our whole kingdom
To be contracted in one brow of woe,
Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
That we with wisest sorrow think on him
Together with remembrance of ourselves.

Therefore our sometime sister, now our Queen,
Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state,
Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,
With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
Taken to wife. Nor have we herein barred
Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone
With this affair along. For all, our thanks. (1.2.1-16)

In the first seven lines, he pretends to mourn his brother whom he himself has murdered. Not only does he conceal the fact, but he also cunningly shifts the meaning of the “we” pronouns, and by this trick he shows an apparent consideration to his subjects. The “our” in the first line is clearly royal which refers to himself. In the third line, however, he says “our hearts”: the plural form of “hearts” shows that “our” means “you the courtiers, the people of the kingdom, and I”. In the same way, “our” in “our whole kingdom” of the same line means “you and I”. The “ourselves” in l. 7 is clearly “you and I”, since the reflexive form of the royal “we” is “ourselves”. Here he says that, although it might be important to mourn the death of the former king, it is also necessary to be “mindful of not only me, but also of you, the courtiers and the people of Denmark”. In this way, by the cunning slide of meaning, he appeals to his subjects as his partners for whom he cares. In the course of the play, he adopts this kind of shift of meaning for his own benefit, as we will see later.

In the next section of the speech, he speaks about the marriage with the former king's wife. In what way he seduced the queen who had been deeply in love with the former king is not clear from the text. But what we see here is that he has a skill to get the heart of someone whose heart is most alien to him, and to change him/her to his friend.⁶ Here, he

covers up the immoral facet of the affair. Moreover, he lessens his responsibility: he declares that it is the result of his consultation with his courtiers and their free talk. He even elevates his subjects' opinions to be wiser than his ("Your better wisdoms"). Thus, in the sixteen lines of his first speech, his viciousness and his ability to effectuate his vicious nature to the full are succinctly expressed.

On the other hand, minor characters, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are involved in the conflict between Hamlet and Claudius, and they all are to lose their lives. Hamlet mentions them as follows. As for Polonius:

HAMLET — Thou *wretched*, rash, *intruding fool*, farewell:
I took thee for thy better. Take thy fortune;
Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger.
(3.4.29-31. Emphasis added.)

As for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

HAMLET They are not near my conscience. Their defeat
Does by their own *insinuation* grow.
'Tis dangerous when *the baser nature* comes
Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of *mighty opposites*. (5.2.57-61. Emphasis added.)

The fight should be between "mighty opposites." It is Claudius who is vicious and proficient enough to become Hamlet's opponent in their fierce strife of seeking for each other's life.

4. The Nature of Hamlet's Revenge

Revenge involves its own inherent contradiction: one has to commit another murder to fulfill the revenge. But the revenge Hamlet is committed to must exclude viciousness.

When the Ghost orders Hamlet to avenge him, his words reveal the contradiction of revenge:

GHOST List, list, O list,
If thou didst ever thy dear father love —

HAMLET O God!

GHOST — Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder!

HAMLET Murder!

GHOST *Murder most foul — as in the best it is —*
But this most foul, strange and unnatural.

(1.5.22-28. Emphasis added.)

Murder is foul, even though it is “in the best”, even when it has the most just cause. And the Ghost orders Hamlet to keep his mind unstained:

GHOST But howsomever thou pursues this act

Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive

Against thy mother aught; . . . (1.5.84-86. Emphasis added.)

And also from the structure of the play, Hamlet’s revenge should exclude vicious aspects. The play begins from its infected state aiming for the final purgation. To remove the vileness which occupies Denmark, Hamlet must confront the revenge, and, therefore, he must avoid any vicious means.

I have argued hitherto 1) Hamlet has got his own motivations for revenge apart from the command of the Ghost. 2) Hamlet’s opponent, Claudius, is vicious, and is also efficient enough to make much of his vicious nature. 3) Hamlet’s revenge must exclude any vile aspects. Taking all of these into consideration, he is to confront his revenge.

5. The Conflict between Hamlet and Claudius

In this section, I shall argue that Hamlet’s revenge which is fulfilled

at last is not accidental at all, but is regulated by the proper plot movement of the play. From the very beginning to the end, there is a certain current in the conflict between Hamlet and Claudius. And it increases in intensity gradually. To follow the course of the conflict will, I believe, give a perspective which will explain Hamlet's "tardiness" to his revenge.

[Plot Movement Concerning their Conflict]

- 1.2 Claudius is confident that his murder is known to nobody.
He behaves like an affectionate "father".
Hamlet gives him a sarcastic reply.
(He suspects that his uncle might have murdered his father.
This becomes clear in 1.5)
- 1.3 Polonius forbids Ophelia to talk with Hamlet.
- 1.5 Hamlet decides to avenge his father.
Hamlet thinks of "antic disposition" to mislead others.
- 2.1 Ophelia informs Polonius about Hamlet's strange manners.
Polonius believes that Hamlet has become mad because of his love for Ophelia.
- 2.2 Claudius summons Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in order to spy out the cause of Hamlet's madness.
Polonius suggests to Claudius that he and Claudius should observe the conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia behind an arras.
Hamlet thinks of verifying the Ghost's words by using a play.
- 3.1 Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern say that Hamlet is not really mad.
Claudius and Polonius hear Hamlet's encounter with Ophelia behind an arras.

- Claudius becomes certain that Hamlet's madness is a pretense, and thinks of sending Hamlet to England.
- 3.2 A play. Claudius gets angry with the content of the play. Hamlet is certain about the Ghost's words. Claudius learns that Hamlet knows about his murder of the former king.
- 3.3 Claudius says that he is to send Hamlet to England and to prepare a mandate. Claudius' soliloquy. He regrets his murder. He grieves that his prayer never goes to heaven. When Hamlet is about to stab Claudius, Claudius is at prayer, and he sheathes his sword.
- 3.4 Hamlet's conversation with Gertrude. He slays Polonius who is hiding behind an arras. Hamlet talks of his going to England. A metaphor of counter-mine.
- 4.1 Gertrude informs Claudius about how Hamlet has killed Polonius.
- 4.3 Claudius bids Hamlet to go to England. Claudius' soliloquy about the content of the letter to England and the plan to kill Hamlet immediately.
- 4.6 Horatio receives a letter from Hamlet. Hamlet says that his ship has been attacked by pirates.
- 5.2 Hamlet talks to Horatio about the actual content of the mandate letter, and how he has switched it with his counterfeit one.

- (3.4—) 4.5 Ophelia becomes mad.

Laertes attacks Claudius' court with mobs, but he is placated by Claudius.

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- 4.7 Claudius seduces Laertes, and makes him his instrument.
Claudius receives a letter from Hamlet.
Claudius and Laertes make plans to kill Hamlet.
Gertrude informs about Ophelia's death.
- 5.2 The duel of Hamlet and Laertes.

[Act 1]

1.2

In 1.2, Claudius is confident that his murder is known to nobody. He treats Hamlet as if he were his son:

KING But now, my cousin Hamlet, and *my son* —

HAMLET A little more than kin, and less than kind.

KING How is it that the *clouds* still hang on you?

HAMLET Not so much, my lord, *I am too much in the 'son'.*

(1.2.64–67. Emphasis added.)⁷

Here Hamlet shows his disgust to his uncle quite cynically by using puns. It is not clear at this point, but later in 1.5, Hamlet says that he has been suspecting his uncle of his father's murder:

GHOST 'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forged process of my death
Rankly abused. But know, thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father's life
Now wears his crown.

HAMLET O my prophetic soul.

My uncle! (1.5.35–41.)⁸

Then Claudius advises him not to mourn his father for so long. He speaks as if he cares for Hamlet:

KING *But you must know your father lost a father,*

That father lost lost his, and the survivor bound
In filial obligation for some term
To do obsequious sorrow; but to persevere
In obstinate condolement is a course
Of impious stubbornness, 'tis unmanly grief,
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,
An understanding simple and unschooled;
*For what we know must be, and is as common
As any the most vulgar thing to sense —*
Why should we in our peevish opposition
Take it to heart? Fie! 'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd, whose common theme
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried,
From the first corpse till he that died today
'This must be so.' (1.2.89-106. Emphasis added.)

Claudius killed the former king, but he repeats three times that his death is the outcome of fortune (ll.89–90, ll.98–99, and ll.105–06). And he chides Hamlet's behaviour as "a fault to heaven, / A fault against the dead, a fault to nature": ironically these words are really applicable to Claudius' deed, and not to Hamlet's. He brazen-facedly shows his sham affection to Hamlet:

KING *We pray you throw to earth*
This unprevailing woe, and think of *us*
As of a father, for let the world take note
You are the most immediate to *our* throne,
And with no less nobility of love
Than that which dearest father bears his son

Do I impart toward you. For your intent
In going back to school in Wittenberg
It is most retrograde to *our* desire,
And *we* beseech you bend you to remain
Here in the cheer and comfort of *our* eye,
Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and *our* son.

(1.2.106-17. Emphasis added.)

Here Claudius' use of the royal "we" is conspicuous. Especially, "think of us / As of a father" is a peculiar sentence: in addressing a quite individual matter, he advocates that he is the King. He then requests Hamlet not to go to Wittenberg. Later, when Claudius feels that Hamlet is dangerous, he plans to send him to England. Now he does not find in Hamlet any dangerous aspects. Here it is Claudius, and not Gertrude, who picks up the topic of Wittenberg, but his formal usage of words ("most retrograde to our desire") shows a meaningful contrast to Gertrude's plain petition:

QUEEN Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet.

I pray thee stay with us, go not to Wittenberg.

HAMLET I shall in all my best obey you, madam.

KING Why, 'tis a loving and a fair reply.

Be as ourself in Denmark. Madam, come —

This gentle and *unforced accord of Hamlet*

Sits smiling to my heart, in grace whereof

No jocund health that Denmark drinks today

But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell

And the King's rouse the heaven shall bruit again,

Re-speaking earthly thunder. Come away.

(1.2.118-28. Emphasis added.)

Hamlet consents to his mother, and not to Claudius. Claudius, however,

shifts the situation for his own benefit: he terms that Hamlet's agreement is not forced by him, and changes it to the accord to himself. He concludes the speech by insisting that his kingly power is as great as the heavens': the cannon which celebrates his coronation is compared to an "earthly thunder" (therefore, Claudius is an earthly Jupiter), and the heavens shall echo it back, celebrating him.

As I have argued above, when the play opens, Claudius is confident that his murder is not out. While Hamlet shows sheer disgust to him, he implores that Hamlet should treat him as his real father. But it is his only apparent behaviour: by his crafty use of the royal "we", he declares that he himself is the King of Denmark. He also believes that his power is as great, and as firm, as a godly one. At this point of the play, he feels no danger in Hamlet.

1.5

When Hamlet is commanded by the Ghost to avenge his father, he is quite willing to confront the affair:

HAMLET Haste me to know't, that I with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love
May sweep to my revenge. (1.5.29-31)

In fact, it requires the whole play to fulfill the revenge, but, at this point of the play, Hamlet is very eager to face the task.

After the encounter with the Ghost, he soon decides to behave as if he were mad:

HAMLET But come,
Here, as before, never — so help you mercy,
How strange or odd some'er I bear myself
(As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on) —

That you (1.5.166-71)

This seeming madness is an idea that comes up to him incidentally. But in the later scenes it is to arouse fear in Claudius when he sees through its semblance. And his fear grows greater, as the play develops. As for Polonius, he thinks that Hamlet becomes mad because of his unrequited love for his daughter. Then his eavesdropping follows, and then comes his death, and Ophelia's, and Laertes' revenge. Thus, what is only a sudden idea of Hamlet will work as an important factor to handle the plot movement.

[Act 2]

2.2

Hamlet's plan has worked. Claudius notices Hamlet's inner change. But he thinks the reason of his madness must be his father's death, and does not even dream that he himself is the cause. He, therefore, thinks that, if he can specify the cause, he will be able to cure him. In this case, too, he behaves as if he worries about Hamlet's disease, but his use of the royal "we" indicates that his request to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is from his standpoint as a king:

KING Welcome, dear Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Moreover that we much did long to see you
The need we have to *use you* did provoke
Our hasty sending. Something have you heard
Of Hamlet's transformation — so call it
Sith nor th'exterior nor the inward man
Resembles that it was. What it should be
More than his father's death, that thus hath put him
So much from th'understanding of himself
I cannot dream of. I entreat you both

That, being of so young days brought up with him
And sith so neighboured to his youth and haviour,
That you vouchsafe your rest here in our Court
Some little time, so by your companies
To draw him on to pleasures and to gather
So much as from occasion you may glean,
Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus
That opened lies within our remedy.

(2.2.1-18. Emphasis added.)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are described as Hamlet's friends. But, as Claudius' words "use you" indicate, they work as Claudius' tools from their first appearance onto the stage to the last. And both of them also acknowledge that:

ROSENCRANTZ Both your majesties
Might by the sovereign power you have of us
Put your dread pleasures more into command
Than to entreaty.

GUILDENSTERN But we both obey
And here give up ourselves in the full bent
To lay our service freely at your feet
To be commanded.

(2.2.26-32)

On the part of Hamlet, he at first receives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern quite freely as his dear friends, but soon he finds out that they have been sent for by the King (2.2.217-61).

There is another plot movement concerning Ophelia and Polonius, which is to mingle later with the theme of the conflict between Hamlet and Claudius. In 1.3, Polonius orders Ophelia not to consort with Hamlet:

POLONIUS This is for all;

I would not in plain terms from this time forth
Have you so slander any moment leisure
As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.
Look to't, I charge you. Come your ways.

OPHELIA I shall obey, my lord. (1.3.130-35)

In 2.1, he thinks that Hamlet's madness is caused by his "neglected" love for Ophelia:

OPHELIA No, my good lord, but as you did command
I did repel his letters and denied
His access to me.

POLONIUS That hath made him mad. (2.1.105-07)

He, therefore, suggests to the king that they listen in on their encounter secretly:

POLONIUS You know sometimes he walks four hours
together
Here in the lobby?

QUEEN So he does, indeed.

POLONIUS At such a time I'll loose my daughter to him.

Be you and I behind an arras then,
Mark the encounter: if he love her not
And be not from his reason fallen thereon
Let me be no assistant for a state
But keep a farm and carters. (2.2.157-64)

At the end of the scene, actors arrive at the court, and Hamlet thinks to verify the Ghost's words:

HAMLET For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. 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. The spirit that I have seen
May be a de'il, and the de'il hath power
T'assume a pleasing shape. Yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me! I'll have grounds
More relative than this. The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King. (2.2.528-540)

It is Hamlet who wants to know the truth, but the audience also needs the information: by the information they feel assured that Hamlet's revenge is worthy for them to follow.

[Act 3]

So far, Claudius has been confident that his murder is not known to Hamlet. But in Act 3 he finds out that his madness is a pretence, and by the play which Hamlet plans he learns that Hamlet knows his evil deed. From this time on, the confrontation of Hamlet and Claudius grows much more serious than before.

3.1

By the examination of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Claudius finds out that Hamlet's madness is counterfeit. He learns that there must be some reason for Hamlet's sham madness. The following passage is the middle of their conversation, as "And" in 1.1 shows:

KING *And* can you by no drift of conference
Get from him *why he puts on this confusion*,
Grating so harshly all his days of quiet
With turbulent and *dangerous* lunacy?

ROSENCRANTZ He does confess he feels himself distracted
But *from what cause* 'a will by no means speak.

GUILDENSTERN Nor do we find him forward to be sounded
But with *a crafty madness* keeps aloof
When we would bring him on to some confession
Of *his true state*. (3.1.1–10. Emphasis added.)

The phrases, "puts on", "a crafty madness", and "his true state", show that they have detected Hamlet's pretence. So far, the *cause* of Hamlet's madness has been the question for Claudius. But now he cannot specify the reason *why Hamlet pretends* to be mad, and it arouses in him a fear. In the phrase "dangerous lunacy", the person who feels the danger should be Claudius and not Hamlet: "Hamlet's lunacy is dangerous for me (Claudius)". As we have seen that Claudius' concern for Hamlet is only apparent, he does not mind about Hamlet's well-being at all (that is, whether Hamlet's madness is dangerous for himself or not). And this is the first time in the play that Claudius speaks of danger.⁹

Soon after this passage, comes Claudius' speech below:

KING Sweet Gertrude, leave us two.
For we have closely sent for Hamlet hither
That he, as 'twere by accident, may here
Affront Ophelia. Her father and myself —
We'll so bestow ourselves that, seeing unseen,
We may of their encounter frankly judge
And gather by him as he is behaved
If 't be th'affliction of his love or no
That thus he suffers for. (3.1.28–36)

But in the actual encounter, Hamlet goes a little higher than Claudius' assay: he may be seeing through Polonius' or Claudius' intent:

HAMLET Where's your father?

OPHELIA At home, my lord.

HAMLET Let the doors be shut upon him that he may play the
fool nowhere but in's own house. (3.1.129-32)

It is impossible to decide from the text whether Hamlet is aware of their eavesdropping. But it is evident that Hamlet is fully aware of Polonius' intrusion.

From the eavesdropping, Claudius learns that there is some other reason for his pretending madness. He cannot specify the reason, and his great fear is expressed in his speech below:

KING Love! His affections do not that way tend.
Nor what he spake, though it lacked form a little,
Was not like madness. There's something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood
And I do *doubt* the hatch and the disclose
Will be some *danger* — which for to prevent
I have *in quick determination*
Thus set it down. He shall *with speed* to England
For the demand of our neglected tribute.
(3.1.161-69. Emphasis added.)

Claudius feels that it is very dangerous if he keeps Hamlet near him. He thinks of sending him to England, and his words, “quick determination” and “with speed”, show his great fear effectively. At the beginning of the play, it was Claudius who bade Hamlet earnestly to stay in the court and not to go to Wittenberg (1.2.112-17). At that time he was quite sure of his safety. But now, he wants to get rid of him as soon as possible. So he resorts to his kingly power to demand the neglected tribute from England, which is his apparent excuse. This scene ends with Claudius words:

KING Madness in great ones must not unwatched go. (3.1.187)
Claudius knows that Hamlet's madness is fake. But he takes the stance

that it is a true one, and arranges it into his pretext: Hamlet is mad, and, therefore, he must be treated accordingly. Moreover, he says so in a general statement, covering over his predicament and justifying his dark intention.

3.2

Claudius has not been able to catch the reason for Hamlet's fake madness, and so he is in great fear. On the other hand, Hamlet has decided to find out by a play whether Claudius killed his father or not. In this situation, the play within the play scene is crucial for the further development of the play. By the play, Claudius learns that Hamlet knows the fact of the murder: on the part of Hamlet, he catches the truth, and moreover, he shows Claudius that he actually knows it.

First, the players give a dumb-show:

The trumpet sounds. Dumb-show follows.

Enter [Players as] a king and a queen embracing him and he her.

He takes her up and declines his head upon her neck. He lies him down upon a bank of flowers. She seeing him asleep leaves him. Anon come in [a Player as] another man, takes off his crown, kisses it, *pours poison in the sleeper's ears* and leaves him. The queen returns, finds the king dead, makes passionate action. The poisoner with some three or four [Players] come in again, seem to condole with her. The dead body is carried away. The poisoner wooes the queen with gifts. She seems harsh awhile, but in the end accepts love. [Exeunt] (3.2.128. Emphasis added.)

The show reflects almost exactly what Claudius has done. He, however, shows no response — at least on the text level. But he must be shocked, and it is not only given out by his speech. His shock is so great that he cannot speak, or he is crafty enough to hide his inner turmoil. When a

player “pours poison in the sleeper’s ears”, he must be panicked: because the very way of the murder is played out in front of him.

After the dumb-show, Hamlet begins to irritate Claudius:

OPHELIA What means this, my lord?

HAMLET Marry, this munching mallico! It means mischief.

(3.2.129–31)

And also in the middle of the play:

KING Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in’t?

HAMLET No, no, they do but jest. Poison in jest. No offence i’t’h’ world.

KING What do you call the play?

HAMLET The Mousetrap. Marry, how Tropically! This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna. Gonzago is the duke’s name, his wife Baptista. You shall see anon ’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 withers are unwrung.

Enter Lucianus.

This is one Lucianus, nephew to the king.

OPHELIA You are as good as a chorus, my lord.

(3.2.226–38. Emphasis added.)

When he is provoking Claudius, he also shows that he grasps the play’s content. When Hamlet comments next time, Claudius can no longer suppress his passions. This is the crucial moment of the play: both of them clearly recognize the true situation that they are in:

LUCIANUS Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing,

Considerate season else no creature seeing,

Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,

With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,
Thy natural magic and dire property
On wholesome life usurp immediately.

[*Pours the poison in his ears.*]

HAMLET *'A poisons him i'th' garden for's estate.* His name's Gonzago. The story is extant and written in very choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife.

OPHELIA The king rises.

QUEEN How fares my lord?

POLONIUS Give o'er the play.

KING Give me some light, away.

POLONIUS Lights! Lights! Lights!

(3.2.248-62. Emphasis added.)

As far as we know, Hamlet's intention is to catch Claudius' secret. But here he shows that he knows Claudius' murder: he says, "'A poisons him i'th' garden for's estate". On the other hand, Claudius feels great fear, because he understands that Hamlet knows not only his murder, but also the means. If Hamlet tries to pursue the revenge successfully, it would be clever for him to ascertain the fact in secret. So Hamlet's demonstration might perplex some members of the audience, but if we consider dramatic design, his behaviour is understandable. Hamlet shows that he is seeking Claudius' life. And on Claudius' part, he learns that his life is in danger. Thus the two main protagonists confront each other. So far, Hamlet has pretended to be mad, and Claudius could not specify the reason for his fake madness. But now everything is cleared for both of them, and all the grounds for the revenge story have been settled.

Thus the fight between the two mighty opponents has actually begun. Their resolution, however, is not so rigid at this point of the play.

Hamlet has grasped the truth just now, and speaks of his decision as follows:

HAMLET 'Tis now the very witching time of night
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breaks out
Contagion to this world. Now *could* I drink hot blood
And do such business as the bitter day
Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother.
(3.2.378-82. Emphasis added.)

In spite of the content of the speech, the subjunctive mood of “could” reveals his indecisiveness. So, he soon changes the subject to that of his mother.

3.3

Claudius does not have a clear intention to kill Hamlet at this point. After the play scene, he expresses his fear for Hamlet, and the action he takes is:

KING *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 us as doth hourly grow
Out of his brows.* (3.3.1-7. Emphasis added.)

First he begins the speech with “I”, but in the same line, he slides to the royal “us”. “I like him not” is an expression of his private fear, but he soon changes it into the danger of a kingly person whose peril influences the whole kingdom. He tries to manage the matter, using the prerogative of a king. In the Arden edition, Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor say that the commission is “presumably the grand commission Hamlet

describes intercepting at 5.2.18; it is never made absolutely clear whether Rosencrantz and Guildenstern know they are conducting Hamlet not just to exile but to his death." (Arden, 326) This comment is misleading, because at this point, he does not think of killing Hamlet:

KING Arm you, I pray you, to this speedy voyage
For we will *fetters* put about this fear
Which now goes too *free-footed*.

(3.3.24-26. Emphasis added.)

"To let his madness range" (l.2), "fetters", and "free-footed" suggest that he is thinking of Hamlet's confinement. After this, he repents the sin of murdering his brother in his soliloquy (3.3.36-72). He feels strong disgust to his own deeds, and so it is improbable that he is contriving another murder. But his great vexation is expressed in "forthwith" (l.3) and "this speedy voyage" (l.24).

As the following speech shows, after watching the play, Claudius repents his sin:

KING O, my offence is rank: it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't —
A brother's murder. Pray can I not:
Though inclination be as sharp as will,
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent
And like a man to double business bound
I stand in pause where I shall first begin
And both neglect. (3.3.36-43. Emphasis added.)

His strong disgust with his own sin is expressed in the first line of the soliloquy.¹⁰ He wishes to pray but he cannot. He really wants to be forgiven, but he also knows that his damnable offense would never, ever be forgiven. In this state of mind, he could not kill one more person. At this stage, the play within the play has not given him enough motivation

to kill Hamlet.

Now Hamlet chances to catch Claudius at prayer alone, and so he gets an almost perfect chance to kill. But he says:

HAMLET Now might I do it. But now 'a is a-praying.

And now I'll do it [*Draws sword.*] — and so 'a goes to
heaven,

And so am I revenged! That would be scanned:

A villain kills my father, and for that

I, his sole son, do this same villain send

To heaven.

Why, this is base and silly, not revenge. (3.3.73-79)

Jenkins argues that we should accept his excuse just as he explains:

Sometimes criticism has even denied what is in the text: for well over a century it was almost universally accepted that when Hamlet proposed to defer his revenge till he could send the King's soul to damnation, he could not have meant what he said.¹¹

However, Hamlet has just grasped the fact that Claudius' has murdered his brother. Their wish to kill each other is not sufficient at this point of the play. A more decisive incident is necessary for Claudius to feel a more urgent danger, and that is to be Hamlet's killing of Polonius.

After the encounter of Hamlet and Ophelia, Polonius still believes that Hamlet's madness is "from neglected love" (3.1.177). So he suggests to the king that he will listen to the conversation of Gertrude and Hamlet behind an arras after the play. Now Hamlet goes to his mother with a strong will to criticise her behaviour with Claudius. As I have argued above, he suppresses the intention to kill his mother for her marriage with Claudius. When Hamlet confronts Gertrude, she is overwhelmed by his resolution:

QUEEN What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me —
Help, ho!

POLONIUS [*behind the arras*]

What ho! Help!

HAMLET How now! A rat! Dead, for a ducat, dead!
[*Kills Polonius.*]

POLONIUS O, I am slain!

QUEEN O me, what hast thou done?

HAMLET *Nay, I know not.* Is it the king?

(3.4.20–24. Emphasis added.)

As Hamlet's "Nay, I know not" shows, Hamlet kills Polonius only by accident. But he also acknowledges that he killed him, taking him for Claudius:

HAMLET [*Uncovers the body of Polonius.*]

— Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell:

I took thee for thy better. Take thy fortune;

Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger.

(3.4.29–31. Emphasis added.)

On Hamlet's intentional level, this murder is an unanticipated accident. On the plot movement level, however, this is not a mere accident, but an important factor contrived for the further development of the drama. In 3.3, Claudius has been so deep in repentance for his sin, but by this "accident" he shakes off the keen sense of guilt, and begins to seek for the means of killing Hamlet. Moreover, by the death of Polonius, another plot movement joins in. Ophelia goes mad, Laertes comes back from France, and he is seduced by Claudius to avenge his father.

In act 4, Claudius' plan of sending Hamlet to England is actualized. But before that, Hamlet refers to it:

HAMLET I must to England — you know that.

QUEEN Alack, I had forgot; 'tis so concluded on.

HAMLET There's letters sealed and my two schoolfellows —

Whom I will trust as I will adders fanged —

They bear the mandate, they must sweep my way

And marshal me to knavery. Let it work.

For 'tis the sport to have the enginer

Hoist with his own petard, and't shall go hard

But I will delve one yard below their mines

And blow them at the moon. O, 'tis most sweet

When in one line two crafts directly meet. (3.4.198-208)

He knows about the “mandate” and Claudius’ “knavery”. In comparison to Claudius’ fearful feeling, Hamlet is very confident. He says that he will slickly outmaneuver Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and things will turn out as he predicts. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to be killed by the king of England in place of Hamlet (4.6 and 5.2). He also recognizes that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are only Claudius’ tools: he acknowledges that the battle is between Claudius and him (“O, 'tis most sweet / When in one line two crafts (i.e. Hamlet’s and Claudius’) directly meet”).

[Act 4]

4.1

When Hamlet has killed Polonius, he has taken him for Claudius. Claudius also recognizes Polonius’ death as if his own:

KING O heavy deed!

It had been so with us had we been there. (4.1.12-13)

When he has perceived in the play scene that Hamlet knows his murder and that he seeks for his life, his fear was not so great as this. But as we see now, Polonius’ death gives him a *concrete* image of his own death. By the actual death of Polonius, he decides to take direct action to kill

Hamlet.

KING Hamlet, *this deed for thine especial safety* —
Which we do tender, as we dearly grieve
For that which thou hast done — must send thee hence.
Therefore prepare thyself:
The bark is ready and the wind at help,
Th'associates tend and every thing is bent
For England.

HAMLET For England?

KING Ay, Hamlet.

HAMLET Good.

KING So is it if thou knewest our purposes.

HAMLET *I see a cherub that sees them. But come, for
England.* (4.3.39-47. Emphasis added.)

Claudius overtly takes the stance that Hamlet is really mad, and that sending Hamlet to England is for Hamlet's own sake. Here, as before, he behaves as if he is a compassionate father-in-law. In comparison to Claudius' *fair* attitude with his dark intention behind it, Hamlet plays fair and square. He says that he sees through Claudius' deeper plot, but he never shrinks back, and accepts the offer of his opponent.¹²

After Claudius has recognized Hamlet's fake madness, his fear has been expressed by his eagerness that things must be managed with speed. After Hamlet has killed Polonius, his expanding fear is also expressed in the same way. When he is first informed by Gertrude about Polonius' death, he says:

KING The sun no sooner shall the mountains touch
But we will ship him hence, and this vile deed
We must with all our majesty and skill
Both countenance and excuse. (4.1.29-32)

He says that he must embark Hamlet before the dawn. His tense feeling is expressed in the comparative construction, “no sooner . . . but”. But after he has given his command to Hamlet, he changes the departure time to “tonight”:

KING Follow him *at foot*.
Tempt him *with speed* aboard.
Delay it not — I'll have him hence *tonight*.
Away, for everything is sealed and done
That else leans on th'affair. *Pray you make haste*.
(4.3.51-55. Emphasis added.)

He really wants to get rid of the danger of Hamlet as soon as possible. He says that the mandate is already written and sealed. When everyone leaves the stage, he reveals the content of the letter. It gives us shiver, when we come to the phrase, “The present death of Hamlet”:

KING And England, if my love thou hold'st at aught
As my great power thereof may give thee sense,
Since yet thy cicatrice looks raw and red
After the Danish sword, and thy free awe
Pays homage to us, thou mayst not coldly set
Our sovereign process, which imports at full
By letters congruing to that effect
The present death of Hamlet. Do it, England!
For like the hectic in my blood he rages
And thou must cure me. Till I know 'tis done,
Howe'er my haps my joys will ne'er begin.
(4.3.56-66. Emphasis added.)

This is the first time that Claudius articulates his intention to kill Hamlet. In this case, and also later, he will not make his own hands tainted. He has shown his anguish in the soliloquy, “What if this cursed hand / Were

thicker than itself with brother's blood? / Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens / To wash it white as snow?" (3.3.43-46). So, in seeking for Hamlet's life, he dare not use his own hand. Instead, he makes full use of his tools, that is, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the king of England, and later, Laertes. In this manoeuvre, too, we see Claudius' vile means to kill Hamlet. And in contrast we see Hamlet's fair acceptance of his foe's offer, being aware of his damned contrivance.

4.5

In this scene Ophelia becomes mad, and Laertes comes back from France to avenge his father. From this point on, the plot originating from the Ophelia-Polonius side begins to mingle with the Hamlet-Claudius revenge plot, aiming for the denouement.

Laertes breaks into Claudius' court in fury, but he is quite easily pacified by Claudius. Or, Claudius' crafty persuasion surpasses Laertes' flaming passion. First, Claudius shows compassion to Laertes' rage: "Let him demand his fill" (4.5.128) and "Who shall stay you" (4.5.135). Then he protests that he is not responsible for his father's death, and so he is not the target of Laertes' revenge:

KING Good Laertes,
If you desire to know the certainty
Of your dear father, is't writ in your revenge
That swoopstake you will draw both friend and foe,
Winner and loser?

LAERTES None but his enemies.

KING Will you know them, then?

LAERTES To his good friends thus wide I'll ope my arms
And like the kind life-rendering pelican
Repast them with my blood. (4.5.138-46)

Here his compassionate posture and the questioning forms work on Laertes effectively.

Then, the mad Ophelia comes in. Thus, Laertes has given double cause for the revenge of his father:

LAERTES Hadst thou thy wits and didst persuade revenge
It could not move thus. (4.5.163-64)

4.6

In this scene, Horatio receives a letter from Hamlet. Only Hamlet is captured by pirates, and they are coming to Denmark. The letter also says a little about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

HORATIO [*Reads.*] *Horatio, when thou shalt have overlooked this, give these fellows some means to the King: they have letters for him. Ere we were two days old at sea, a pirate of very warlike appointment gave us chase. Finding ourselves too slow of sail, we put on a compelled valour and in the grapple I boarded them. On the instant they got clear of our ship, so I alone became their prisoner. They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy, but they knew what they did: I am to do a turn for them. Let the king have the letters I have sent, and repair thou to me with as much speed as thou wouldst fly death. I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb. Yet are they much too light for the bore of the matter. These good fellows will bring thee where I am. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hold their course for England. Of them I have much to tell thee. Farewell. He that thou knowest thine. Hamlet.* (4.6.13-28)

4.7

By the time we go into 4.7, Claudius has succeeded in persuading Laertes and taking him in under his control:

KING Now must your conscience my acquittance seal
And you must put me in your heart for friend
Sith you have heard and with a knowing ear
That he which hath your noble father slain
Pursued my life. (4.7.1-5)

Then a letter from Hamlet comes to Claudius, and he reads the letter to Laertes:

KING [*Reads.*] *High and mighty. You shall know I am set naked on your kingdom. Tomorrow shall I beg leave to see your kingly eyes. When I shall (first asking you pardon) thereunto recount the occasion of my sudden return.*
(4.7.43-46)

By the time Hamlets writes this letter — as we will learn later at the beginning of 5.2 —, he has stolen the grand commission from the pocket of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and read it: Claudius' command to the king of England is that "on the supervise, no leisure bated / — No, not to stay the grinding of the axe! — / My [Hamlet's] head should be struck off" (5.2.23-25). Hamlet, therefore, writes this letter to Claudius, knowing the crucial danger of his life. He dares to come back to his foe under the resolution that "I shall kill him or he shall kill me". Their intentions to kill each other has grown to such intensity.

Claudius, then, proposes to Laertes a plan to kill Hamlet:

KING I will work him
To an exploit, now ripe in my device,
Under the which he shall not choose but fall. (4.7.61-63)

Then, he abruptly changes the topic. He speaks of the fame of Laertes'

sword practice in France. He also tells that Hamlet has been envious of it:

KING Sir, this report of his
Did Hamlet so envenom with his envy
That he could nothing do but wish and beg
Your sudden coming o'er, to play with you.
Now out of this — (4.7.100-04)

“Out of this” comes a crafty lure for Laertes in a questioning form:

KING Laertes, was your father dear to you?
Or are you like the painting of a sorrow,
A face without a heart? (4.7.105-07)

Claudius heaps praises on Laertes' fencing technique, and suddenly changes the subject to his fidelity to his father. He continues:

KING But to the quick of th'ulcer —
Hamlet comes back. What would you undertake
To show yourself in deed your father's son
More than in words? (4.7.121-24)

In this way, Claudius makes Laertes believe that his decision to kill Hamlet is of his own volition, and not compelled by him. Finally, they make a complete plan how to kill Hamlet: the competition with an unbated sword, with venom on it, and the preparation of a poisoned cup of wine. Then, Gertrude comes in, and informs them that Ophelia has drowned. Thus act 4 ends, looking forward to the fatal finale.

[Act 5]

As I have argued so far, Hamlet and Claudius have undergone a conflict, which increases in seriousness along with the development of the play. Claudius feels danger in Hamlet who seeks for his life, and he always contrives something in order to forestall Hamlet. On the other

hand, although Hamlet has been fully motivated to avenge his father, he has not taken any concrete action to kill Claudius. Hamlet's own explanation is as follows:

HAMLET Rashly —
And praised be rashness for it — let us know
Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
When our deep plots do fall — and that should learn us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will. (5.2.6-11. Emphasis added.)

His "deep plots" have not worked well so far. What he has tried to do for the revenge is now in the state of "rough-hewed". And his final purpose is to be fulfilled by "divinity", that is, the authorial direction which governs the whole play.

In the fencing match, Laertes takes the poisoned weapon:

LAERTES This is too heavy, let me see another.
HAMLET This likes me well. These foils have all a length?
OSRIC Ay, my good lord.
KING Set me the stoops of wine upon that table. (5.2.241-44)

Hamlet only suspects the length of the foils, while Claudius orders his servant to prepare wine. Here, Hamlet's nobility and fair attitude is contrasted to Claudius' crafty wickedness. The chance to kill this vilely skillful foe is given at last in spite of his own intention:

LAERTES It is here, Hamlet, thou art slain.
No medicine in the world can do thee good:
In thee there is not half an hour of life;
The treacherous instrument is in thy hand
Unbated and envenomed. The foul practice
Hath turned itself on me. Lo, here I lie,
Never to rise again. Thy mother's poisoned —

I can no more — the King, the King's to blame.

HAMLET The point envenomed too? Then venom to thy work!

[*Hurts the King*] (5.2.298-306)

Hamlet is doomed with less than a half hour's life allowed to him. This small space of time is significant for his revenge and for the theme of the play. His revenge is regulated to be fair by the words of the Ghost, and also by the construction of the play (from infection to purgation). Even though he murders his foe with the same means that he is killed, he is never ever tainted with vileness. As I have examined so far, the mighty opposites have developed a conflict seeking for each other's life, and the intensity of the conflict has increased in seriousness with the development of the plot. In this process of their conflict, the fatal moment of the revenge comes to Hamlet at last. It is only at the sacrifice of his own life that Hamlet gets the chance to kill Claudius.

6. Conclusion

Hamlet avenges his father's death not only because he is commanded to do so by his father's ghost. But he has got his own motives which concerns his own being. When the play begins, he is innerly dead: he has totally lost the purpose of life. And when he is commanded by the Ghost, he wishes for a new life for revenge. His mother's betrayal of his father also gives great damage to his soul. This affects his own way of loving: he cannot believe in his own love for Ophelia. All these causes with him, Hamlet confronts Claudius. He is vile and wicked enough to become Hamlet's opponent. He is also talented enough to make full use of his evil nature. On the other hand, Hamlet's revenge is regulated by the Ghost's words and by the play's structure to exclude any viciousness.

With the development of the play, the two opponents deepen their intentions to kill each other. After Claudius learns that Hamlet is seeking for his life, he contrives vile plans — first to get rid of him, and then to kill him. On the other hand, Hamlet does not devise any concrete scheme for the murder. But their strife, to kill or to be killed, increases in seriousness along with the course of the play. Therefore, it is not just by accident that Hamlet gets the chance to kill Claudius at last. But it is the inevitable conclusion of the deepening course of their conflict.

Notes

- ¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, the Arden Shakespeare, the third series (London: Cengage Learning, 2006). All the quotations from *Hamlet* are from this text.
- ² This is also true of Gertrude and Ophelia. Before the murder they were in wholesome and happy conditions, as I shall argue later.
- ³ Caroline F. E. Spurgeon argues in her famous book, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells Us* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1935), 318. "This image pictures and reflects not only the outward condition which causes Hamlet's spiritual illness, but also his own state. Indeed, the shock of the discovery of his father's murder and the sight of his mother's conduct have been such that when the play opens Hamlet has already begun to die, to die internally; because all the springs of life — love, laughter, joy, hope, belief in others — are becoming frozen at their source, are being gradually infected by the disease of the spirit which is — unknown to him — killing him."
- ⁴ "should" in l.143 is "would" in the F1, which signifies the usage of the past.
- ⁵ Hamlet pretends to be mad in order to hide his deeper intentions. There are three parties of people according to their interpretations of his madness: 1) those who believe that he is really mad — Gertrude and Polonius; 2) those who perceive that it is a fake behaviour, and try to find his deeper motive — Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; 3) she who believes that he is mad, but has a deeper insight into his fundamental change — Ophelia. She has been loved by Hamlet, and actually perceives his great change. After Hamlet's powerful insult to her about a

woman's wantonness, Ophelia laments his fall:

OPHELIA O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword,
Th'expectation and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
Th'observed of all observers, quite, quite down.
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That sucked the honey of his musicked vows,
Now see what noble and most sovereign reason
Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh —
That unmatched form and stature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy. O woe is me
T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see.

(3.1.149-160. Emphasis added.)

The underlined parts show his former state, whereas the double-underlined parts show his changed state.

- ⁶ Later we can see another example of this tactic, when he exerts his influence on Laertes as an instrument to fulfill his own plans.
- ⁷ In the first Folio, “son” in 1.67 is “Sun”, while in the second Quarto it is “sonne”. In the days of Shakespeare, both “son” and “sun” were spelt “sonne”.
- ⁸ About the word, “prophetic”, Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor say, “Hamlet has not expressed a specific suspicion that the present King murdered his brother, though this confirms and justifies his hostile attitude in 1.2.” (Arden, 214)
- ⁹ Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern share the idea of Hamlet’s fake madness, but Gertrude does not. Her speeches, “Did he receive you (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) well?” (3.1.10) and “Did you assay him to any pastime” (3.1.15) sound rather ridiculous. She believes Hamlet’s madness is a true one, and she is anxious for him. She feels for him throughout the play as a loving mother, and her standpoint and Claudius’ are quite different.
- ¹⁰ The word, “rank” is one of the keywords in the play. It expresses 1) the nature of Claudius’ sin, and 2) the infected state of Denmark caused by Claudius’ murder. So, Hamlet speaks of the state of Denmark as “Fie on’t, ah, fie, ‘tis an unweeded garden / That grows to seed, things *rank* and gross in nature / Possess it merely” (1.2.135-37). And when Hamlet discloses Claudius’ sin using the play, he makes the player speak the same word: “Thou mixture *rank*, of midnight weeds collected, / With Hecate’s ban thrice blasted, thrice infected” (3.2.250-51).

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- ¹¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, The Arden Shakespeare, 2nd ed (London: Methuen, 1982) p. 124.
- ¹² In Hamlet's speech in l.45, the punctuation is different between the Folio and the second Quarto: in the Folio, "For England?", whereas in the second Quarto, "For England." The latter case shows Hamlet's decisiveness more effectively.