

Leo Rockas

"Stick Fiery Off": Foils in *Hamlet*

The handbooks of literature define "foil" as a character who contrasts with another character and offer as examples Laertes and Fortinbras in relation to Hamlet so regularly as to suggest they are cribbing from a common source or each other. There are, to be sure, enough contemporary references to characters as foils or to the concept of the foil to indicate that recent critics are simply recalling what Renaissance authors knew all along. The *OED*'s earliest reference to "foil" as a contrast is dated 1581, and as a contrast in character is Jasper Mayne's *City Match* (1639): "I need no foile, nor shall I think I'me white only between two Moores." But there are earlier occurrences in Middleton, Dekker, and Jonson, and in Shakespeare himself.¹ Flamineo in *The White Devil* says to Vittoria of Camillo: "You are a goodly foil, I confess; well set out . . . but cover'd with a false stone: yon conterfeit diamond" (I.ii.136-38).² In *Epicoene* Dauphine says to Madame Haughty of the lesser ladies: "I perceive they are your mere foils" (V.ii.12).³

In critical writing the earliest reference I find to "foil" is in R.G. Moulton, writing in 1885, who says that *Character-Foils* are the "lowest degree" of Character-Contrast (the higher degrees are "Duplication" and "Character-Grouping"):

. . . by the side of some prominent character is placed another of less force and interest but cast in the same mould, or perhaps moulded by the influence of its principal, just as by the side of a lofty mountain are often to be seen smaller hills of the same formation. Thus beside Portia is placed Nerissa, beside Bassanio Gratiano, beside Shylock Tubal; Richard's villainy stands out by comparison with Buckingham, Hastings, Tyrrel, Catesby, any of whom would have given blackness enough to an ordinary drama. It is quite possible that minute examination may find differences between such companion figures: but the general effect of the combination is that the lesser serves as foil to throw up the scale on which the other is framed.⁴

The apparent source of the handbooks' examples from *Hamlet* is the commentary by Joseph Quincy Adams, appended to his 1929 edition of the play. Adams's brief account is nonetheless the fullest I have found in any critic. A foil, he says, "must present certain features of similarity in order to render the contrast effective." He discusses Horatio as foil to Hamlet in "inborn temperament" and Fortinbras and Laertes as foils to "his temporary and altogether abnormal state of inactivity." According to Adams, Shakespeare resorted to foils in *Hamlet*, at least to the latter two, because he could not explain Hamlet's inactivity directly and so was "compelled to resort to an indirect method." A single case (Fortinbras) might be considered exceptional; by employing a second (Laertes), "he gives universality to the energetic activity of youth."⁵ But I cannot understand how these foils could explain the mystery of Hamlet's inactivity; the more universal the energetic activity of young men in a similar situation, the deeper becomes the mystery of Hamlet's conduct—and that deepening of the mystery may be a better reason for employing foils than the reason of explaining his behavior.

Ernest Jones complicates somewhat the theory of the foil, though he does not actually use the term. The function of what he calls "doubling" is, he says, to exalt the importance of the principal characters, "and especially to glorify the hero, by decoratively filling in the stage with lay figures of colourless copies whose neutral movements contrast with the vivid activities of the principals." This account is the one we recognize in Moulton and Adams, but Jones's account of "decomposition" is different: "various attributes of a given individual are disunited, and several other individuals are invented, each endowed with one group of the original attributes." In this process, however, the "attributes" are entirely taken over by the new characters, whereas the theory of the jewel and foil suggests that the central figure retains all the attributes, which are additionally separated and diminished in its foil(s). According to Jones, Shakespeare decomposed the one father (his own, I presume) who is both loved and hated into the beloved elder Hamlet, the hated Claudius, and Polonius, who represents the "senile babbler" form of the paternal archetype. Examples of pure "doubling" for Jones are Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo; Claudius, Laertes, and Fortinbras are examples of both "doubling" and "decomposition."⁶ But Jones is everywhere looking for what the author repressed, whereas criticism as a whole is interested in his artistic accomplishment, fully or almost fully conscious.

William Empson notes with interest Jones's theory of "decomposition" and contributes one of his own, the "pseudo-parody to disarm criticism," which may be the best account we have yet had of "comic relief." He says this type of foil is "not at all to parody the heroes but to stop you from doing so: 'If you want to laugh at this sort of thing laugh now and get it over.'" ⁷ Richard Levin, a more recent theorist, makes good use of Empson's observation and is at some pains to differentiate between "foil" and "parody." The foil elevates the central figure, while the parody diminishes it. But he admits that true examples of parody are "much more difficult to come by."⁸ The Pistol scenes in *Henry V* he denies as parody and offers only the comic material of *Doctor Faustus* as a true example of parody. It would appear, then, that the majority of minor characters in Renaissance plays, whether "serious" characters such as Horatio and Laertes, or comic characters such as Pistol, function in Levin's view as foils, as characters who heighten or elevate the central character.

Like other Renaissance plays, *Hamlet* has its own references to foils. In choosing foils (swords) to fence with, Hamlet says:

I'll be your foil, Laertes; in mine ignorance
Your skill shall like a star i' th' darkest night
Stick fiery off indeed. (V.ii.256-57)⁹

A celestial simile clarifies a metaphor from jewelry—a gem and its setting—which is applied to skill in fencing. "Foil" here is also a pun for a fencing weapon and a setting in jewelry. And the lines are ironic, whether they are to be taken as modest or hypocritical in Hamlet, for Laertes is actually Hamlet's foil, in fencing and in characterization. It is Laertes who makes Hamlet "stick fiery off," or shine brilliantly. Hamlet also schools us in the method of dramatic foils when he says of Laertes "by the image of my cause I see/The portraiture of his" (77-78). Unless "portraiture" is simply an "elegant variation" on "image," the contrast of terms here suggests that one representation is more vague or distant or unknown or artificial, the other more distinct or close or familiar or real. If "image" is the term minimized, Hamlet once more ironically makes himself Laertes' foil.

Ophelia seems to comment on the three foils to Hamlet when she thinks him mad:

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword. . .

(III.i.150-51)

This inventory of persons and features does not add up in a progressive sequence or in any form of *chiasmus* I recognize: it is apparently the sword of the soldier (Fortinbras), the tongue of the courtier (Laertes), and the eye of the scholar (Horatio). Nigel Alexander, through a study of literature and painting of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, observes that Hamlet is presented with the traditional "choice of life" with its associated imagery: "the sword of the active life, the book of the contemplative life, and the flower of the passionate life."¹⁰ Apparently Shakespeare chose to embody these choices of life in the three foils to Hamlet and gave two of them a father's death to avenge as well. None of the three is really necessary to the plot—not even Laertes—for Claudius could have otherwise contrived at Hamlet's death. Laertes becomes his accomplice because no one else is so conveniently available. Both Laertes and Hamlet have returned to challenge the throne, perhaps the life, of the King, and Claudius finds a means of turning the one against the other.

The elder Fortinbras ambitiously challenged the elder Hamlet to a duel and thereby lost his life and forfeited certain lands. The younger Fortinbras has therefore nothing in point of law or honor to avenge but, in imitation of his father's ambition, becomes an aggressor to Denmark. His uncle—like Hamlet's uncle the new king, but old and infirm and as unlike the energetic Claudius as the elder Fortinbras was unlike the peaceable elder Hamlet—dissuades Fortinbras from this aggression toward Denmark. But Fortinbras is undaunted and renews his attack on Poland for a useless piece of land. Why should he be in the play? To inspire one of Hamlet's most memorable soliloquies, to provide a successor to the throne of Denmark when Claudius, Hamlet, and Laertes are dead? From the point of view of plot Fortinbras is a convenience rather than a necessity. His real function is to provide a contrast to Hamlet, to suggest a merely military "choice of life" for Hamlet and so to highlight Hamlet's distinctiveness.

Laertes is the only son whose father also appears in the play, and so it may be harder to see that he and Polonius represent an older and younger version of the same role and potential course of action for Hamlet—that of the courtier. We think of Laertes as the embodiment of youth and vigor and of Polonius as the embodiment of old age, if not infirmity—differences attributable merely to age. Their similarity is glanced at in Ophelia's inventory, if we associate "tongue" with "courtier." The honeyed words of Laertes to Ophelia have not, I think, been sufficiently noted. He assures her, apparently from experience, that Hamlet's favor is "sweet, not lasting, / The perfume and suppliance of a

minute—/ No more.” He adds that “as this temple waxes, the inward service of the mind and soul/ Grows wide withal.” As he urges her to protect her “chaste treasure” from Hamlet’s “unmast’red importunity,” we recognize his petition to her as a form of seduction (Jones sees repressed incest between Laertes and Ophelia) and may imagine the easier flow of his tongue with another lady not his sister. Ophelia tells him not to be a “puff’d and reckless libertine,” as if he is not one, but the expression seems validated by Polonius’ suspicions of his conduct in Paris—and by Polonius’ own recollections of his youth. “I do know,” he says, “When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul/ Lends the tongue vows” (I.iii.8-10, 12-14, 31-32, 49, 115-17). The theory that Hamlet has gone mad over love is credited only by Polonius and partly by Gertrude—sensualists both. When Ophelia describes the unearthly miseries of Hamlet, Polonius reduces his complexities to sex, which Polonius can understand: “Mad for thy love?” and “This is the very ecstasy of love” (II.i.82,99). The lines are comic in obtruding his *idée fixe* where it has no business.

T.S. Eliot found “little excuse” for the “unexplained scenes—the Polonius—Laertes and the Polonius-Reynaldo scenes.”¹¹ Polonius’ advice to Laertes has been considered a list of paternal homilies applicable to Hamlet as well as Laertes¹²—almost as if Polonius has appropriated some wisdom from the dead Hamlet, whose chief courtier he may also have been. Both scenes develop the role of the courtier, in youth and old age, as a possible “choice of life” for Hamlet. Polonius tells Reynaldo to hint to other Danes that Laertes has been misbehaving, even “drabbing”, and denies that such faults are dishonorable, if presented as “the taints of liberty” (II.i.32): he may well be thinking of his own youth. In addition the talk with Reynaldo introduces some topics anything but peripheral to the central action of the play. One critic suggests that “Just as Hamlet cannot escape his father’s spirit, so Laertes cannot escape Polonius.”¹³ Another suggests that the “tactics” Polonius urges on Reynaldo “are very similar to those that will be used against Hamlet.”¹⁴ I find more useful Harry Levin’s hint that the “instructions to Reynaldo have laid down the pattern for an elaborate game of espionage and counter-espionage.”¹⁵

The central action of the play is the attempt by the Prince and the King to learn the secrets of each other. In the scene immediately preceding the one between Polonius and Reynaldo, Hamlet goes to elaborate lengths to insure that Horatio and Marcellus will never reveal—not what the ghost has told him, for Hamlet decides not to repeat it to them—but even that they saw a ghost resembling the elder Hamlet. He indicates how subtly secrets can be revealed:

That you, at such times seeing me, never shall,
 With arms encumb' red thus, or this headshake,
 Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,
 As "Well, well, we know," or "We could, and if we would,"
 Or "If we list to speak," or "There be, and if they might,"
 Or such ambiguous giving out, to note
 That you know aught of me. . . . (I.v.173-79)

This passage almost seems a lesson in how to keep a secret. The devices Polonius urges on Reynaldo in the next scene seem by contrast a lesson in how to discover a secret—and, despite Polonius' doddering, are equally subtle. Reynaldo is to pretend only a distant acquaintance with Laertes and to hint at his various possible faults; his interlocutor will thus be gently pressed to reveal exactly what he knows of Laertes. Polonius calls his technique "a fetch of wit" ("a fetch of warrant" in the Folio), an ingenious device or justifiable trick, and explains himself further with images from fishing and bowling:

Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth,
 And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
 With windlasses and with assays of bias,
 By indirections find directions out. (II.i.38, 60-63)

These are the tactics that will be used against Hamlet, perhaps, but they are more clearly those he will use against Claudius, and the "fetch of wit" or "of warrant" and the "bait of falsehood" are terms for Hamlet's "Mousetrap." In his playlet Hamlet will hint at Claudius' faults and "By indirections find directions out." The "unexplained scenes," then, develop some important thematic considerations of the play and help to develop the foil of the courtier, whose "tongue" is shown in Laertes's seductiveness, and in Polonius is reduced to his pride in his winning ways—his attempts to convince the King and Queen that he can solve the mystery of Hamlet's odd behavior.

Hamlet is capable of the martial airs and bearing of Fortinbras, though not always disposed to exercise them. Fortinbras in the last line of the play remembers Hamlet as a soldier: out of Hamlet's many virtues Fortinbras sees and praises only his own. Hamlet's tongue is also if anything more skillful than Laertes'; Maurice Charney has shown some of Hamlet's versatility in an analysis of the various styles in the play.¹⁶ But Hamlet's special affinity is to the scholar Horatio. In the first act Laertes wishes to return to Paris and pleasure, while Hamlet wishes to return to Wittenberg and study. The Queen tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "sure I am two men there is not living/To whom he more

adheres" (II.ii.20-21). But she must be remembering his childhood and has not recognized that Horatio is now his special friend, the special choice of his soul, as he tells Horatio in a detailed and extraordinary tribute. Though J.Q. Adams sees this speech as a record of qualities Hamlet lacks, I agree with J.K. Walton that "Horatio is meant to remind us through his 'elective affinity' with Hamlet, of those qualities of 'blood' and 'judgement' which Hamlet displays throughout the dramatic action."¹⁷ Hamlet says Horatio "is not passion's slave" (III.i.72), perhaps thinking of Claudius, who is, and perhaps of Laertes as well: Hamlet and Horatio are both by contrast meditative and cautious and honorable. When they first meet in the play and Horatio says he is Hamlet's "poor servant ever," Hamlet says, "I'll change that name with you" (I.ii.163), as if to assert their equivalence. Marcellus and Barnardo have asked Horatio to come and see the ghost with his scholar's eye, and when Horatio tells Hamlet of the apparition, the two seem to establish a certain commerce in eyes.

Hamlet. My father—methinks I see my father.

Horatio. Where, my lord?

Hamlet. In my mind's eye, Horatio.

Horatio. I saw him once, 'a was a goodly king.

Hamlet. 'A was a man, take him for all in all,
I shall not look upon his like again.

Horatio. My lord, I think I saw him yesternight. (I.ii.184-89)

Again, when they are readying for the playlet, Hamlet tells Horatio to give "heedful note" to the King, in a passage that equates their eyes and their judgments:

For I mine eyes will rivet to his face,
And after we will both our judgments join
In censure of his seeming.

Horatio. *Well, my lord,*

*If 'a steal the whilst this play is playing,
And 'scape [detecting], I will pay the theft.*

(III.ii.85-89)

Horatio, we recall, is the only person Hamlet entrusts with the secret of the ghost's story and is also the person he chooses to tell his story to the world.

The play gives Horatio no father, but if he had one, we sense he would be like himself, as Fortinbras resembles his father, Laertes resembles Polonius—and Hamlet the elder Hamlet. Hamlet recalls his father with

worshipful and godlike images, and he seems to be describing the ideals he himself would strive for. The ghost-father is in purgatory "Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature/Are burnt and purg'd away" (12-13). Nevertheless we are to think of him as a good man and king: Kittredge says these "foul crimes" are "the ordinary sins of mortality."¹⁸ A generational duplication of fathers and sons seems to have been in the conception of the play. Indeed, a similar correspondence is suggested in Gertrude and Ophelia. The Queen says, "Ophelia, I do wish/That your good beauties be the happy cause/Of Hamlet's wildness" (II.i.37-39) and "I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife" (V.i.244). Her sympathetic notice of Ophelia on these occasions, and her touching account of Ophelia's death, suggest that she recognized in Ophelia a younger version of herself, who was also as a young woman wooed by a Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.

We may perhaps wonder whether Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were not also meant for foils to Hamlet, but while they certainly contrast with Hamlet, we recognize, as elsewhere in Shakespeare, that their being two instead of one renders them so much less important, and indistinguishable from each other. Earlier examples are Salerio and Salanio of *The Merchant of Venice*. In *Hamlet*, Voltemand and Cornelius (and Reynaldo) might well be the same characters, or players, as each other, or as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When the two appear together, either might read the lines of the other with no dramatic loss. As they make a single obeisance, arbitrarily divided between them, the King and Queen respond with speeches equally indistinguishable. Perhaps they smile at each other as they answer the twin tools:

Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern.

Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz. (II.ii.33-34)

The two are part of Claudius' effort at counter-espionage, his attempt to glean Hamlet's secret. They are both, as Hamlet says of Rosencrantz, sponges: when Claudius "needs what you have glean'd, it is but squeezing you and, spunge, you shall be dry again" (IV.iii.19-21). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are so pale as characters they are foils even to the foils of Hamlet: they make Laertes and Horatio seem distinctive if not altogether significant in their own right.

A better case might be made for Osric as a foil to Hamlet, since he is a single and distinctive character. Apart from Shakespeare's predilection for mixing comedy and tragedy, it is puzzling to determine any necessity for Osric's appearance in the final and most tragic scene of the play. No

doubt Hamlet needs to be somehow directed to his final duel, but why so much flair, so much comedy? Empson's "pseudo-parody" would suggest he is there to vent any remaining laughter so that we are fully prepared to cry at the multiplying corpses coming up. In addition, Osric is a fawning, ceremonious courtier and an expert referee of fencing, qualities that seem to glance at Laertes and Fortinbras. Hamlet's and Horatio's questioning of him is like a scholar's catechism of the absurdities of the courtier and soldier. Osric's last two speeches in the play direct our attention, first to the dying Laertes and then to Fortinbras, who is arriving to inherit the throne of Denmark. We may recall that we never see Laertes in Paris (though we learn from Claudius of the horseman Lamord who praised his art of the rapier), and we never see Fortinbras in his element, battle. As usual when it is inconvenient or undramatic to develop lesser characters than the protagonist, Shakespeare gives us parodies of them. Osric is a considerable landowner, which explains why Claudius has bothered to retain him—he is "spacious in the possession of dirt" (V.ii.88). This most gratuitous detail in the gratuitous portrait of Osric relates him to Fortinbras who goes forth "to gain a little patch of ground/That hath in it no profit but the name" (IV.iv.18-19). Hamlet, we recall, says of his own supposed ambition: "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell" (II.ii.253). Claudius, by contrast, has risked his soul to win, not only Gertrude, but the land of Denmark. A special folly attaches in this play to those who make much of land; the philosophic view of land is put forth by Hamlet in the graveyard scene:

Hum! This fellow might be in 's time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries. [Is this the fine of his fines, and the recovery of his recoveries,] to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? Will [his] vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and [double ones too,] than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures? The very conveyances of his lands will scarcely lie in this box, and must th' inheritor himself have no more, ha? (V.i.103-12)

Osric seems a dramatization of an earlier parody of a soldier, who came to Hotspur in battle, "a poppingay" demanding Hotspur's prisoners (*I Henry IV*, I.iii.29-69). If there can be a foil to a foil, Osric might be best considered a parodic foil to Fortinbras and Laertes, as the ladylike lord is to Hotspur, who is also a foil to Henry.

A more difficult character to account for, though he may be an example of "comic relief" and perhaps too of "pseudo-parody," is the gravedigger. F.P. Wilson suggests that such scenes as his give us "the feeling for bread and cheese" of the everyday world, before we return to

"the high tragic mood."¹⁹ Maynard Mack adds that these scenes offer us "a dialogue of which the Greek dialogue of individual with community, the seventeenth-century dialogue of soul with body, the twentieth-century dialogue of self with soul are perhaps all versions in their different ways."²⁰ These perceptive comments certainly help us understand such scenes in general, but do not sufficiently account for each one in its place. Would the drunken porter serve for a comic inclusion in *Hamlet*, or the gravedigger in *Macbeth*? Obviously, the gravedigger serves as an occasion for Hamlet's philosophic comments on life and death. He himself contributes certain songs and jokes and thoughts; beyond these, he is our only expositor of life in the everyday court of Hamlet's father: he dates his gravedigging with the victory of the elder Hamlet over Fortinbras and the birth of young Hamlet. A clown himself, he tells us of the earlier clown, King Hamlet's Yorick.

The gravedigger has a place in Act V similar to and balancing the role of the ghost in Act I. There is no indication of where the ghost has come from when he appears ("in his night gowne," according to the first Quarto) in the Queen's bedroom, but when we recall that his theatrical residence and retreat in Act I was "the cellarage," we may feel that, after making his tragic contribution in Acts I and III, he is reserved for a transformation and a new appearance out of the cellarage, tossing dirt, to make his comic contribution to the tragic last act. Either the ghost or the gravedigger might be designated as "truepenny" or "old mole" (I.v.150,162), and both have an expository association with the dead father. Productions of *Hamlet* often call upon one player to take more than one role; I have never heard of a director using the same player for the ghost and the gravedigger, but there would seem a certain appropriateness in the combination. A foil is, we say, similar enough to a central character to highlight the contrasts between them. Laertes and Fortinbras and Horatio are like pieces broken away (or "decomposed") from Hamlet, with certain qualities in him exaggerated or hypertrophied. The ghost of course is not Hamlet's father, any more than is the player king of the play within the play; but it might be said that the ghost, the player king, and the gravedigger are "foils," two serious, one parodic, to a missing but very important character in the plot, the elder Hamlet.

These remarks on the ghost and gravedigger remind us again of Shakespeare's mixture of tragedy and comedy and tempt us to push further back to the area of dreamy conception when the poet was not sure which of his "sources" he might develop and whether he would write on a given occasion a tragedy or a comedy. Consider the background of

Hamlet. A young man, a prince, is in love with a young woman, a girl whose father is the chief courtier. The prince's mother looks favorably on the match, seeing something of herself in the girl and her own earlier choice of the prince's father. But the girl's father, the courtier, and the girl's brother object to the match: the prince's favors may be changeable; and besides, as heir to the throne, his choice may be determined by needs or demands of the state. The brother meanwhile has plans of his own, centering on Paris, where he is reportedly given to gambling and wenching, which his father wishes to check, though he also looks on such activities indulgently, remembering his own youth. The prince is of a more scholarly cast of mind and plans to return to his studies at Wittenberg.

This outline indicates the true comedic basis of *Hamlet*: the young men seeking young women, with parental obstacles to their fulfillment—perhaps such a play as *Hamlet* anticipates when he hears the players are coming:

He that plays the king shall be welcome—his majesty shall have tribute on me; the adventurous knight shall use his foil and target; the lover shall not sigh gratis; the humorous man shall end his part in peace; the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are tickle o'th' sere; and the lady shall say her mind freely, or the blank verse shall halt for 't. (II.ii.306-311)

Or, to take a more particular case, such a play as *As You Like It*, with its good brother banished and its bad brother in power, like the elder Hamlet and Claudius; with its good son discouraged and its bad son encouraged, like Hamlet and Laertes; with its Yorick fully developed as Touchstone; with its heroine establishing a happy conjunction with the greenwood unlike Ophelia's tragic drowning. The image of the foil suggests a central character and radiations from it. Turn the stone one way and certain radiations appear; turn it another and new radiations are unexpectedly revealed. In *Hamlet*, more than in the other tragedies, we see a potential or former comic situation contaminated into tragedy. Claudius, whose lust for Gertrude and ambition for the throne was the first taint in the comedy, offers us one account of the play's conception:

With mirth in funeral, and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole . . . (I.ii.12-13)

And the player king offers a similar account, nearly parallel in its paradoxes:

Where joy most revels, grief doth most lament;
Grief [joys]. joy grieves, on slender accident. (III.ii.198-99)

Two of the most perceptive modern critics of the play, Maynard Mack and Harry Levin, have each isolated three thematic attributes of central importance. Mack discusses mysteriousness, reality versus appearance, and mortality.²¹ Levin discusses interrogation, doubt, and irony.²² I will close by mentioning three themes which are not contradictory but complementary to those already noted, arising from my view of the play as comedy transposed into tragedy, and illustrated with speeches that may appear otherwise extraneous or even silly.

The play within the play offers us our only glimpse of the situation prevailing before the actual play begins. No matter who the author of "The Murder of Gonzago" may be presumed to be, or which "dozen or sixteen lines" Hamlet may be presumed to have added, the play as a whole teases us to imagine Gertrude with her first husband and, in the playlet, offers us a queen with her first king; we cannot help but fill in the gap as the play itself suggests it might be. The main theme of the play within the play is the mutability of love, thematically relevant to a comedy transposed into tragedy. As Dover Wilson notes, the speech of the player king is duplicated in a later speech of Claudius':²³

There lives within the very flame of love
A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it . . . (IV.vii.114-15)

Though these are speeches made by kings of the play, they are thematically indicative of what chiefly disturbs the prince—that the harmonious situation prevailing in Denmark before the play began is "All changed, changed utterly." This theme is related to Mack's "mortality" and Levin's "irony." In an apparently irrelevant passage, Rosencrantz tells Hamlet that children's acting companies have replaced adult companies in the favor of the public. It is part of the general unreliability or mutability of life. Hamlet says: "It is not very strange, for my uncle is King of Denmark, and those that would make mouths at home while my father liv'd, give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats a-piece for his picture in little" (II.ii.363-66).

Difficult as it is to grant that things have changed, that the old certainties can no longer be relied on, it is even more difficult to see exactly what changes have occurred. Another important theme of the play is the difficulty of perception. This theme is related to Mack's "mysteriousness" and "reality versus appearance" and to Levin's

“interrogation” and “doubt.” A cloud will once seem a camel, then a weasel, then a whale, as Polonius obligingly grants the apparently mad Hamlet. A later fool, Osric, in a near duplicate of this exchange with Polonius, agrees it is hot, and then cold, and then hot again. Hamlet says elsewhere “there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so” (II.ii.248-49).

Difficult as it is to perceive the changing shapes of reality and what is right or wrong in them, life calls upon one—the ghost calls upon Hamlet—to take action. The necessity for action is a third important theme in the play. In Arnoldian terms, what should the Hellenic temperament do in a world demanding Hebraic action? One’s actions may or may not be justified and may result in damage, to others and to oneself, rather than the improvements they were supposed to bring about. If one acts in haste and with bad judgment, a terrible doom may result. Hamlet cautions his mother with a mad fable that better applies to himself:

Who would do so? . . .

Unpeg the basket on the house’s top,
Let the birds fly, and like the famous ape,
To try conclusions in the basket creep
And break your own neck down. (III.iv.191-96)

Hamlet feels himself an ape watching the birds fly and wondering whether he can match their skill. He had better “try conclusions” more cautiously. A central, if not the central, problem of the play is what to do about changed conditions. The best intentions may, indeed do, result in tragedy.

These themes remind us once more of the function of the foils to Hamlet. The mutability of love is the special theme of Laertes in his warnings to his sister. The difficulty of perception is the problem of the scholar, or Horatio. And the necessity for action is what goads Fortinbras, although he has almost none of the just causes for action that Hamlet has. The conditions of life have changed for both Fortinbras and Laertes as well as for Hamlet, but they do not have the same scholar’s scruples or hesitations he has. Thus we return by indirections to the central or most interesting topic of critical commentary on the play, the character of the hero. The study of foils directs our attention to the setting of a jewel, which makes it “Stick fiery off indeed.” The jewel itself is the object of our enduring wonder.

NOTES

1. See William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1950), p. 30, and Richard Levin, *The Multiple Plot in English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 112-13.
2. John Webster, *The White Devil*, ed. J.R. Mulryne. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), p. 16.
3. Ben Jonson, *Epicoene or the Silent Woman*, ed. L.A. Beaurline. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 1966, p. 126.
4. Richard G. Moulton, *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* (New York: Dover, 1966, repr. 1893), pp. 332-33.
5. *Hamlet*, ed. Joseph Quincy Adams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1939), pp. 304, 295, 306.
6. Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1954), pp. 149-61.
7. Empson, pp. 57, 30.
8. Richard Levin, p. 119.
9. Citations are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans *et al.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
10. Nigel Alexander, *Poison, Play, and Duel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), pp. 129-30, 168-69.
11. T.S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949), p. 123.
12. Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 25.
13. Mark Rose, *Shakespearean Design* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 107.
14. J.K. Walton, "The Structure of *Hamlet*," *Hamlet*, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 5, ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (London: Edward Arnold, 1963), p. 55.
15. Harry Levin, p. 27.
16. Maurice Charney, *Style in Hamlet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 267-313.
17. Walton, p. 67.
18. *Hamlet*, ed. George Lyman Kittredge (Boston: Ginn, 1939), p. 167n.
20. Maynard Mack, "The Jacobson
19. F.P. Wilson, *Elizabethan and Jacobean* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), p. 122.
20. Maynard Mack, "The Jacobean Shakespeare: Some Observations on the Construction of the Tragedies," *Jacobean Theatre*, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 1, ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (London: Edward Arnold, 1960), p. 21.
21. Maynard Mack, "The World of Hamlet," *Yale Review*, 41 (1952), 502-23.
22. Harry Levin, pp. 17-107.
23. John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1935), p. 265-66.