Hamlet's Vows*

JAMES BLACK

Two princes in separate Shakespearean plays have a common lament: Hal, "Before God, I am exceeding weary"; Hamlet, "O God, God, How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable/Seem to me all the uses of this world!"¹ Hal's expression of exceeding weariness may seem not much less emphatic than Hamlet's when we consider that this is his very first line in Part II of *Henry IV*. He already (throughout Part I) has carried on for a long time his solitary and single-minded plan of redeeming time — bound to a debt or commitment which rarely is expressed to anyone but himself:

... When this loose behaviour I throw off,
And pay the debt I never promised,
By how much better than my word I am,
By so much shall I falsify men's hopes.² Part I. 1. 2. 203-6

In a world of mendacity and sham, where the King himself "knows at what time to promise, when to pay" (Part I. IV. 3. 53), Hal is a promise-keeper. The vows to overcome Hotspur, to banish Falstaff and to be "the true prince," are all made good; and they are *his* vows, self-generated.

Looked at in this way, Shakespeare's delineation of Hal can help us to understand the situation of Hamlet. For Hamlet also is self-sworn, his sense of commitment to a vow no less profound than Hal's and infinitely more painful. And *Hamlet* itself, as I shall show, is a play in which there is especial emphasis upon promises and vows.

I shall begin by suggesting that the lines in which Hamlet dedicates himself to the mission which the Ghost has set him ring with an echo which so far as I can tell has not yet reached the ears of any commentator upon the play. "I have sworn't," he says at the conclusion of his

* This study, in slightly different form, was presented as a paper at the meeting of the Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies at Fredericton, New Brunswick, 28 May 1977.

speech (I. 5. 92-112) which immediately follows the Ghost's departure. The speech begins,

O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?
And shall I couple hell?

As a "swearing-in" Hamlet's asseveration and vow both echo and contravene an article of the Sermon on the Mount:

Swear not at all, neither by heaven, for
it is the throne of God:
Nor yet by the earth: for it is his foote stoole.

(Matthew V:34-5. Geneva text)

As we shall see, the echo is more than fortuitous: the injunction against heedless swearing is not the only principle in the Sermon which bears upon Hamlet's situation.

In the scenes leading up to Hamlet's dialogue with the Ghost there is an emphatic pattern of action in which authorities are consulted and authority exercised. Horatio is brought to the platform in I. 1 by Marcellus and Barnardo because he is a scholar: they need his authoritative presence there to confirm that the Ghost is more than their superstitious delusion; they also expect him to address the Ghost formally; and finally he will advise them what to do (In I. 4 Horatio and the Guardsmen also listen respectfully to Hamlet's dissertation upon Danish customs and "nature's livery or fortune's star"). In I. 2, Claudius demonstrates his firm hold upon court and affairs, and eventually lectures Hamlet upon the futility of prolonged mourning. Hamlet, enjoined here to throw over his unprevailing woe and to give up his plan of returning to Wittenberg, accedes like a dutiful child to the wishes of his elders — or one of them: "I shall in all my best obey you, madam" (I. 2. 120). The following scene, I. 3, is built upon instruction: elder to younger. Laertes lectures Ophelia; Polonius recites his precepts to Laertes and then translates Laertes' directions to Ophelia into a commandment. Though Ophelia is a little ironical about Laertes' chip-off-the-old-block sententiousness, it is clear that sisters are meant to listen with some respect to their brothers, and even more clear that children are to hear and obey the instruction of their parents. Ophelia tells Laertes, "I shall the effect of this good lesson keep/As watchman to my heart" (I. 3. 45-6); Laertes patiently hears out Polonius' sermon-before-blessing; and in the last words of the scene the daughter promises to honour her father's rough command that she avoid Hamlet: "I shall obey, my lord." The Fifth Commandment as interpreted by St. Paul is shown in these scenes to be very much alive

in Denmark — “Children, obey your parents . . .” (Ephesians VI: 1-3); the Commandment is everywhere implicit in Polonius’ expectations of his daughter and in his references to “her duty and obedience” (II. 2. 107, 125).

Thus the pattern of social and familial reflexes is set: deference to authority and experience, obedience to parents. Hamlet and Ophelia may chafe, but they obey. And soon (I. 5) Hamlet will be confronted with the Ghost and have a promise extracted from him. Yet while Shakespeare is establishing this pattern he also is emphasising what the generation which expects compliance and exacts promises thinks about promises and vows. Claudius seals Hamlet’s “accord” with his own “pledge” — which to him is nothing more than a toast:

This gentle and unforced accord of Hamlet
Sits smiling to my heart, in grace whereof,
No jocund health that Denmark drinks to-day,
But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell,
And the king’s rouse the heaven shall bruit again,
Re-speaking earthly thunder.

I. 2. 123-8. See also I. 4. 12

Left alone, Hamlet seems to suggest in a bitter pun that there are other kinds of “cannon/canon” by which to govern one’s ways, the “canons” fixed by “the Everlasting” (I. 2. 131-2: incidentally, the delivering of “Thou shalt not kill,” to which Hamlet is alluding, and the other Commandments was accompanied by a heavenly thundering which seems to make Claudius’ cannonade petty and vainglorious; see Exodus XIX. 16, XX. 18). Later, he again expresses his dislike of the Danish tradition of pledging in drink as “a custom/More honoured in the breach than the observance” (I. 4. 15-22), and associates it, unwittingly, with “the dram of evil” (I. 36). Even if we were to regard Claudius’ treatment of an accord as nothing worse than bad taste, Polonius’ court cynicism is made jarringly clear when, to Ophelia’s protests that Hamlet has “given countenance to his [wooing]/With almost all the holy vows of Heaven,” he retorts:

Ay, springes to catch woodcocks. I do know
When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul
Lends the tongue vows. These blazes daughter,
Giving more light than heat, extinct in both,
Even in their promise, as it is a-making . . .
Do not believe his vows, for they are brokers
. . . mere implorators of unholy suits,
Breathing like sanctified and pious bonds
The better to beguile.

I. 3. 113-31

From the beginning of the play, insincerity and cynicism are the governing modes which Hamlet senses in Denmark. His first soliloquy (I. 2. 129-59) expresses the pain he feels over Gertrude's so soon forgetting her vows and loyalty to her first husband and posting "with such dexterity to incestuous sheets." The same pain is in the Ghost's lamentation at Gertrude's falling-off

From me whose love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage.

I. 5. 48-50

Thus, early in the play, the complacency and cynicism of Claudius and Polonius (and, by association, Gertrude) towards vows and duty are set off against the sensitivity and dedication of Ophelia and Hamlet.

Hamlet's hatred of cynicism and betrayal is so like his dead father's that it is an easy task for the Ghost to indenture his son to a bond. Indeed the Ghost, like Polonius — or, come to that, like any of the Senecan ghosts upon whom he partly is modelled — presumes a bounden duty from his offspring, and the moral and emotional pressures upon young Hamlet are overwhelming: "Speak, I am bound to hear./So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear" (I. 5. 6-7); and "If thou didst ever thy dear father love . . . Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (I. 5. 23-5). As the Ghost departs, satisfied that his son is dedicated by blood, Hamlet launches upon his verbal expression of the commitment:

O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?
And shall I couple hell? O fie!
..... Remember thee?
Ay thou poor ghost whiles memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmixed with baser matter — yes by heaven!
O most pernicious woman!
O villain, villain, smiling, damnéd villain!
My tables, meet it is I set it down
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain,
At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark . . .
So, uncle, there you are. Now, to my Word,
It is 'Adieu, adieu, remember me.' . . .
I have sworn't.

I. 5. 92-112

"Word" and "tables" in this speech have intrigued commentators: Nigel Alexander believes that Shakespeare might have had in mind Quintilian's advice to students on how "to learn a passage by heart from the same tablets on which he has committed it to writing";³ John Dover Wilson interpreted "Word" heraldically, "as the motto or 'word' on a knight's coat of arms or shield . . . Hamlet solemnly dedicates himself to the service of the quest which the Ghost has laid upon him, adopting as his motto his father's parting words."⁴ Alexander concurs with Dover Wilson that the tables are some sort of notebook, or slate for impressions, though he is more inclined toward a metaphorical interpretation of the word, following on "the table of my memory." An even more solemn interpretation is offered by Harold Fisch, who finds in Hamlet's references to "word," "book," "commandment" and "tables" a series of Biblical metaphors which "force upon us the comparison with such Biblical covenant occasions as the revelation at Sinai or the dark covenant with Abraham (Genesis XVII)."⁵ Whatever weight we accord the words which I have just listed, or whatever pattern of imagery we may detect in Hamlet's speech, there can be no doubt that Hamlet has taken, or — the same thing — thinks he has taken, a vow of the most profound nature. (Dover Wilson inserts a stage-direction just before the last line of the speech: "he kneels and lays his hand upon the hilt of his sword.") "A commandment is given," says Fisch, "a promise asked."⁶ The proceedings which now bring this scene and act to an end — Hamlet swearing his friends to secrecy — come near to farce, and editors have had difficulty in justifying them. But John Holloway rightly points out that this swearing-in is meant to underline the more important fact that Hamlet has dedicated himself: "Hamlet invents a brief ritual, a ceremony, the grimly humorous writing of Claudius down in his tablets, and he follows with the more conventional ceremony of swearing the others to be his confederates. The whole [ritual] is to make both conspicuous and solemn the moment when Hamlet takes upon himself the role [of revenger]."⁷ There is irony here also when, just between Hamlet's oath-taking and the swearing-in of his friends, Horatio blurts out anxiously, "Heaven secure him!" (I. 5. 114). Hamlet's friends regard a promise given as friend, scholar, or soldier (cf. I. 141) as binding enough — Marcellus, having given his word, meets Hamlet's requirement, "Upon my sword," with "We have sworn, my lord, already" (I. 147). Their reluctance to formally swear, set against Hamlet's near-maniacal insistence and the Ghost's commands from under their feet, emphasises that one should at the very least be extremely wary of taking an oath. They do it out of their affection for Hamlet, out of their sense of awe and fear at his condition, and in part out of deference to his "authority" — his authority, that is, as one who has talked

to the Ghost and had some sort of revelation of more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in philosophy:

<i>Horatio.</i>	What news, my lord?
<i>Hamlet.</i>	O, wonderful!
<i>Horatio.</i>	Good my lord, tell it.
<i>Hamlet.</i>	No, you will reveal it.

I. 5. 117-9

The oath-taking, then, is the climax to an act which has presented a series of obedient gestures, the most profound of which has been Hamlet's solemn undertaking to perform an act of revenge.

In impulsively swearing, Hamlet has disregarded the code set out in the Sermon on the Mount. As I have suggested, in swearing by heaven and earth he apparently has broken that code. The Sermon also goes on, "Neither shalt thou sweare by thine head" (36), and Hamlet has dedicated himself to remembering with "Remember thee? Ay thou poor ghost whiles memory holds a seat In this distracted globe." And the article on swearing ends with "Let your communication be, Yea, yea: Nay, nay. For whatsoever is more than these commeth of evil" (37) — a direction with which Horatio and Marcellus obviously would agree.

Shakespeare clearly assumes his audience's familiarity with the Sermon on the Mount. His use of the Sermon's judging-and-forgiving theme in *Measure for Measure* is well known, and the direction against swearing is in Edgar's "mad" catalogue of Old and New Testament commandments (*King Lear*, III. 4. 80-2): "Obey thy parents: keep thy word's justice; swear not; commit not with man's sworn spouse."

After dealing with swearing, the Sermon turns directly to its next topic:

- 38. Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.
- 39. But I say unto you, Resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheke, turn to him the other also . . .

Not only has Hamlet disregarded or broken away from the Sermon's directions against swearing: he also has sworn to exact an eye for an eye. He will ask Horatio, "Is't not perfect conscience to quit [Claudius with this arm?]" (V. 2. 67-8), but will receive no answer; and he desperately tries to justify striking back in his soliloquy "O what a rogue and peasant slave . . .":

Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,

Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,
 Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie i' th' throat
 As deep as to the lungs — who does me this,
 Ha, 'swounds, I should take it: for it cannot be
 But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall
 To make oppression bitter.

II. 2. 574-81

But this bitter rationalizing of retaliation seems hollow if set beside the words which in its anatomical details it seems to echo, "Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheke, turn to him the other also." And Hamlet's catalogue of his own personal wrongs in this soliloquy (significantly, not the wrongs done old Hamlet) sits uneasily with the Geneva's marginal gloss on this part of the Sermon: "Rather receive double wrong, than revenge thine own griefs" ("I knew you must be edified by the margent" is a remark Horatio will direct at Hamlet later in the play: V. 2. 157). Indeed, Polonius' advice to Laertes, "Give every man thy ear but few thy voice," is not far removed from "Let your communication be Yea, yea: Nay, nay." Hamlet has given the Ghost both ear *and* voice, a dual commitment distinguished in:

Hamlet. Speak, I am bound to hear.
Ghost. So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.
Hamlet. What?

I. 5. 6-8

It has been well said that the moral problems of this play would appear much simpler if the audience and the commentators could make up their minds unequivocally about the nature of the Ghost, who is a moral enigma because his "dramatic function is more important than [his] moral references The Ghost exists to create Hamlet's problems, not to solve them."⁸ But the Ghost's "spectral wail of a soul's bitter wrong crying from one world to another in the extremity of its torment"⁹ is a clamorous imperative. A.C. Bradley says that Hamlet "habitually assumes, without any questioning, that he *ought* to avenge his father," and "Whatever we in the twentieth century may think about Hamlet's duty, we are meant in the play to assume that he *ought* to have obeyed the Ghost."¹⁰ To agree with this conclusion we would have to accept that the play itself is the thing, a mere Senecan artefact embalmed and hermetically sealed in its own atmosphere; and, so far as *Hamlet* is concerned, Samuel Johnson would have been right in his judgement that Shakespeare sometimes "carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong, and . . . leaves their examples to operate by chance. This fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate."¹¹ But as Hamlet's vow is quite clearly rung off against the

answering verbal echoes from the Sermon, an audience which could respond to these echoes would see that the Ghost is a throwback not only to Seneca but also to the Old Testament. And even those who would agree with the Fifth-Commandment reflex to filial obedience might also remember that when St. Paul tells children to obey their parents he also adds a special exhortation to parents: "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath" (Ephesians VI:4).

It also can be argued, of course, that when he has vowed in the first act Hamlet does not thereafter consistently assume that he ought to obey the Ghost: he at least speculates upon the possibility that it may have been a damned ghost that he has seen, or that the Ghost might have been a devil in a pleasing shape (II. 2. 602-7; III. 2. 78-82). His appalling doubts about the task he has undertaken are voiced chiefly in the soliloquies. But what also appears to surface in at least one of Hamlet's speeches is an uneasiness in his mind concerning swearing itself. In II. 2 he abruptly changes subjects on Polonius. Polonius is listing the accomplishments of the players when Hamlet interjects, "O Jephthah, judge of Israel, what a treasure hadst thou!" and sings a snatch of what he calls a "pious chanson" to remind the nonplussed courtier that Jephthah's treasure was "One fair daughter, and no more,/ The which he loved passing well" (II. 2. 408-13). Dover Wilson identifies the song as being from a play entitled *Jephthah* in the repertory of the Admiral's company: Hamlet, he suggests, is following Polonius' line of theatrical discourse.¹² While it is quite true that Shakespeare may be alluding to a theatrical Jephthah, it also might be that he is inviting his audience to reflect upon the Biblical Jephthah, who is famous chiefly for his tragic vow:

Jephthah vowed a vowe unto the Lord, and said, if thou shalt deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, then that thing that cometh out of the doores of mine house to meet me, when I come home . . . shal be the Lord's, and I will offer it for a burnt offering.

Judges XI: 30-31

The first person to meet Jephthah after his victory is his only daughter, whom he is compelled to sacrifice because he has "opened [his] mouthe unto the Lord, and can not go backe." In Shakespeare's time, Jephthah, for what the Geneva margin calls "his rashe vowe and wicked performance of the same," was a famous pattern of reprehensible swearing. In *Henry VI Part Three* Clarence says, "To keep that vow were more impiety/Than Jephthah's when he sacrificed his daughter" (V. 1. 93-4); and the Homily Against Swearing and Perjury uses him as a cautionary example:

As well they use the name of God in vaine, that by an oathe make unlawfull promises of good and honest things, and performe them not; as they which doe promise evill and unlawfull things, and doe performe the same Of them that make wicked promises by an oathe, and will performe the same, we have example in the Scriptures, chiefly of Herod, the wicked Jewes, and of Jephthah The promise which [Jephthah] made (most foolishly) to God, against God's everlasting will and the law of nature most cruelly he performed, so committing against God a double offence.¹³

After Hamlet has given him the snatch of song, Polonius' response is:

	Still on my daughter.
<i>Hamlet.</i>	Am I not i' th' right, old Jephthah?
<i>Polonius.</i>	If you call me Jephthah, my lord, I have a daughter that I love passing well
<i>Hamlet.</i>	Nay, that follows not.

II. 2. 414-8

Either Polonius does not quite catch Hamlet's drift or else he is resisting the implication that as a Jephthah he will sacrifice even his only daughter for a political advantage. He may feel that Hamlet has hit uncomfortably close to his plan of "loosing" Ophelia to Hamlet for the purpose of extracting information (II. 2. 158-66): Ophelia is a "Jephthah's daughter" in this sense.¹⁴

But if we accept this exchange only as Hamlet "harping on [Polonius'] daughter" (II. 2. 187) and baiting Polonius, we get no more from the business than Polonius himself understands. Polonius is talking about playing when Hamlet interrupts him. The purpose of playing, as Polonius understands it, is the recital of a standard repertoire — tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, and so on. As Hamlet understands it, the purpose is to hold the mirror up to nature, "to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (III. 2. 20-4). Is it merely an accident that as Hamlet talks to the players about the purpose of playing he should seem to echo in "the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" those words in his speech of dedication, "I'll wipe away . . . all forms, all pressures past"? The form and pressure of this present time of his is the substance of his vow — that matter which is now engraved upon the table of his memory. And as Polonius talks about playing and Hamlet thinks of it, perhaps Polonius momentarily becomes for Hamlet the nearest convenient mirror, a glass in which Hamlet sees not just Polonius the prating fool and ruthless intriguer, but also himself, a Jephthah. In "O Jephthah, judge of Israel" Hamlet

may be harping not just upon Polonius and his daughter, but upon his own rash vow. For in terms of that vow Hamlet is a Jephthah too. Strikingly, while on the subject of playing-mirroring Hamlet also mentions Aeneas (II. 2. 451) and out-heroding Herod (III. 2. 14). Aeneas was famous for having sworn love to Dido and then being forsworn; Herod was not only "represented in the mystery plays as blustering and grandiose,"¹⁵ he also is used in the Homily as a type of wicked swearer.

The vow that Hamlet has sworn is of the Jephthah-kind delineated in the Homily: a wicked promise sealed by an oath, with intention of performance. As swearing in the *manner* by which Hamlet has vowed is condemned in the Sermon on the Mount, so swearing to the *matter* of his vow is condemned in both the Sermon and the Homily. Obviously, the ethics of Hamlet's vow are very doubtful, and Hamlet's Jephthah allusion may arise, as I have suggested, out of his meditation upon this fact. What of the practicality of the business to which he has bound himself? Bradley dismisses out of hand suggestions that Hamlet would have found it difficult to catch the King unguarded or to prove him guilty of murder.¹⁶ But Kenneth Muir, reflecting upon the Ghost's specific instructions that Claudius must be killed but nothing is to be contrived against Gertrude, raises the question, "How can [Hamlet] kill Claudius in such a way that justice appears to be done, without at the same time exposing the guilt of his mother?"¹⁷ The impossibility of satisfying both requirements of the task is underlined, I believe, by the fact that in the play Claudius and Gertrude are practically as inseparable as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern — as perhaps their interchangeable lines to those worthies are meant to suggest:

<i>King.</i>	Thanks Rosencrantz, and gentle Guildenstern.
<i>Queen.</i>	Thanks Guildenstern, and gentle Rosencrantz.

II. 2. 33-4

Certainly Laertes' direct attempt to avenge *his* father on Claudius is an illustration of what might well have happened if Hamlet had moved frontally. Laertes breaks in upon the King, and advancing upon Claudius with sword at the ready finds in the determined Queen a very considerable physical obstruction. "The Queen throws herself in his path" is Dover Wilson's justifiable stage-direction to accompany this passage:

<i>King.</i>	What is the cause, Laertes, That thy rebellion looks so giant-like? Let him go Gertrude, do not fear our person,
--------------	--

There's such divinity doth hedge a king,
 That treason can but peep to what it would,
 Acts little of his will. Tell me, Laertes,
 Why thou art thus incensed — let him go, Gertrude.

IV. 5. 121-7

The action here may reflect the Priam-Pyrrhus-Hecuba tableau conveyed in the Player King's speech (II. 2. 506-22); and the irony of Gertrude saving Claudius from murder is one we could wish that Hamlet were around to savour. But the high drama and majesty of this — Claudius' finest moment in the play — are touched not just with irony but with farce as well. Gertrude obviously is clutching at the angry revenger; perhaps she is being dragged along stubbornly as he advances on Claudius; does he really want to be released from her grip, and does Claudius really want her to let go? Substitute Hamlet for Laertes in this situation and the tragic pressure of the entire play would be sharply deflated. Hamlet never sees Claudius and Gertrude apart until the chapel and closet scenes of Act III. By Act IV moving against the one without involving the other has become an apparent impossibility, as suggested in Hamlet's riddle when he is sent off to England:

Hamlet [to Claudius]. Farewell, dear mother.

King. Thy loving father, Hamlet.

Hamlet. My mother — father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, and so my mother.

IV. 3. 48-51

The task the Ghost has set Hamlet would seem impossible, and both the mission and the vow to perform it irreligious. The Homily is applicable to both aspects of the situation: "If a man at any time shall eyther of ignorance or of malice, promise and sweare to doe any thing which is eyther against the Law of Almighty God or not in his power to performe: let him take it for an unlawful and ungodly oath." And, when he has had time to reflect, no one in the play appears better qualified to appreciate the situation than Hamlet himself. No one is more preoccupied with vows. The *Murder of Gonzago* (he is part-author of the players' version) is all about broken vows as well as murder: "That we do determine, oft we break" (III. 2. 186) is the burden of the Player King's wisdom; while to the Player Queen's earnest vow, "Both here and hence pursue me lasting strife, If once a widow, ever I be wife" — "Tis deeply sworn," is her husband's response — Hamlet's reaction is "If she should break it now!" (III. 2. 221-3). The solemnity of the oath moves him profoundly, whereas Gertrude speaks for the more disinterested and less rapt section of the

audience for *The Murder* in her comment that "The lady doth protest too much" (III. 2. 229). Her son's irritation at this apparently unfeeling response flashes out in "O, but she'll keep her word." Shortly afterward he will scornfully tell Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that playing the recorder "is as easy as lying."

These barbs dart from a consciousness especially sensitive to truthfulness as well as to duty and love. When Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo say to him, "Our duty to your honour," he is quick to respond, "Your loves, as mine to you" (I. 2. 253-4). His mother's apparent faithlessness to her marriage vows leads him to pronounce in the first of his soliloquies, "frailty thy name is woman" (I. 2. 146) — he has not yet come to Jephthah, but it is striking to remember that Jephthah was the son of a harlot (Judges XI:1). Although he utters a misogynistic tirade against Ophelia, his attitude towards her up until her death may be influenced less by a general feeling about women than by the commitment to which he has been sworn. According to the terms of the vow he has made to the Ghost, that commitment supersedes all previous ones. During their first exchange of words in the play Ophelia tries to remind Hamlet of his former addresses to her:

<i>Hamlet.</i>	I never gave you aught.
<i>Ophelia.</i>	My honoured lord, you know right well you did, And with them words of so sweet breath composed As made the things more rich.

III. 1. 96-9

These addresses were "the holy vows of heaven" so roughly disvalued by Polonius, the "music vows" lamented by Ophelia (III. 2. 159). Hamlet here repudiates the memory of them because the word he has given to the Ghost has come after, and between. To break his promise to the Ghost would be to bear out what the Player King in *The Murder of Gonzago* observes: "What to ourselves in passion we propose,/The passion ending, doth the purpose lose" (III. 2. 192-3). The former vows to Ophelia (who just might be in the enemy camp) are at tragic cross-purposes with the fatal promise; and so Hamlet, a Jephthah who has vowed, must put away from him the daughter of Jephthah-Polonius.

(There is an interpretation of the Jephthah story which suggests that the daughter was not actually put to death, but "set . . . apart to perpetual virginity."¹⁸ Perhaps the nunnery to which Hamlet orders Ophelia lest she become a breeder of sinners, III. 1. 121-52, is not necessarily or not only the bawdy house which is suggested by commentators.)

The tragic situation of Ophelia, so deeply committed to both her

father and the man she loves and breaking between the "mighty opposites" (V. 2. 61-2) in the Danish court, reflects the dilemma of Hamlet himself. And of course her plight emphasises the link between Jephthah-Polonius and Jephthah-Hamlet. Little wonder that at times it is impossible to be certain whether it is the dead parent or the exiled lover who is the theme of her mad singing: "How should I your true love know? . . . He is dead and gone, lady" (IV. 5. 23-32). She sings as well a curious Valentine song about love and commitment, about idle swearing and broken vows:

Ophelia. Indeed, la, without an oath, I'll make an end on't —
 [sings] By Gis and by Saint Charity,
 Alack and fie for shame!
 Young men will do't, if they come to't,
 By Cock, they are to blame.
 Quoth she, Before you tumbled me,
 You promised me to wed.

IV. 5. 57-62

She is singing of the tradition whereby the first girl seen by a young man on St. Valentine's day was to be his true-love — a customary obligation which doubtless, if Ophelia had her way, would be more honoured in the observance than the breach. Hamlet is or has been her true love, but unknown to her he has made another commitment, against the powerful memory of which Ophelia's remembrances of love are no stronger than a flower: "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance — pray you love, remember" (IV. 5. 174-5).

Hamlet's vows precipitate his and Ophelia's tragic plight in a Denmark whose king knows at what time to promise, when to pay — and who in fact recognises the falseness of his "most painted word" (III. I. 54). We may follow through the play a trail of broken promises with the hero — "promise-crammed," as he ironically describes himself (III. 2. 92), and with examples gross as earth of faithless vows all around him — clinging loyally to an oath, however irreligious, to perform a task which is both wrong and impossible. Hercules with his load is paralleled in Hamlet, who is loaded with his own impossible labour while disclaiming Hercules' powers (I. 2. 152-3). The vow and task are mighty opposites, for the word is set against the word.¹⁹

But relaxation of the impasse comes in the graveyard scene, where Hamlet is shown to pull away from his terrible focus upon the memory of the Ghost. Instead of concentrating upon a particular ghost come from a particular grave, Hamlet participates in the lesson — self-taught, with the Gravedigger to prompt — than there can be a wider and gentler perspective on the dead.

In this scene, two men enter a graveyard and see a grave being prepared. In Hamlet's speculations the grave could be anybody's: it could be Cain's, who did the first murder, he begins (V. I. 77), and it might seem that he is about to embark upon a dissertation on fratricide coming around to his father's death. Instead the speculation is widened: the skull which has just been thrown up "might be the pate of a politician." Now perhaps we are to hear about Claudius-Cain, the master politician: but no, Hamlet goes on to speculate that the skull and the grave might be a courtier's, a lawyer's, a land-dealer's. Then the grave becomes the gravedigger's — "Whose grave's this, sirrah? Mine, sir —," then no man's, then a woman's or one that was a woman, but rest her soul she's dead. The speculation continues: the grave could be Alexander's, or Caesar's; all must consign to this and come to dust. It is, or has been but now is no longer, Yorick's grave; it is now Ophelia's; soon — by the Gravedigger's definition, V. 2. 121 — it will be Laertes' grave, and Hamlet's as well. They will occupy it briefly. In this catalogue of possible and actual occupants of the grave there is a great sweep of universality, a meditation upon the fact that those who dwell in towers and gorgeous palaces are really only actors in an insubstantial pageant. As the perspective widens, Hamlet has an opportunity to focus again upon his father, for the gravedigger tells him of coming to the trade on the very day of Hamlet's birth and the old King's triumph over Fortinbras. But Hamlet lets pass the opportunity — "the motive and the cue for passion" (II. 2. 564). Instead, as he looks at the skull of poor Yorick, who has been supplanted from his last resting-place as rudely as old Hamlet was turfed out of his bed and throne, a wave of great affection sweeps over him and he seems to see more widely than before, to exercise what before he has only talked about — "such large discourse,/Looking before and after" (IV. 4. 36-7). Without knowing that this grave is prepared for Ophelia or that Ophelia's head will lie where this skull of Yorick's lay, Hamlet says of the death's head, "Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft." At Hamlet's first appearance in the play, when he was counselled by his mother and step-father, Claudius exhorted him to "throw to earth/This unprevailing woe" (I. 2. 106-7) and Gertrude begged,

Do not for ever with thy vailéd lids
 Seek for thy noble father in the dust,
 Thou know'st 'tis common, all that lives must die,
 Passing through nature to eternity.

I. 2. 70-3

Now, in the graveyard, Hamlet meditates upon the "earth" and "dust"

which Claudius and Gertrude mentioned unthinkingly. In a way, he follows their advice; and he finds in the dust of the grave not just his father, but the common earth which all men are and will become. He has not forgotten his father — just before the duel he recites, as a kind of indictment before trial, a list of Claudius' crimes: "He that hath killed my king, and whored my mother . . ." (V. 2. 64-7). But one great function of the graveyard scene has been to make it quite clear that Hamlet has *not* wiped away "all forms, all pressures past": the table of his memory has far more written upon it than the Ghost's commandment.

Out of this "larger discourse" Hamlet has learned (a Polonius precept but correct for all that; Polonius like Claudius can cite Scripture for his purpose) that to be true to the Ghost exclusively is to be less than true to others, including himself. He certainly has by the Fifth Act learned to "play the king" — a function which he has performed in writing and sealing the warrant. And he has learned to stand still — if Hamlet "hesitates," then he who hesitates is found. "The readiness is all," is a lesson that the gravedigger already has taught the audience:

Here lies the water — good. Here stands the man — good. If the man go to this water and drown himself, it is, will he nill he, he goes, mark you that. But if the water come to him, and drown him, he drowns not himself.

V. 1. 15-19

Hamlet waits, the "water" or opportunity comes with Claudius' self-destructive plot, and justice — but not the "wild justice" of revenge — is dealt by, and on, Hamlet.

Fredson Bowers has noted and analysed "the extraordinary effort that Shakespeare makes in [Hamlet's] death scene."²⁰ This extraordinary effort is exerted, I believe, from the beginning of the Fifth Act, and, as I have tried to explain, an important part of it is to show Hamlet, for the first time, getting his responsibilities and commitments into perspective. Throughout this act, Hamlet can look back not just in frustration and anger at broken vows and faithless oaths, but in tender affection. And when he looks forward, defying augury and trusting in a special providence, part of his "readiness" may consist in a certainty, tragic and serene at once, that his vows to the Ghost and to Ophelia will soon be paid, or at any rate that — as Prince Hal said of *his* vows — "the end of life cancels all bands."²¹

Notes

- 1 *Henry IV Part II*, II. 2. 1; *Hamlet*, I. 2. 132-3.
- 2 All references to *Henry IV* cite the New Arden edition, ed. A.R. Humphreys (London, 1965-66). References to *Hamlet* cite the New Cambridge edition, ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge, 1954).
- 3 "Hamlet and the Art of Memory," *Notes and Queries*, New Series 15 (1968), 137-39.
- 4 The New Cambridge *Hamlet*, p. 163.
- 5 *Hamlet and the Word* (New York, 1971), p. 102.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 7 *The Story of the Night* (London, 1961), p. 27.
- 8 Nigel Alexander, *Poison, Play and Duel: A Study in Hamlet* (London, 1971), pp. 31-33.
- 9 Edwin Wilson, ed. *Shaw on Shakespeare* (Harmondsworth, 1961), p. 106.
- 10 *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1960), pp. 76-79.
- 11 "Preface to Shakespeare," in *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Walter Raleigh (Oxford, 1959), p. 21.
- 12 New Cambridge *Hamlet*, p. 182.
- 13 *Certain Sermons or Homilies, Appointed to be Read in Churches*, 2 v. (London, 1640), II, 48-49.
- 14 Cf. Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (New York, 1959), p. 66; Roy W. Battenhouse, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Its Christian Premises* (Bloomington and London, 1969), p. 241.
- 15 John Dover Wilson, New Cambridge *Hamlet*, p. 274.
- 16 *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 74-76.
- 17 Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare: "Hamlet"* (London, 1963), p. 23.
- 18 See the note on Judges XI:39 in *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York, 1967).
- 19 See *Richard II*, V. 5. 13-14.
- 20 Fredson Bowers, "The Death of Hamlet: a Study in Plot and Character," in *Studies in the English Renaissance Drama*, ed. Josephine W. Bennett, Oscar Cargill and Vernon Hall, Jr. (New York, 1959), p. 41.
- 21 *Henry IV Part I*, III. 3. 157.