HAMLET AND THE *ODYSSEY*

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Readers of Bakhtin's study of Dostoevsky have been intrigued by the thought that the novelist could have "realized the potential of a genre"—Menippean satire—"he barely knew."[1] Evidently, through the few such satires he did know Dostoevsky was able to divine the nature of the tradition itself as well as its potential for further development. "Great writers—Shakespeare, Dostoevsky—have a special relation to tradition. More fully than others, they intuit the rich resources of the past carried by genres."[2] It is my belief that Shakespeare intuited the resources of the *Odyssey*. Though he did not know the tale at first hand, as it lay outside the story of Troy and was translated by Chapman only in the year of his death,[3] he certainly knew of the *Odyssey* by report.[4] Says Valeria in *Coriolanus*, "You would be another Penelope: yet they say, all the yarn she spun in Ulysses' absence did but fill Ithaca full of moths" (1.3.82–84).[5] Like Dostoevsky getting down to the very sources of a tradition by the exercise of "genre memory," Shakespeare might also have perceived the *Odyssey* through the *Aeneid*, a revision (some

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[1] Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, 1990), p. 295.

[2] Ibid., p. 297.

[3] A decade before the Chapman translation, however, Ben Jonson alluded to the opening of the *Odyssey* in *Volpone*: "that idle, antique, stale, gray-headed project/ Of knowing men's minds and manners, with Ulysses!" (*Volpone* 2.1.9–10). Ironically, Horace's *Satire* 2.5 has Ulysses receiving instructions from Tiresias on how to endear himself into a rich man's will, as in *Volpone*. The Homeric Odysseus, defender of his estate, devolves into a legacy hunter.

[4] On indirect or proverbial knowledge of the *Odyssey*, cf. Chaucer, "Franklin's Tale," ll. 1443–44: "What seith Omer of goode Penalopee?/ Al Grece knoweth of hire chastitee"; *Book of Duchess*, ll. 1080–81; Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, scene 5, ll. 153–54: "She whom thy eye shall like, thy heart shall have,/ Be she as chaste as was Penelope"; Donne, "Teach me to hear mermaids singing." In "The Tale of Ill-Advised Curiosity" interpolated into *Don Quixote*, Camila cunningly refers to herself as a second Penelope, besieged but constant. In academic circles the *Odyssey* was known in full. William Gager's "tragedy" *Ulysses Redux* (1592) has been judged "the best Latin play of the century by an Englishman." Marvin T. Herrick, *Tragicomedy: Its Origin and Development in Italy, France, and England* (Urbana, 1955), p. 221.

[5] All references are to the Riverside Shakespeare.

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would say a correction) of the *Odyssey*.[6] "In Vergilian terms, Hamlet's *pietas*, the loving reverence toward family, state, and gods, demands *furor*, the impious rage that kills without ruth or mercy,"[7] but it is Odysseus, at once ruthless in revenge and—according to Zeus himself—the most pious of men (*Odyssey* 1.65–67), who first presents these qualities in dramatic unity. The *Odyssey*, then, is not one of Shakespeare's sources in the usual sense of the term, but something possibly deeper—an underlying source, we might call it. Nor does the *Odyssey* constitute the foundation of a given genre so much as a well of literary potential from which different genres draw, its reversals and recognitions, for example, later becoming devices of tragedy. (In his discussion of these matters, Aristotle classifies the plot of the *Odyssey* as defectively tragic, then likens it to comedy.) As one who composed in different genres, injected the comic into tragedy, and at times, as in the problem plays, confounded genre as such, Shakespeare tapped the richness of a source prior to genre itself. In the first of the problem plays, *Troilus and Cressida*, he subjects Homeric material to the freest irony. In a different way, he does so in *Hamlet* as well—itself a problem play, with Hamlet being the problem.

Shakespeare did not know the *Odyssey* at first hand, but the *Iliad*—in some part—he did know. In the *Iliad* men pursue recognition in the sense of honor, proclaiming themselves in word and deed: an endeavor with little place for disguise. It is in the *Odyssey*, ironic counterpart of the *Iliad*, that we hear of Helen circling the Trojan Horse, calling out to the Greeks in the voice of their wives as if she recognized them individually, even in hiding. In the world of Hamlet, where word and deed part company, the heroic ideal of recognition is subverted, complicated, and transformed—beyond recognition. Granted recognition by the new king in the form of an odious tender of paternal love and equally hollow political assurances, Hamlet also receives the inverse honor of being singled out as the object of suspicion and fear. The patent indecency of the royal union seems to attract the notice of no one but Hamlet, as if it were itself a ghost passing unrecognized before the eyes of the court. Employing disguise and indirection as Odysseus did

[6] On the structural similarity of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, see, e.g., Northrop Frye, *The Return of Eden: Five Essays on Milton's Epics* (Toronto, 1975), p. 13.

[7] Robert S. Miola, "Aeneas and Hamlet," *Classical and Modern Literature* 8 (1988): 285.

(who also feigned madness once, according to legend), Hamlet in an act of unconventional warfare goes into a form of hiding, and by staging Claudius' crime before his eyes—forcing upon him the shock of recognition—gets him to betray his guilt with as much clarity as the case allows. He himself undergoes the ordeal of recognition in peering into his own soul and deals out a similar experience to his mother by holding up a mirror to her corruption. Where the *Odyssey*, as Pope says, presents the *Iliad* in reverse,[8] *Hamlet* subjects to radical irony not only the heroic ethos of recognition that drives the *Iliad* but the revenge plot of the *Odyssey* itself. *Hamlet*'s immediate affinity may be with *The Spanish Tragedy* of Kyd, whose own inspiration was Seneca; but the Senecan style is itself parodied in *Hamlet*, and Shakespeare's imagination overshoots both Kyd and Seneca (as Bakhtin's Dostoevsky overshoots Voltaire), reaching all the way to the original poet, Homer, whose works were better known to Seneca than to himself.

Seeking to correct an overemphasis on the condemnation of revenge in Shakespeare's day, recent scholarship has argued that revenge was also "recognized as having potentially affirmative and even heroic functions," just as the avenger himself could be seen not as a twisted soul but one inspired by motives "heroic and essential to individual and social existence, like indignation, gratitude, compassion, loyalty, appropriate self-regard, a sense of integrity, and a passion for justice."[9] Historically as well as logically speaking, the affirmation of revenge precedes its interdiction, and perhaps nowhere in literature is revenge shown in a more positive light than in the *Odyssey*, whose hero, significantly, exhibits compassion and gratitude as well as a literal rage for justice. If the avenger is "a redresser of abuses, a defender, one that restoreth unto liberty and freeth from dangers, a punisher" (as the word was glossed in Shakespeare's time),[10] then Odysseus stands as the perfection of the kind, for in killing the suitors and their accomplices he not only punishes wrongdoing but frees his wife and son from danger, overthrows

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[8] *Literary Criticism of Alexander Pope*, ed. Bertrand A. Goldgar (Lincoln, 1965), p. 147.

[9] Harry Keyishian, *The Shapes of Revenge: Victimization, Vengeance, and Vindictiveness in Shakespeare* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1995), pp. 1–2, 9.

[10] John Florio (1611), cited in Michael Neill, "Remembrance and Revenge: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*," in *Jonson and Shakespeare*, ed. Ian Donaldson (London, 1983), p. 37.

oppression, restores and renews the true order of things. Under the influence of *Hamlet*'s mood of paradox and equivocality, revenge necessarily loses this purely affirmative character. If the tragic avenger is one who fails to bring off such feats of redemption, Hamlet might even be taken as superlative of *that* kind—an Odysseus under the sign of negation. Where the cerebral nature of Odysseus fits him perfectly for the role of the avenger who "reflects upon what has been done in order to reflect what has been done,"[11] Hamlet's reflectiveness is his scourge if also his glory.

Being a thinker, Odysseus refrains from killing the sleeping Polyphemus lest he and his men perish in the ogre's cave.[12] Elsewhere too he delays revenge. Years pass between his interview with Tiresias, when he learns of the suitors, and his arrival in Ithaca, though nothing indicates either that he is oppressed by the thought of letting a mission go unaccomplished or that his hatred of the suitors festers or somehow grows obsessive with the passage of time. It is as if the seven years spent with Calypso scarcely elapsed at all. When we finally meet the hero in book 5 of the *Odyssey*, he is said to be pining for his wife and home, not torturing himself with the thought of the suitors' depredations and his own tardiness. When he at last does catch up with the suitors, his hatred is as fresh and unspoiled as it must have been at the moment Tiresias told him, "You may punish the violences of these men, when you come home."[13] In Ithaca he delays the hour of reckoning once more, though again without any sense of letting time slip through his hands. Informed by Athena that the suitors are lording it in his palace and lying in ambush for his son, Odysseus instead of killing them straightaway puts friend and foe through a series of tests, somewhat like Hamlet staging "The Mousetrap." In this case the intent behind the testing isn't really to make sure of guilt before punishing it, the crimes of the suitors having already been established. Not moral but as it were dramatic proof is what Odysseus wants. No doubt the theatricality of revenge, with its plotting and disguises, its reversals

[11] John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford, 1996), p. 16.

[12] "Then I/ took counsel with myself in my great-hearted spirit/ to go up close, drawing from beside my thigh the sharp sword,/ and stab him in the chest, where the midriff joins on the liver,/ feeling for the place with my hand; but the second thought stayed me" (9.298–302, Lattimore translation).

[13] *Odyssey* 11.118.

and revelations, recommends it to the stage as such. In *Hamlet*, however, we watch an act of revenge being plotted at the expense, somehow, of revenge itself.

"Have you not heard what glory was won by great Orestes/ among all mankind," Athena reminds Telemachus near the beginning of the *Odyssey*, "when he killed . . ./ the treacherous Aegisthus, who had slain his famous father?" (1.298–300). In *Hamlet* this model of retribution, indeed the entire Homeric drama of return, disguise, and revenge, is reworked in irony.[14] That Hamlet's position resembles that of the ambiguous and irresolute Telemachus as well as Odysseus, the avenger and man of disguises—this in itself is characteristic of the play's ironic doubling. The Ithaca books of the *Odyssey* feature pollution that there may be purification, danger that there may be deliverance. In *Hamlet* pollution overshadows the possibility of purification, and deliverance comes accidentally, in the shape of an ambitious Norwegian. That *Hamlet* should bear any sort of correspondence to the *Odyssey* seems ironic in itself—one more sign of things being out of joint—inasmuch as the model of literary greatness in Shakespeare's time, and after, was provided not by the *Odyssey* but the *Iliad*. The *Odyssey* after all tells of a man as a private being and a being in privation (to the Phaeacians Odysseus could say, with Hamlet, "I am set naked on your kingdom" [4.7.43–44]); from it springs the novel form that was itself traditionally placed low on the scale of literary merit. Joyce's election of the *Odyssey* as his text in *Ulysses* (a work also threaded with references to *Hamlet*) is itself, in a way, an act of displacement.[15] Also displaced is Hamlet, a king's son suddenly thrown into the galling position of a private being—mourner and thinker—with no official function.

In the sense that worse is the comparative of bad, Hamlet on his return from Wittenberg to Denmark finds himself in a situation comparable to Odysseus on his return to Ithaca. Denied a throne rightly his by a usurper even more indecent than the suitors (a usurper, too, who is a husband in fact

[14] Homer's Orestes is never said to have killed his mother, even though she conspired to murder Agamemnon; Hamlet must remind himself not to kill his mother, who, it seems, had nothing to do with the murder of the king.

[15] Like Shakespeare, Joyce ironizes the Homeric model of revenge. I discuss this in the manuscript of which the present article is a part, "The Bow of Odysseus: Reflections on Revenge."

and not in prospect), derided in front of the court as "unmanly"[16] (as Odysseus is "harshly spoken to in his own palace" [24.163]), Hamlet takes the Odyssean course of disguising himself and meditating revenge, without being able to pursue this act with singlemindedness and seemingly without the possibility of restoring the ancient order at all. Instead of a household containing a loyal core, Hamlet is confronted with a court that has so surrendered itself to the new king ("elected" by the court) that it breathes not a word of criticism of his incestuous marriage. Gertrude herself, far from keeping suitors at bay for years on end, leaps into the bed of a second husband weeks after the death of the first, and while she did not connive in his murder and seems not to be irredeemably corrupted, a vague shadow of Clytemnestra hangs over her. "Almost as bad, good mother,/ As kill a king, and marry with his brother" (3.4.28–29). (For that matter, according to Athena, Penelope herself, like any other woman, "wants to build up the household of the man who marries her,/ and . . . of her beloved and wedded husband,/ she has no remembrance when he is dead, nor does she think of him" [15.21–23]. To Hamlet these words would be wormwood.) Moreover, in this tale of usurpation and revenge, it is not the avenger who is "godlike" but the deceased King Hamlet, graced with "Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,/ An eye like Mars" (3.4.56–57). To Hamlet go Odyssean guile and daring without the godlikeness that, in Odysseus himself, makes of these qualities a perfect unity. Possibly Hamlet's most Odyssean trait is simply his way of going off course. Like Odysseus, he is indeed "polytropic," a man of many turns, but turns in this case take the form of reversals: he goes from believing the Ghost to doubting him to believing him again, from heightened purpose to drifting, from thoughts of killing himself to thoughts of killing his father's assassin, in all of this subverting the very idea of an identity that could be summed up in a single epithet, however ambiguous. No cloak, no suit can denote Hamlet truly, but in the drama of testing and suspicion played out in the latter books of the *Odyssey*, the identity of the hero *is* denoted truly by a pin, a scar, a bow.

It has been said that of all the men in the Trojan War, only Odysseus possesses the ideal blend of wisdom and valor. Unlike Nestor, a wise man no

[16] *Hamlet* 1.2.94.

longer a warrior, and Achilles, a great warrior who defies counsel, in Odysseus counsel and courage, words and deeds exist in harmony.[17] The Nestor of *Hamlet* is of course Polonius, a garrulous and superfluous counselor whose wisdom exists only in his own opinion. The fact is that in the ironic world of *Hamlet* the balance of speaking and doing illustrated in the Odysseus of the *Iliad* does not and cannot exist. If the Homeric ideal is to be a speaker of words and a doer of deeds, the Ghost possesses the power of speech in the highest degree but is powerless to act, while Hamlet's actions, which do not speak for themselves, will have to be explained to the world by Horatio. In this drama of things out of joint we have speech without thought and thought without speech, action without words—as in the dumb show—and words in lieu of action. Given that in *Hamlet* the balance of thought, speech, and act exemplified in the Odysseus of the *Iliad* is nowhere to be found, it seems to follow that Hamlet is unable to forge a heroic unity of the qualities of cunning and courage possessed by the Odysseus of the *Odyssey*. In Hamlet, indeed, Shakespeare ironizes the quality of completion so notable in Odysseus—the completion that made Odysseus, in the eyes of Joyce, the fullest character in literature. Scion of Zeus on one side and a thief on the other, paramour of a goddess but unable to forget a mortal wife, capable of both ruthlessness and humanity, Odysseus is all the same a unity for Homer, as though he were defined by manysidedness itself where others are distinguished by some simpler trait. As thinker, student, prince, swordsman, lover, wit, and fool, Hamlet possesses such an abundance of traits and roles as to complicate fatally the very idea of completion. The unity of Hamlet is the contradictory unity of one at variance with himself, as Odysseus never is. He stands as the image not, like Odysseus, of the whole or fully realized man, but precisely of the division of the mind against itself; and in direct contrast to a "finished and completed" hero of the epic world,[18] he is everchanging and unpredictable until the moment of his death.

As soon as he reveals his identity, Odysseus' right to the throne of Ithaca—his throne—speaks for itself. With Hamlet it is otherwise, and had he killed

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[17] Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, 1973), p. 171.

[18] M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981), p. 34.

Claudius at once, the act would surely have been misinterpreted as one of balked ambition, an expression of some private animus or disappointment.[19] This in turn points to a critical complication imposed by Shakespeare on the act of revenge. In perhaps every society with a code of revenge and a preoccupation with honor, definite penalties await one who fails to avenge an injury, whether to himself or his kin. Such a person is marked with disgrace. "In societies with a strict code of honor, the ostracism suffered by a person who fails to avenge an offense can be crippling."[20] *Hamlet* of course concerns a failure to avenge, but in this case the court presumably, and Denmark certainly, do not even know that the blood of Hamlet's father was spilled, making his task of revenge altogether different and in fact inherently paradoxical. (It is Laertes who finds or imagines himself in the position of one bound to avenge a crime known to everybody.) If, traditionally, the avenger's honor is at stake precisely because it is seen to be at stake, Hamlet is called on to avenge a crime that went unseen. So too, instead of being branded with disgrace, he so brands himself; and instead of being ostracized, he chooses a kind of internal exile. Paradox inheres both in Hamlet's character and in his situation. After his encounter with the pirates, indeed, his mood changes, as though he received an infusion of dramatic energy from the romance tradition—the pirates existing in a kind of shadow-world beyond the play, like "the roving pirates" of one of Odysseus' lying tales (17.425).

Not only as a sexual prize or the possessor of a great household do the suitors desire Penelope. The suitors seek to be husbands, and heads of a noble house; they also seek to be kings, and with Penelope would come both the throne of Ithaca and some kind of title to it. "By Penelope's receiving the suitor of her choice into the bed of Odysseus, some shadow of legitimacy, however dim and fictitious, would be thrown over the new king."[21] In *Hamlet* the legitimacy accruing to the new king through his wife's bed is fictitious absolutely, and it is the fraudulence of the pretender-king and the pollution of the marriage bed, not the facts of King Hamlet's assassination, that make up the theme of Hamlet's private tirade to his mother. This scene,

[19] In the case of Hieronimo, the Knight Marshal in *The Spanish Tragedy*, reduced to acting in his own cause, the Spanish court can hardly comprehend the bloody catastrophe of act 4.

[20] Jon Elster, "Norms of Revenge," *Ethics* 100 (1990): 864.

[21] M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (Harmondsworth and Middlesex, 1979), p. 90.

in which Hamlet demands that Gertrude recognize her own corruption and absent herself from her new husband's embraces, presents a striking example of Shakespeare's ironization of dramatic conventions going back to Homer.

The recognition scene in book 23 of the *Odyssey* begins with Telemachus reproaching his mother:

> My mother, my harsh mother with the hard heart inside you,
> why do you withdraw so from my father, and do not
> sit beside him and ask him questions and find out about him?
> No other woman, with spirit as stubborn as yours, would keep back
> as you are doing from her husband who, after much suffering,
> came at last in the twentieth year back to his own country.
> (23.97–102)

Hamlet too berates his mother, wondering if her heart "be made of penetrable stuff" (3.4.36), but berates her precisely for *not* keeping back from her present husband. Both scenes home in with powerful effect on the image of the marriage bed, Penelope testing her husband's identity with the indirect suggestion that some other has put his bed "in another place" (23.184), and Hamlet outraged that another has taken his father's place in a bed now fouled. Both queens yield in the end, Penelope to the longing for her husband, Gertrude to her son's moral pressure. Yet where recognition in the one case seals the reunion of husband and wife, in the other it leaves a woman in the intolerable position of henceforth leading a double life with her husband himself. In effect Shakespeare has inverted the Homeric reunion scene in a satiric mirror akin to the one in which Hamlet himself views the world.

Claudius, as said, is even more indecent than the suitors of the *Odyssey*. Yet it is impossible to read of the outrages of the suitors themselves without feeling that these men and their actions are literally obscene. Anthropologically considered, dirt or defilement constitutes "a kind of compendium category for all events which blur, smudge, contradict, or otherwise confuse accepted classifications. The underlying feeling is that a system of values which is habitually expressed in a given arrangement of things has been violated."[22] Pitching their camp and rioting in another man's hall as if in a public place

[22] Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London, 1975), p. 51. The Trojan War itself is fought over a violation of the given system of things, namely, a woman who seems to be married to two men at the same time.

and paying court to the man's wife as though she were a widow, the suitors dramatize such violation. As his use of a palace as a kind of tavern and, above all, his designation of Gertrude as "our sometime sister, now our queen" (1.2.8) make plain, Claudius too deranges accepted classifications, the difference being that he practically boasts of his violations, as when he plays rhetorically on the theme of "mirth in funeral, and . . . dirge in marriage" (1.2.12). Things being out of joint, normal orderings break down in obscene contradictions such as "your husband's brother's wife" (3.4.15). As the play's paradoxes suggest, however, such monstrous violations are not to be swept away like so much dirt marring only the surface of things. Given to reversal, the lover and reviler of Ophelia, Hamlet himself after all confounds our ordinary ways of understanding. According to tradition, when Odysseus was recruited for service in the Trojan War, he feigned madness. Hamlet feigns madness, and yet his madness is not altogether an act. For that matter, the name of Odysseus seems to signify both "troubles inflicted and troubles endured,"[23] a paradox in itself, and one reflected in Hamlet's double role as the scourge and the scourged:

> Heaven hath pleas'd it so
> To punish me with this, and this with me,
> That I must be their scourge and minister. (3.4.173–75)

It is as if the "fundamental ambiguity" of Odysseus[24] had been heightened in Hamlet to the point of enigma. To add to the complication, Hamlet resembles not only Odysseus, the belated avenger, but that hero's son, the thoughtful Telemachus, now dejected and now daring, whose life is sought by the men who usurp his place. We might go further yet. In the story of Penelope's somehow wavering constancy, Homer dramatizes the threat to human resolution and loyalty posed by the passage of time itself. In book 19 of the *Odyssey*, Penelope appears before us as one who "can no longer hold out against the ineluctable pressures of time."[25] This theme—the erosive effect of time—becomes Hamlet's private curse and burden, as well as the topic of

[23] Jenny Strauss Clay, *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in the Odyssey* (Princeton, 1983), p. 56.
[24] W. B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme* (Ann Arbor, 1968), p. 79.
[25] Sheila Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Princeton, 1987), p. 134.

a great speech in the play within the play. That Hamlet resembles a woman whose virtuous resolution gives way (in the drama's terms, the Player Queen) makes his trial at the hands of time itself all the more shaming, perhaps, in his eyes.

After quickly dispelling his son's doubts of his identity, Odysseus urges him to

> tell me the number of suitors, and tell me about them,
> so I can know how many there are, and which men are of them;
> and then, when I have pondered in my faultless mind, I can
> decide whether we two alone will be able to face them. (16.235–38)

As though he had rewritten the tale of revenge itself with Odyssean cunning, Shakespeare makes Hamlet's consciousness that he is *not* of faultless mind a proof of his distinction. It is because he knows himself liable to delusion that Hamlet stages the play within the play. To the reader or spectator of *Hamlet*, the prince's foul imaginations, melancholy, and bitter questioning of himself—all the evidences of a mind roiled as Odysseus' is not—come to seem not so much defects as expressions of wealth. Here is a mind too rich to obey the dictates of revenge without a second thought. One of the play's great driving ironies is that a thinker should be called to dedicate himself to so blind a passion—a passion better befitting Laertes and the fictional Pyrrhus, both in a rage to avenge the death of their father. Had Hamlet a one-track mind, he might well have proved a better avenger. Additionally, while the spirit of revenge brings others to life, filling them with passion and purpose—like Achilles after the death of Patroclus, or the Danes who, with the coming of spring, rise up and avenge their defeat on the Jutes in the Finnsburg episode of *Beowulf*—the imperative of revenge seems to leave Hamlet as melancholy as it found him.

The play staged by Hamlet to verify the Ghost's tale (and perhaps take the place of some more direct mode of action) makes for another powerful contrast with the Homeric epic. Some distinguish between literary uses of words—utterances framed in the manner of art, placed at an "aesthetic distance" for our contemplation—and words used for immediate or practical effect. There seems to me no purer or more impressive example of aesthetic distance than the Homeric gods' contemplation of the human pageant from

above. At such times the immortals are pictured "looking on without any necessary implication of action . . . in fact, watching men like spectators of a drama or a sporting competition."[26] (This motif makes an ominous reappearance in *Hamlet* in the hint that the gods may have looked on unmoved at the destruction of Troy and the slaughter of its inhabitants [2.2.516].) Within the *Odyssey* this kind of purely aesthetic experience is reproduced on the earthly level as those gathered in the splendid court of Alcinous listen to the tale—the framed tale—of Odysseus. Precisely as an audience, they have nothing to do but listen. With this exemplary leisure pastime, it is as though the Phaeacian elite came as close as mortal life allowed to the leisure of the gods. When Claudius is told that a play is to be performed in Elsinore, he must be expecting something to be enjoyed from a similar aesthetic distance, some entertainment that in this sense confirms his being above the fray like a true monarch. Instead the play exerts almost as practical an effect on him as if he had been shot with an arrow. Nor is this effect accidental, as when Demodocus, the bard of the Phaeacian court, sings of the actions of Odysseus in the presence of Odysseus himself, moving the hero to conceal his face with his cloak lest his tears be seen and his identity revealed. Odysseus preserves his secret; Claudius does not.

It is a curiosity of the construction of the *Odyssey* that it skips over the hero's year with Circe and races through other adventures only to draw out to some ten books the few days in which the hero, now returned to Ithaca, pursues his revenge against the suitors. In *Hamlet* too time is strangely protracted—not because the hero, like Odysseus, pursues an end with the utmost method, but because he lacks method itself; nor in any case does the assurance of success await him, as it does Odysseus, like a ripe fruit needing only to be plucked. Not Hamlet but Machiavelli's Prince keeps deliberation and haste in perfect ratio, acts with method, seizes the ripe moment. Calling for a hero to redeem an Italy at present "headless, orderless, . . . overrun, and plagued by every sort of disaster,"[27] like Ithaca in the absence of Odysseus,

[26] Jasper Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1983), p. 182.
[27] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Robert M. Adams (New York, 1977), p. 73.

Machiavelli modernizes the Homeric myth; Shakespeare, however, modernizes it by reinventing it in irony.[28]

Had Hamlet less of a mind, there would have been less to come between him and the act of revenge, less of the doubt, moral nausea, and self-reproach that seem unknown to both Odysseus and the Prince for all of their famously cerebral nature. The very wealth of Hamlet's nature seems to interfere with the act of revenge. In a curious observation on human character, Hume remarks that while great deeds may be inspired in part by vanity (acting as one motive among others), the spirit of revenge seems to dominate other motives. "Where . . . revenge enters into any seemingly virtuous action . . . it is natural to suppose it the sole actuating principle."[29] By the same token, where revenge does not dominate all else, does not possess the undoubted supremacy of a ruling motive, it may not conduce to action at all. So it seems with Hamlet, at any rate. Hamlet has too many motives for any one of them, including the imperative of revenge, to take sole possession of his moral life. As if to underscore his singularity by contrast, Shakespeare has included in the play avengers who do seem actuated by a single principle—dramatizers of their own passion.

What would the player who wept for Hecuba do, Hamlet asks, "had he the motive and the cue for passion/ That I have?" (2.2.561–62). Hamlet is not one to follow cues and prompts unreflectively, to overact his passion (like Pyrrhus, the killer of old Priam), to play the role of the avenger with the flair of the player himself. These terms belong of course to drama, and it is worth noting that where the Ghost assigns Hamlet his part and hovers over his mind, in the *Odyssey* Athena actively stage-manages the hero's return to his palace as if it were a drama in its own right, complete with disguises and revelations; indeed, she practically constructs his triumph (a kind of meddling parodied in the machinations of Prospero and, in *Measure*

[28] Machiavelli opens *The Prince* by distinguishing hereditary from new states, the former of little interest to the theorist because their rulers have it so easy. Even if by chance a hereditary prince is dethroned, "the slightest mistake by the usurper will enable him to get [his position] back" (4). In *Hamlet* a prince ever mindful of himself as a king's son is constrained to use the fraud and violence of a "new prince," a Machiavellian adventurer. Slight mistakes by the usurper, such as an openly incestuous marriage, do not lose him the throne.

[29] David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis, 1987), p. 86.

for Measure, the Duke of Vienna). The reason Odysseus' return to Ithaca comes to such an ideal conclusion is that it has been conducted to that end by the hand of Athena. Athena provides Odysseus his disguise, emboldens the suitors in order to whet his hatred of them to the last degree, delays Penelope's recognition of her husband, gives her the idea of the bow contest that sets the slaughter in motion, and herself "imitates" Mentor—in each case like a poet staging a drama, and staging it to greatest effect. She even prolongs the battle, and in fact taunts Odysseus, in order to make the final victory the more dramatic:

> "No longer, Odysseus, are the strength and valor still steady
> within you, as when, for the sake of white-armed, illustrious
> Helen, you fought nine years with the Trojans, ever relentless."
> . . . . . .
> She spoke, but did not yet altogether turn the victory
> their way. She was still putting to proof the strength and courage
> alike of Odysseus and his glorious son. (22.226–28, 236–38)

Following as he does the promptings of Athena, which are the promptings of drama itself, Odysseus is the practical opposite of one who neglects the cues of passion and the dramatic role that has been thrust on him; who seems in fact like "a being who has wandered by accident upon a stage."[30]

Accordingly, his father's reproach—"Do you not come your tardy son to chide?" (3.4.106)—does not sting Hamlet into action as the words of Athena do Odysseus, just as Hamlet's taunts of himself sink in and rankle in a way that Athena's goading of Odysseus does not. At several points after Odysseus' return to Ithaca, Athena intervenes to heat the conflict and draw it out to its full dramatic dimensions so that the eventual victory will be fully worthy of Odysseus himself. "She was *still* putting to proof . . ." No doubt Odysseus could have made short work of the suitors upon his return to Ithaca, without suffering their abuse as a beggar while the tale moves inexorably, book by book, toward its destined ending. But that would have been a poorer tale, lacking the force of contrast, the rich irony of reversal, the steady approach to an explosive outcome. The protraction of revenge—the hero arrives in Ithaca, after all, with half of the poem's books to go—enhances the

[30] Harold Rosenberg, "Character Change and the Drama," *Symposium* 3 (1932): 362.

hero's glory as well as the tale's. Delay is of the essence. Hamlet's delays make for a tale richer and stranger than the tale of delayed revenge in the *Odyssey* itself. Perhaps nothing marks the ironization of the Homeric model in *Hamlet* more sharply than the use of time not to ripen the conflict and fatten the hero's enemies (as though in spite of their violations, the natural processes of an idyllic world were still at work, as in fact they are in the *Odyssey*), but to shame and scourge the hero himself. The humiliation of begging does not go deep in Odysseus and washes away in the end like the brine of the sea. Never in Ithaca is Odysseus humiliated in his own eyes. Hamlet is so humiliated, and therein lies a difference between romance and tragedy.

If Hamlet seems to have wandered onto a stage, Odysseus himself—a man whose genius runs to unconventional warfare, one distinguished not by pride, anger, or valor but the more ambiguous quality of resourcefulness—differs from the more purely dramatic heroes of the Trojan War. But he bears his difference without strain. Where Hamlet's power of action seems suspended, it is Odysseus himself who will break the seemingly interminable impasse of the Trojan War with a triumphant ruse. So too, in the tale of his homecoming as he acts out the drama directed by Athena in the interests of drama itself, he is not at all oppressed by a sense of having to play a part. Playing a beggar, being subjected to the suitors' abuse, brings out precisely those powers of resource and endurance that are his natural strength. The delay of action that Athena judges necessary for her own reasons Odysseus appears to judge a tactical necessity as well. He and the dramaturge are at one. Far from being alien to him or forced on him, the part of the beggar is one that Odysseus himself could well have chosen in order to employ his own virtuosity. As one who pursues his ends with indirection, Odysseus is also at one with the tale itself, a tale that moves toward its own end steadily but not swiftly or by the most direct route. In a sense Odysseus proceeds like a storyteller, which in one section of the *Odyssey* he actually is. No such consonance between hero and tale exists in *Hamlet*. Where Athena's stagecraft—her transformation of Odysseus and drawing out of the conflict between him and the suitors—brings out the theatricality of revenge itself,[31]

[31] On the theatricality of revenge, cf. Anne Pippin Burnett, *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1998), p. 3.

Hamlet, in the play-within-the-play, uses the theater practically as a substitute for the act of revenge. Not only has Hamlet been thrust into a role he never chose; he is conscious at every moment of the fictive nature of drama. "I have that within which passes show" (1.2.85). Considering that the Indo-European root for "revenge" yields the Greek "to show,"[32] Hamlet's ironic or detached attitude toward show implies some similar reserve toward the act of revenge itself. Those in *Hamlet* at one with their role are by that fact deficient in being, in contrast to the hero.

If Odysseus, as I have said, is Hamlet's practical opposite, within the play itself Hamlet has foils in Fortinbras and Laertes. Though the text never says so directly, it suggests that Fortinbras has been biding his time, awaiting the moment to avenge his father's defeat by King Hamlet, and that as the action begins he has decided to exploit both the absence of that formidable deterrent and the unsettled condition of the Danish kingdom. Supposing that Fortinbras has been waiting for years on end to avenge the injury commemorated by Hamlet's birth, he would stand as an example either of steady purpose or sheer obsession, but in any case of a mind occupied with a single object, in contrast to the dialectical nature of Hamlet. As it happens, Fortinbras in the end gains the throne of Denmark not by courage or cunning but by blind luck. As to Laertes, upon his return to the stage in act 4, it is as if some dramaturgical deity had puffed up this player of himself with passion and furthermore had contrived events for the sole purpose of raising his fury to the highest pitch, adding the death of Ophelia to that of his father as Athena inspires the suitors to new outrages. The fool of his own passion, Laertes too is on a mission of revenge, initially against Claudius, though by the end of act 4 he is being used, has even asked to be used, as a human prop by Claudius in his plot against Hamlet. Like an aristocrat, which he is, intent on staging the vindication of his sacred honor, Laertes leaps at the proposal of a duel against Hamlet; that the duel is to be rigged suggests just how illusory this theatrical quality is. At any event, whether he is being operated by Claudius or dramatizing his own passions, it seems there is no thought in Laertes, no inwardness, nothing that passes show, as if he possessed the same kind of

[32] Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy*, p. 17.

existence as a character in a drama who exists before our eyes and nowhere else. Why he should be named for the father of Odysseus is a mystery.

The limiting example of a character leading a miragelike existence in *Hamlet* might be Pyrrhus, the son of Achilles, who rises before us in a speech begun by Hamlet and completed by the First Player. Purely a figment of speech, Pyrrhus, in contrast to Hamlet himself, lets nothing stand in the way of revenge, but "horridly trick'd/ With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons" (2.2.457–58), stalks the aged king of Troy himself and, in the ultimate piece of theater, butchers him in front of his wife's eyes.[33] As though in keeping with the ironization of Homer in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare in this set piece concerned with the power of sight portrays the last events of the Trojan War through the eyes of its victims. Pyrrhus is the spirit of revenge run loose. With his sword suspended momentarily above Priam's head as if stuck in the air, he stands in telling contrast to a Hamlet frozen seemingly indefinitely between will and deed. And yet if revenge is so insane that it exults in the blood of "fathers, mothers, daughters, sons," then Hamlet has cause to hesitate before this passion. In the *Aeneid*—Shakespeare's source for these events—immediately after the slaying of Priam, Aeneas is stopped by his mother, Venus, from killing Helen in a fury of revenge. Hamlet himself would be guilty of atrocity if, instead of refraining from killing his mother, he went ahead and did "such bitter business as the day/ Would quake to look on" (3.2.391–92), by analogy with Pyrrhus committing deeds that would make the onlooking gods weep.

If Hamlet's reluctance to take up the sword signifies something other than a sickness of the soul, there ought to be some good reason for it. The Pyrrhus speech, begun by Hamlet himself, suggests one possibility. Characteristically, the same lines that indict Hamlet by contrast with this lethal avenger also expose the savagery, even madness, of revenge—the revenge of Pyrrhus as he hacks his way through the streets of Troy, murdering young and old, in search of Priam. But only because of Odysseus, inventor of "th' ominous horse" (2.2.454) does Pyrrhus run free inside the walls of Troy at

[33] Priam to Pyrrhus in the *Aeneid*: "You/ have made me see the murder of my son,/ defiled a father's face with death" (2.722–23). *The Aeneid*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York, 1971), p. 47.

all. It was Odysseus who produced the literal breakthrough that brought the Trojan War to its finish. Seeing that Odysseus himself is known as a sacker of cities and that in Ithaca he too would take a terrible revenge after lying very low, a kind of secondary antithesis exists between Hamlet and Odysseus: the latter a resourceful actor capable of performing anything from the tragic history of the *Iliad* to the epic pastoral romance of the *Odyssey*, the former putting into question all of the actions that a man might play.

The revenge of Pyrrhus is described first by Hamlet and then by the Player in a melodramatic register like nothing else in the play.[34] On the page the entire piece seems set in red. Laertes for his part acts out his rages with a bombast that out-Herods Herod, offending Hamlet accordingly. Homer's Odysseus is inspired, Laertes merely inflated. By making the revenge-crazed Laertes so rhetorical—"O, treble woe/ Fall ten times treble on that cursed head/ Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense/ Depriv'd thee of!" (5.1.246–49)—and by giving the Pyrrhus episode a language unto itself, also highly rhetorical, Shakespeare seems to say that the obsessive pursuit of revenge makes for bad poetry. Certainly language itself is thrown into question in *Hamlet*, what with the quibbling of the gravedigger, the smooth lies of diplomacy, the curlicues of Osric, and the equivocations of Hamlet himself, to cite only examples from act 5. And this points up a fundamental difference between Homer and Shakespeare. In Homer there are no rival languages. The world speaks in one voice. In the conversation between the soul of a suitor and the soul of Agamemnon in the last book of the *Odyssey*, the former amazingly describes his own defeat and death in the same evaluations Homer himself would use. Odysseus—his own killer—

> endured for a long time with steadfast spirit
> to be pelted with missiles and harshly spoken to in his own palace;
> but then, when the purpose of aegis-bearing Zeus had stirred him,
> he, with Telemachos, took away the glorious armor,
> and stowed it away in the chamber, closing the doors upon it.
>
> (24.162–66)

[34] "The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms,/ Black as his purpose, did the night resemble/ When he lay couched in th' ominous horse,/ Hath now this dread and black complexion smear'd/ With heraldry more dismal: head to foot/ Now is he total gules" (2.2.452–57).

Nor does the selflessness of this report reflect especially well on its giver. He recounts an event in the only way it can be recounted. (Thus he reports the hiding of the armor, even though the act itself took place out of his sight; in a similar way, Eumaeus in telling the story of his own abduction reports speeches he could not have heard.) This is a world under the dominion of a single language. No such absolute monarch exists in Shakespeare.

As the suitor's narrative makes plain, the story of Odysseus requires no Horatio to explicate it to the world. It speaks for itself. After the death of Hamlet, the truth will remain not just unknown but unknowable—knotted up like an insoluble riddle—until Horatio makes his report. In one more sign of a world out of joint, only with the drama complete will the narrative begin.

In classical tragedy things too terrible to be enacted before the eyes of the audience are narrated instead, the ritual sacrifice of Polyxena, for example, being described at length by a witness to the act in *Hecuba*. Implied in this procedure of course is a definite distinction between showing and telling, or dramatic and narrative representation, although the narration itself is encompassed in drama and still partakes of the power and immediacy of drama to a good degree. Homeric epic, predating the distinction between narrative and drama and using a great deal of direct speech, enacts the very events it tells of. This ancient unity of narrative and drama, which survives in some strength in the classical tragedies, is totally undone in *Hamlet*. "Will 'a tell us what this show meant?" (3.2.142). The Pyrrhus episode itself—described by Hamlet as a tale ("'twas Aeneas' tale to Dido") in a play ("an excellent play, well digested in the scenes")—theatricalizes events like mass slaughter and the fall of a great city that could never conceivably be enacted on a stage. As soliloquist and commentator, Hamlet himself becomes a quasi-narrator of the very drama he is part of, the narrative function being at odds with the drama itself, however. What is for many the most memorable section of the *Odyssey*, the hero's recital of his adventures, brings before us things that lie outside the poem's field of representation, and does so in a dramatically charged way roughly comparable to the witness accounts of later tragedy. In *Hamlet*, where the linkage between words and deeds breaks down, so too does the unity of language that makes it possible for drama and

narration to come together in the first place.

So dramatically charged is Homeric narrative that, according to Eric Havelock in his memorable study of the Platonic challenge to the oral tradition, its very recital constitutes an act of dramatic mimesis. Under the spell of the literally unforgettable performances of the Homeric tradition, writes Havelock, it is impossible to separate oneself from the tradition itself, impossible to

> frame words to express the conviction that "I" am one thing and the tradition is another; that "I" can stand apart from the tradition and examine it; that "I" can and should break the spell of its hypnotic force; and that "I" should divert some at least of my mental powers away from memorisation and direct them instead into channels of critical inquiry and analysis. . . . The *psyche* which slowly asserts itself in independence of the poetic performance and the poetised tradition had to be the reflective, thoughtful, critical psyche, or it could be nothing.[35]

At this point we can say that in addition to fatally complicating the Homeric theme of delayed revenge, Shakespeare shatters the authority of Homeric language by making Hamlet nothing if not reflective, thoughtful, and critical. In view of Havelock's argument that in the oral tradition memorization is all, it seems noteworthy not only that the Ghost's parting words to Hamlet in act 1 are "Remember me," but that Hamlet proceeds to describe memory itself in terms of writing:

> 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. (1.5.97–103)

Like the oral tradition itself in Havelock's account, the Ghost, speaking with the hypnotic force of the archaic, demands to be remembered; Hamlet answers in an extravagant metaphor of literacy. It stands to reason that what

[35] Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 199–200.

Havelock terms the "unfettered capacity for action" bequeathed by the oral tradition should be lost to Hamlet.[36]

Many a reader of Homer has been struck by the sheer presence of his characters—the impression that they exist before us fully realized. Thus, for example, Erich Auerbach's claim that in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* it is Homer's way to leave nothing hidden, unexpressed, "half in darkness," "unexternalized."[37] Perhaps Shakespeare himself, reading the *Iliad* in translation, was impressed with the brilliant illumination of the Homeric world. In *Hamlet*, however, he follows other principles. By surrounding events with a mysterious penumbra and, of course, making the hero himself a mystery, Shakespeare gives *Hamlet* its compelling depth. Exactly how Claudius won the widowed queen; how the court ratified his seizure of the throne; what it really thinks of the indecent union; whether, by the time of her death, the Queen has removed herself from her husband's embraces as Hamlet demands—these are exactly the kind of background mysteries that, according to Auerbach, do not and cannot exist in Homer. (In Homer, if a king like the elder Hamlet had been assassinated, it is hard to imagine only one or two people in the world knowing about it.) Hamlet himself stands as a living refutation of epic mimesis, his soliloquies bringing home to us just how much of him lies hidden from our eyes, unexternalized. "I have that within which passes show" (1.2.85): this no Homeric hero could ever say. Not only, then, does Shakespeare reinvent the original tale of revenge; he inverts what some consider the very principles of Homeric representation as if in the mirror of satire.

As a tragedy, *Hamlet* can hardly end with the sort of renewal of the existing order featured in the *Odyssey* and later incorporated into comedy, although with the passage of the throne to Fortinbras things do return to a semblance of normality. Counterposed as he is to Hamlet (who was born on the very day of the elder Fortinbras' defeat at the hands of King Hamlet), Fortinbras

[36] Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, p. 199.

[37] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, 1953), p. 5.

himself can only be seen as a figure lacking both depth and distinction. To Hamlet he is a picture of honorable simplicity. But in the world of this play, where so much is open to question, the honor of Fortinbras is questionable as well. If Hamlet complicates the ancient theme of delayed revenge, the Norwegian's sudden happening on a vacant Danish throne reads like the lucky outcome of *his* quest for vindication following his father's defeat many years before (chance succeeding where method itself might fail). Along with Laertes and the fictional Pyrrhus, Fortinbras too goes on the list of secondary characters in *Hamlet* with a slain father, although his ultimate revenge is too perfect to be anything but accidental. Nor does he ever move against King Hamlet. As I have said, his military stirrings so soon after the death of the elder Hamlet certainly suggest a man who was lying low, deterred by the power of a strong king, now at last venturing to act. For all his "divine ambition" (4.4.49), only, it seems, with the great king dead and his place taken by a manifest inferior is Fortinbras willing to move against Denmark. Such are the complexities of *Hamlet* that "their total effect is to neutralize the sense of the restoring of moral balance that a revenge is supposed to give us as a rule,"[38] and nowhere more memorably than in the *Odyssey*. With the completion of Fortinbras' fortunes in a way he could never have imagined, the ironization of revenge in *Hamlet* is itself complete.

[38] Northrop Frye, *On Shakespeare* (New Haven, 1986), p. 90.