



CLUB PAPER
CLIII

PERCEPTION AT ELSINORE

by
JOHN L. TUOHY

THE CHICAGO
LITERARY CLUB
2020



PERCEPTION AT ELSINORE

by

JOHN L. TUOHY



THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB

20 February 2017



PERCEPTION AT ELSINORE

**My Paper Is an Effort to Apply a Lawyer's Eyes
To the Alleged Murder by Claudius of Hamlet Sr.
And the Effect of the Evidence Presented,
To the Characters in the Play *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare**

On this cold winter day in Chicago, I invite you to join me in a return visit to a presumably equally cold Denmark (Denmark being some fifteen degrees further north than Chicago by latitude) and to the castle (dare we call it a palace?) of Elsinore, the home of Hamlet Sr., the late king, and Hamlet Jr., the hero of our play. I invite you to revisit the play with a new perspective, and perhaps gain a new appreciation for the inner workings of this masterpiece.

Claudius, the uncle of Hamlet Jr., murdered Hamlet Sr.



Or did he? How much do we know about the murder? How much did Hamlet know? How much and when did Horatio know? Gertrude? Laertes? Other characters? The case for murder is clear and convincing to us as the audience, but it is not so clear-cut to characters in the play.

PERCEPTION AT ELSINORE

And the availability of that evidence, and the strength or weakness of that evidence, affects the actions taken by those characters and the relationship of those characters to Hamlet.

For those of us who may not have ventured into this play in the recent past, I offer a brief synopsis, so that our memories are jogged about the principal characters and turns of event.

The play opens on the castle ramparts, with Horatio, Hamlet's closest friend, and two soldiers, Bernardo and Francisco, witnessing the appearance of a ghost who looks like Hamlet Sr. Horatio entices Hamlet back to the ramparts the following night, when the ghost reveals to Hamlet alone the alleged facts of Hamlet Sr.'s death: murder at the hands of Claudius. When Hamlet reunites with Horatio and the guard, he refuses to reveal what he has heard. We next see Hamlet in the company of the new king, Claudius, uncle to Hamlet Jr., and of his new wife, Gertrude, Hamlet Jr.'s mother. We meet Polonius, councilor to the king, and his son Laertes, who pleads for permission to return to school in France. Laertes appears as a friend to Hamlet, although soon he is seen warning his sister Ophelia against Hamlet's amorous overtures. Hamlet Sr. has died but two months ago, yet Claudius has been crowned king and has married Gertrude. In soliloquy Hamlet bemoans the hastiness of that marriage ("frailty, thy name is woman"). We see in act 2 Hamlet's infatuation with the lovely Ophelia, first in a puzzling scene between them, and then in a letter from him to her, purloined by Polonius and delivered to Claudius. Polonius asserts Hamlet's madness. At this point enter Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, acknowledged by the remarks of both Claudius and Hamlet to have been close friends to Hamlet in their youth. They are dispatched by the king to see what is wrong with Hamlet. A troupe of players arrive, announced by Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; Hamlet plots with the players to present his "play within a play" to trap the king. Act 3 opens with the king and queen arranging a meeting between Ophelia and Hamlet, and Polonius and the king

PERCEPTION AT ELSINORE

listen in, to hear Hamlet's strange address to Ophelia ("To be or not to be . . ."). The play-within-the-play is enacted, by Hamlet's direction, mimicking the murder of Hamlet Sr. and the king's hasty marriage to his widow. The king storms out, enraged. We hear Claudius in soliloquy confess all, bemoaning both murder and marriage. Hamlet is called to his mother's apartment, with Polonius hiding behind a curtain. In the queen's apartment, Polonius makes a noise and Hamlet stabs and kills him through the curtain, thinking he has stabbed Claudius. Hamlet berates his mother for her incestuous bedding. The ghost reappears and speaks only to Hamlet. Claudius sends Hamlet to England, under guidance from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and in sealed message bids for England to kill Hamlet. Laertes returns from France, raging about the death of his father, and leading a crowd chanting for Laertes to be king (what is going on there?). The action speeds up, as the king points to Hamlet as the villain in Polonius's death; Ophelia displays her madness and is drowned. Claudius sets up the duel between Hamlet and Laertes, but Claudius and Laertes plan treachery, for Laertes's sword tip will be tinged with poison, and a nearby cup of poisoned water will be available for Hamlet to drink. The bloody finale finds Hamlet, Laertes, Claudius, and Gertrude all dead, and word is brought of the slaying of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in England.

The audience knows more, and the audience knows less, than the characters onstage. On the one hand, we hear everything that is said onstage, regardless of who says it or to whom it is said. On the other hand, much factual material known to various characters is withheld from us. As an example of the latter, we have no details of what happened after the death of Hamlet Sr. Was there any kind of an inquest into his death? Was there no rumbling in the kingdom about the marriage of the king to Gertrude? Was it the general cultural attitude in Denmark that such a coupling constituted incest, as Hamlet declares, and would an Elizabethan viewer agree?

PERCEPTION AT ELSINORE

The audience alone is given the strongest piece of evidence of murder: the king's own confession, in his soliloquy: "Oh, my offense is rank! It smells to heaven. It hath the primal eldest curse upon't, a brother's murder" [3.3.36–8], and "Forgive me my foul murder" [3.3.52], and "I am still possessed of those effects for which I did the murder" [3.3.53–4]. Convincing stuff: a self-admission and not made under duress (although made under the heavy burden of guilt). But that admission was not witnessed by any other character, and it was never again repeated. As members of the audience we do not need a reiteration of the confession to be convinced. But it is notable that the confession was never offered to or heard by any character in the play. Later, in act 5, Hamlet accuses the king of being "murderous" [5.2.327], but the king does not respond to the accusation (he doesn't have much chance: Hamlet is feeding him poison, and the king dies two lines later). And even that accusation does not necessarily point to the king's murder of Hamlet Sr., since at this point it is clear that the king is responsible for the poisoned cup drunk from by the queen and for the poisoned foil of Laertes. And in any case the king does not admit anything at this time. However, notwithstanding the absence of a repeat of his confession, either in public or in private, from the audience's view the king is guilty, damned by just five lines.

But let us see what evidence is presented to Hamlet. Shakespeare wastes no time in giving Hamlet his first witness: the ghost in the appearance of his father, presented in act 1, scene 5, in a speaking role. The ghost gives the murder's gruesome details in a relatively short (given the importance of the disclosure) scene [1.5.26–80], to Hamlet alone.

Let us analyze both the visual appearances of the ghost throughout the play and then its utterances. In all the play there are seven identified visual and/or verbal ghostly appearances. First and second, Marcellus and Bernardo report that they have seen the ghost on two successive nights before the play begins [1.1.29]. Third, Marcellus and Bernardo and Horatio see it [1.1.43–55]. Fourth, Marcellus and Horatio see it with

PERCEPTION AT ELSINORE

Hamlet (oddly enough, without Bernardo) [1.4.38–57]. Fifth, Hamlet absolutely prevents Horatio from joining him in meeting with the ghost [1.4.79–86] and he sees it separately from Marcellus and Horatio, at which time the ghost speaks to Hamlet [1.5.1–92]. Sixth, Marcellus, Horatio, and Hamlet see it again together, and Hamlet demands that the fellow viewers swear not to disclose any of these matters [1.4.150–2], and Shakespeare has the ghost command “Swear” four times [1.5.158, 164, 170, and 190]. Finally, the ghost appears in Gertrude’s bedroom, visible and audible to Hamlet alone. We do have confirmation from other characters of the first four (and sixth) visible appearances of the ghost: by Marcellus, Bernardo, and Horatio. We cannot be sure that any other character ever hears the ghost speak. No one is present when it speaks at length to Hamlet, since Hamlet has precluded Horatio from joining him in that scene. In the sixth appearance, in which Hamlet demands his companions’ silence, the ghost says “Swear” four times, and Hamlet responds to it (“Well said ole mole . . .”), but never is there an acknowledgment by Horatio or Marcellus that they have heard the ghostly command or that they acted in obedience to it, even though they do swear to silence, as Hamlet has insisted. And of course Gertrude denies, with some agony, seeing or hearing the ghost in her bedroom. We are left, then, with three characters other than Hamlet who have seen the ghost, but no confirmation by any other character that the ghost can or did speak. And we have the possibility that Hamlet imagined the whole ghostly conversation.

What are we to make of a ghost appearing as the star witness? What did Shakespeare intend? One can hardly imagine a twenty-first-century playwright driving the action of a play with a spirit. Yet Shakespeare did. Was the Elizabethan listener so different from us? A perusal of four Elizabethan period writers suggests that the existence of ghosts, or spirits, was a lively topic for elucidation and debate by intelligent and educated persons. Keep in mind that Hamlet was written in the period

PERCEPTION AT ELSINORE

1600–5. In 1572 a Swiss writer, Ludwig Lavater, in *Of Ghostes and Spirites Walking by Nyght*, declared that “spirits and sights do appear, and that sundry strange and monstrous things do happen,” and furthermore “that those spirits and other strange sights, be not the souls of men, but be either good or evil angels, or else some secret and bad [?] operations [?]” [the available copy is not clear], and finally attempted to show “why, or to what end God suffereth spirits to appear, and other strange things to happen: as also how we men ought to behave them selves when they meet with any such things” [headings of the three parts of the book]. The work is a compilation of reported appearances over time, told with the sense that the reports were indeed valid. The discussion is not so much the question of whether spirits are real, which he asserts in the early part of the book, but the nature of the spirit: whether the spirit be the soul of a deceased human or a good or evil being: angel or devil. The latter discussion is reminiscent of Hamlet’s own question [2.2.599–604], wondering whether the spirit be the soul of his father or the devil.

An English gentleman and landowner, Reginald Scot (the eclectic author, also, of a tract on hop farming!), wrote *The Discovery of Witchcraft* in 1584. In this book, he set out to “Prov[e], that the compacts and contracts of witches with devils and all infernal spirits or familiars, are but erroneous novelties and imaginary conceptions. Also discovering, how far their power extendeth in killing, tormenting, consuming, or curing the bodies of men, women, children, or animals, by charms, filters, periapts, pentacles, curses, and conjurations. . . . All which are very necessary to be known for the undeceiving of judges, justices, and jurors, before they pass sentence upon poor, miserable and ignorant people, who are frequently arraigned, condemned and executed for witches and wizards.” [Book cover, title]. Scot was not so much out to prove that spirits were solely the imagination of human beings, as he was addressing the widely held belief that witches were the agents of devils, and attacking the social evil of torturing and killing witches because of that supposed agency.

The most prominent writer to enter the fray was King James VI of Scotland (later King James I of England), who published his *Daemonologie* in 1597. He expressly took on Scot's work, and argued in favor of the continued punishment of witches: "The fearefull aboundinge at this time in this countrie, of these detestable slaves of the Devill, the Witches or enchaunters, has moved me (beloved reader) to dispatch in post, this following treatise of mine, not in any wise (as I protest) to serve for a shew of my learning and ingine, but onely (moved of conscience) to preasse thereby, so farre as I can, to resolve the doubting harts of many; both that such assaultes of Sathan are most certainly practized, & that the instrumentes thereof, merits most severely to be punished; against the damnable opinions of two principally in our age. . . ." [Preface]. No doubt about his position: there were spirits out there; those spirits were devils; and they entered the bodies of women and caused them to be witches worthy of punishment and death.

Finally, Pierre Le Loyer, a French royal councilor and demonographer, in 1605 wrote *A Treatise of Specters or Straunge Sights, Visions and Apparitions Appearing Sensibly unto Men*. Le Loyer offers this helpful definition of a specter: "A Specter, or Apparition, is an imagination of a Substance without a Bodie, the which presenteth it selfe sensibly unto men, against the order and course of nature, and maketh them afraid"—an especially apt characterization in the context of Hamlet's ghost! Le Loyer catalogues the many spirits, or specters, reported in the literature, and argues against the writers who deny the existence of those specters.

So it appears ghosts and spirits were familiar to the Elizabethan audience. And at least the writers whom I found were not on either side of an argument to the effect that spirits simply did not exist. Rather, the issue was on the nature of the spirits: whether the spirit represented the soul of a deceased human being or whether it represented a good angel or an evil devil.

Hamlet's ghost says it is returning from purgatory, where it admits to being in severe discomfort because of its earthly failings: "I am thy

father's spirit, doomed for a certain term to walk the night, and for the day confined to fast in fires, till the foul crimes done in my days of nature are burnt and purged away" [1.5.10–14]. This follows the line of thought that a spirit is the representation of the soul of a deceased human being. The trouble with that line of thinking, if in fact the spirit is the soul of the father who loves Hamlet, is that the spirit is propelling Hamlet toward an action which will surely doom Hamlet to an eternity in hell, which is presumably even worse than purgatory. Would a loving parent do that? Would Hamlet Sr.'s desire for revenge trump any concern he might have for Hamlet's soul?

Even Hamlet himself, with some time to consider the evidence after receiving it from the ghost, does not immediately accept it as solid. He admits to the possibility that the ghost, while real, may be the devil looking like his father, tempting him to evil: "The spirit that I have seen may be the devil, and the devil hath power t' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps, out of my weakness and my melancholy, as he is very potent with such spirits, abuses me to damn me" [2.2.599–604]. Here is the contrary argument presented by the Elizabethan authors: the spirit is an evil devil. Of course, either one—loving father or evil devil—could be telling the truth about the murder, but their motivation would be different. Hamlet's father would be out for revenge; the evil devil would be out to snag Hamlet's soul for eternity in hell. But if the spirit is an evil devil, the murder story may have been fabricated to accomplish the devil's end.

Hamlet is hesitant. He needs more. He sets up the play-within-the-play, in order to provoke substantiation: "I'll have these players play something like the murder of my father before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks; I'll tent him to the quick. If 'a do blench, I know my course" [2.2.595–9]. And to Horatio he says, "If [the king's] occulted guilt do not itself unkennel in one speech, it is a damned ghost that we have seen, and my imaginations are as foul as Vulcan's stithy" [3.2.79–83]. In these

PERCEPTION AT ELSINORE

few words, Hamlet says he will consider the contrary argument. If he does not get the substantiation he seeks, he may conclude that the ghost is an evil devil telling a made-up story. But more, there is a new hint of a third interpretation: the ghost's revelations and instructions as "my imaginations"—imagination is not a term used heretofore. Maybe he just imagined the whole verbal exchange, the product of an overwrought and anguished mind. And there is good cause for such a state of mind, since Hamlet is dealing with a major series of stresses: the death of his father, the "too soon" remarriage of his mother (and an incestuous one at that), the coronation of his uncle, and his being pushed out of the line of succession, at least for a while. And there is good reason for us to suspect his third possibility, since we never have any confirmation by any other character that the ghost ever spoke to Hamlet. That the entire exchange between the ghost and Hamlet is a figment of Hamlet's imagination has to remain as a possibility in the mind of the audience.

The next piece of evidence, and the one which seems to solidify his resolve, is the king's reaction to the play-within-the-play. Hamlet plots with Horatio to watch the king "and after we will both our judgments join in censure of his seeming" [3.2.85–6]. The play mimics the scene reported by the ghost, except for the odd change in the person of the murderer: a nephew rather than the brother of the player king. The king rises, storms out (presumably), and shouts, "Give me some light. Away!" [3.2.267]. Apparently this unseemly behavior of the king is evidence to Hamlet of his guilty conscience, and of his perpetration of the murder. Upon this slender reed does Hamlet pronounce judgment: "Oh, good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound" [3.2.284–5]. But any number of causes can be suggested for the king's reaction: maybe he is angry because of his perception that Hamlet is critical of his overly hasty marriage [3.2.261–2]; or maybe he is showing his pique at the exchange between player king and player queen about whether the queen would ever marry again; or maybe his general anger is surfacing

at Hamlet's making such an ass of himself at the entertainment. But no, Hamlet is convinced, and he looks no further for confirmation, and the die is cast. The king is guilty. Oh, Hamlet, where is your heralded caution, your want to rationally weigh all the possibilities?

Thus we have Hamlet forming his resolve on two events. The first is the ghost's visual appearance (by itself corroborated and believable), together with the verbal revelation of the murder and commands by the ghost to Hamlet (of questionable persuasiveness, given the lack of corroboration; the possibility of Hamlet's imagining it all; and the possibility that the ghost is not in fact the soul of Hamlet Sr. and is fabricating the story). The second is the reaction by the king to the play; while dramatic, it is of little persuasiveness of his guilt.

We in the audience are invited by Shakespeare to think that Hamlet is right in being convinced of Claudius's culpability. Yea, more than invited: we are privy to the king's confession. What would we think if the confession scene were cut? What if we had only the evidence that Hamlet has? Would we be as quick to sympathize with Hamlet's verdict of guilt? I think not. But that is not what Shakespeare gave us: he was not, after all, writing a whodunit. And he wanted to explore how Hamlet reacts to his verdict, not how good a detective Hamlet was.

Now let us turn to another character. What did Horatio know? And how did that affect his relationship with Hamlet? Given the obviously intimate nature of the friendship, there is probably nothing that would have disturbed the total loyalty and dedication Horatio has to Hamlet. Horatio learns early on of Hamlet's upset over the hasty marriage [1.2.179–84]. Also early on Horatio knows that something serious has transpired between Hamlet and the ghost [1.5.142–9]. As he plots with Horatio to watch the king's reaction to the play, Hamlet says, "One scene of it comes near the circumstance which I have told thee of my father's death" [3.2.75–6]. This is the first suggestion that Horatio may know about the murder. But what he knows at this point is left ambiguous.

PERCEPTION AT ELSINORE

We never understand clearly when and how much Horatio learns. My interpretation is that by this time Horatio knows the full extent of the knowledge Hamlet possesses. What else than the murder could Hamlet mean by “the circumstance of my father’s death”? By the end of the play, when Hamlet begs Horatio to tell the story (“Horatio, I am dead; thou livest. Report me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied” [5.2.340–2]), Horatio must know it all. That knowledge, whenever it was acquired, puts Horatio on the same footing as Hamlet and on the same footing as the audience from the point of his education. No one else knows the whole story, even at the last scene. Horatio is attached to Hamlet’s cause from the beginning to the end. Although Horatio’s relationship to Hamlet would most likely have kept him totally loyal throughout, his possession of the knowledge of the full extent of the treachery makes it absolutely certain that Horatio will be cemented to Hamlet’s cause.

How about Hamlet’s mother and the wife of his father? What did Gertrude know? How does that affect her relationship with her son? In the act 1 scene, the ghost suggests some culpable behavior by Gertrude (“Leave her to heaven and to those thorns that in her bosom lodge, to prick and sting her” [1.5.87–9]), but pointedly the suggestion relates to her incestuous behavior, not to participation in the murder. From this, Hamlet does not know how deeply, if at all, Gertrude is involved in the murder. Hamlet first presents her with an accusation, leveled seemingly at her: “A bloody deed—almost as bad, good mother, as kill a king, and marry with his brother” [3.4.29–30]. To which she responds, “As kill a king!” Total surprise by Gertrude: her first inkling of something amiss. Thereafter Hamlet berates his mother for the incestuous behavior but makes no further mention of the murder. Hamlet has backed off, presumably for lack of certainty of the extent of her involvement. Gertrude’s life, and her relationship with Hamlet, is changed. She appears persuaded by Hamlet of the pernicious nature of her relationship with the king. She gets no elaboration of Hamlet’s murder charge, but presumably the

PERCEPTION AT ELSINORE

idea that a murder has been committed is lodged in Gertrude's mind for later consideration. It must have revised her attitude toward Hamlet's recent strange behavior. Why doesn't Hamlet open up completely with Gertrude? At this point in the action Hamlet is sufficiently convinced of the king's culpability to push forward to kill him; so why does he lack the same conviction to enable him to tell Gertrude what he knows? Is it because he doesn't trust her, because he fears she would warn the king and frustrate Hamlet's action? Surely if there is one character (perhaps second to Horatio) who is likely to side with Hamlet if she knew the full story, it is Gertrude. She ought to be consumed with rage over the thought that her dear first husband was murdered. In the bedroom scene she appears to rue her incestuous relationship, in part because Hamlet Sr. was such a superior person. If her beloved first husband had been murdered, and if she were convinced of it, would she not become a willing co-conspirator with Hamlet? I think she would. But Shakespeare never imbues her with any independence, or gumption, or decisiveness, so maybe that is mere wishful thinking on my part. And, in any event, it is hard to imagine how Gertrude acting on her own might have put into play any action that would have changed the ultimate outcome.

Laertes, brash young bon vivant, acts as he does because of a total lack of evidence of the murder. What is the relationship between Laertes and Hamlet at the outset? Laertes and Hamlet first appear onstage together in act 1, scene 2, but do not exchange words. Advice by Laertes to Ophelia contains words of caution about Hamlet's motives in his overtures to Ophelia [1.3.5-44]. Partly those words are reasonable and deal with the relative social status of the two lovers ("His will is not his own. For he himself is subject to his birth"). But they also carry Laertes's suspicion that Hamlet would use his status and power purely for sexual pleasure ("Then weigh what loss may sustain if your chaste treasure open to his unmastered importunity"). These scenes do not portray a long-shared friendship. Indeed, Laertes would seem a good deal younger than Hamlet's thirty

PERCEPTION AT ELSINORE

years of age, so such a friendship is not expected. The relationship between the two seems more like that of a young courtier, aware of the realities of social gradations, who admires but is suspicious of the handsome and powerful prince. Laertes next appears in act 5, scene 5, charged up as a hothead—we know not why. He apparently has encouraged, or at least not discouraged, the populous clamor: “Laertes shall be king, Laertes king!” [4.5.111]. (What is going on here, by the way?) He demands to see his father, learns of his death, is seduced into conspiracy with the king, and witnesses his pitiful sister’s state of mind. No wonder he has built up a head of steam leading to the bloodshed of the final scene. But there is a turning point presented here: at the burial scene, where Hamlet professes his love for Ophelia and fights with Laertes, it is clear to Hamlet that Laertes believes Hamlet is responsible for both Polonius’s and Ophelia’s deaths. Does he seize the moment? Does he seek Laertes out to explain the whole story? No, he walks away: “Hear you, sir. What is the reason that you use me thus? I loved you ever. But it is no matter. Let Hercules himself do what he may, the cat will mew, and dog will have his day” [5.1.292–95]. Had Laertes been presented with the evidence in Hamlet’s possession, the outcome of the play surely would have changed. Laertes seems honorable and moral, albeit volatile. He could well have changed his loyalties. But Hamlet seems destined not to share his knowledge with much of anyone.

We cannot pass entirely by without noting that Shakespeare names this young man after the father of Odysseus in *The Odyssey*; he didn’t make up the name. There are intriguing parallels. Both Hamlet’s Laertes and Odysseus are away from home when significant things are happening there. Odysseus’s reconnection with his father is clouded by a made-up story; Hamlet’s reconnection with his Laertes is clouded by inadequate communication from Hamlet—inadequate disclosure of the available evidence—and by Claudius’s devious communications.

The relationship between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is very different from that with Laertes. These three are apparently of

similar age and were friends growing up. Claudius speaks of those two as “being of so young days brought up with him, and . . . so neighbored to his youth and haviour . . .” [2.2.11–12]. Hamlet himself refers to the two as “my two schoolfellows” [4.1.209]. The first face-to-face encounter among the three starts most light and friendly, as Hamlet exclaims: “My excellent good friends! How dost thou, Guildenstern? Ah, Rosencrantz! Good lads, how do you both?” [2.2.224–6]. [I just cannot resist a reference to the Kenneth Branagh production of the play, in which at this moment Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, hanging off either side of a steam locomotive, arrive to greet Hamlet with unrestrained enthusiasm and affection!] The parallel at this point to Hamlet’s relationship with Horatio seems strong: all of similar ages and all apparently boyhood friends. But the relationship quickly changes, as Hamlet correctly suspects that the two are spies from the king. We already know that they are on such a mission [2.2.1–18] and that they are toadies, as Guildenstern says to the king: “But we both obey, and here give up ourselves in the full bent to lay our service freely at your feet, to be commanded” [2.2.29–32]. It is not at all clear, however, why Hamlet knows this, but once again we in the audience understand that his knowledge, or intuition, is correct in this regard. One might wonder how things might have changed if Hamlet shared with them his knowledge of the murder, whether the boyhood friendship might have trumped their loyalty to the king. But this is idle speculation. After toying with them, and once he elicits a confession (Guildenstern: “My lord, we were sent for” [2.2.293]), the space between them grows, and there is probably nothing that could repair the breach among these boyhood friends. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the enemy. They don’t merit any action on Hamlet’s part to punish or remove them. He does not need to actively deter or sidetrack them. And yet, in an ironic twist, they become the recipients of Hamlet’s most cold-blooded action in the play. They are blithely sent off on the diplomatic ship to England to be slaughtered by the English king, pursuant to the Hamlet-

authored diplomatic missive: “without debatement further more or less, [the English king] should those bearers put to sudden death, not shriving time allowed” [5.2.45–7]. That is tough retribution for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who knew not that they were agents in Claudius’s plot to murder Hamlet—and presumably Hamlet understood that lack of active involvement. It is understandable why Hamlet sent them off to England, rather than disclosing the plot to them and saving their lives: by doing so he kept them away from Denmark, giving him time to return and orchestrate his revenge. Hamlet rests comfortably with their savage deaths: “Why, man, they did make love to this employment. They are not near my conscience. Their defeat does by their own insinuation grow” [5.2.57–9]. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the antithesis to Horatio. Although all of them were boyhood friends, there is probably nothing that could have changed Horatio’s loyalty to Hamlet, and there is probably nothing that could have turned Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into loyal allies of Hamlet.

Fortinbras, it seems to me, deserves at least a note. (An explanatory note here: Fortinbras is the young prince of Norway; Norway and Denmark are at the moment at peace with each other. Fortinbras has requested and received permission to cross Denmark to do battle with Poland, where mass Norwegian deaths are expected to occur.) There is no personal connection between Hamlet and Fortinbras. Hamlet meets Fortinbras’s captain, but not Fortinbras himself, in act 4, scene 4. And Hamlet is dead in act 5, scene 2, before Fortinbras arrives for his “*deus ex machina*” appearance. Fortinbras is outside the play but a looming presence. Hamlet broods on the difference between himself and Fortinbras. “How stand I, then, that have a father killed, a mother stained, excitements of my reason and my blood, and let all sleep, while to my shame I see the imminent death of twenty thousand men . . . go to their graves like beds. . . .” [4.4.57–63]. Hamlet believes that Fortinbras, were he in Hamlet’s position, would have taken immediate and precipitate action. One might

PERCEPTION AT ELSINORE

even speculate that, if Fortinbras in his present role had been put on notice of the evidence of Hamlet Sr.'s murder, he might have jumped at the opportunity to step in and destabilize the Danish situation on the excuse of punishing the wrongdoer, but with the intention of seizing power there.

Where, then, do we come out? Did Claudius murder Hamlet Sr.? Of course he did: he confessed the same to us—and to his God. Did Hamlet believe that Claudius murdered his father? Of course he did. Was that a reasonable belief? The Elizabethan culture in which Hamlet appears onstage accepted without doubt that spirits—or specters or ghosts—were real enough. The accepted wisdom about those spirits, however, was not in agreement, as to whether those spirits were, on the one hand, the souls of departed human beings, or, on the other hand, good angels or evil devils. This ambiguity is recognized by Shakespeare, and by Hamlet: “The spirit that I have seen may be the devil, and the devil hath power t’ assume a pleasing shape. . . .” If the ghost were the devil, Hamlet should have been skeptical about the evidence presented. But with the corroboration of the reaction of Claudius to the play-within-a-play, weak as it seems to me, Hamlet no longer dwells on the issue, and he is convinced of the genuineness of the ghost and the strength of the damning evidence. The die is cast.

The relationship of each of the other characters to Hamlet is affected by the amount of the evidence of the murder presented to them and the timing of that presentation. And it is interesting to speculate on how those relationships would have changed with more of such evidence. Horatio learns at some point everything and remains uncompromisingly loyal to Hamlet. Gertrude gets some inkling of the magnitude of the crime, and apparently changes her attitude and behavior and shifts her loyalties to her son. Laertes is a hothead, and the difference in personalities seems to prevent the passage of any useful information from Hamlet to him. Laertes is sure he knows all the answers and is too prone to believe the

PERCEPTION AT ELSINORE

king. Hamlet, on the other hand, is too hesitant to try to win him over. Laertes is highly principled and moral, and surely could have become an ally if only he knew the facts. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were doomed from the beginning. They were under the control of the king; Hamlet knew it, and there was no chance he would risk sharing any information with them. And there is probably little chance that they would risk their position within the court anyway.

So we could speculate about what might have been, had Shakespeare presented the evidence differently. But of course that would be mere idle speculation.

This paper was written for the
Chicago Literary Club
and read before the Club on
Monday evening, the Twentieth of February,
Two Thousand and Seventeen.
This edition of two hundred fifty copies
was printed for the Club in the month of
May, Two Thousand and Twenty.

Printed in the United States of America



