



September 1982

Henry James's Hamlets: "A Free Rearrangement"

Adeline R. Tintner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 18, no.3, September 1982, p.168-182

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Henry James's Hamlets: "A Free Rearrangement"

by ADELINE R. TINTNER

"I take liberties with the greatest"

Henry James to Mrs. Cadwalader Jones, 1902

HENRY JAMES all his life felt compelled to redo those classics of literature he had known from boyhood—to rewrite them his own way and to encourage the reader to recognize in his story the models behind them. To ignite this "torch of analogy," as he called it, he looked to Shakespeare's plays most often, with Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine* as a runner-up. Although James enfolded six Shakespearean plays within his fiction early and late in his career,¹ it was only *Hamlet* which he reworked as many as three times in all stages of his life—early, middle and late. The play appears first in "Master Eustace," in 1871, a second time in *The Princess Casamassima*, in 1886, and for the last time in his unfinished novel, *The Ivory Tower*, in 1914–1917. To demonstrate the differences in the way James rehandled *Hamlet* is the object of this study.

I

"Master Eustace": "I Am Like Hamlet"

"MASTER EUSTACE" (1871) is the first attempt by Henry James to rewrite *Hamlet*, ingeniously modified by the conceit of making Hamlet the bastard of Claudius and Gertrude. His Hamlet is a man of action, who plans to shoot his presumed step-father. Learning that he is the latter's illegitimate son, he turns the gun against himself but fails in his attempt at suicide. James has further simplified the plot of *Hamlet*. His cast is limited to Mrs. Garnyer or Gertrude, Eustace or Hamlet and Mr. Cope or Claudius—the mother, the son and the second husband who is Hamlet's real father.

One can imagine that when James reviewed Carlyle's translation of

1. James redid *The Merchant of Venice* in "Guest's Confession" (1872), *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra* in "Eugene Pickering" (1874), *As You Like It* in "The Papers" (1903) and *King Lear* in *The Outcry* (1911). See my "James's 'King Lear': 'The Outcry' and the Art Drain," *A. B. Bookman's Weekly*, February 4, 1980, pp. 797–828; "The Papers": Henry James Redoes *As You Like It*," *Studies in Short Fiction* (Spring 1980); "Henry James's Shakespearean Burlesque," *A. B. Bookman's Weekly* (March 29, 1982).

Wilhelm Meister in the *North American Review* (July 1865) he was reminded of Goethe's idiosyncratic reinterpretation of *Hamlet*. (Joyce was to give his own in *Ulysses*.) In this first reworking of *Hamlet*, James, despite his variations on the basic theme, sticks quite closely to the underlying armature. The following analysis should enable the reader to see in detail how James incorporates so many Shakespearean fragments into his own version. His later and more mature reworkings of the Shakespearean matter show a freer, more subtle and more generalized attitude to the source. But in the earliest attempts to do his own Shakespearean thing there is frequently a one-to-one correspondence between the language and figures of Shakespeare's play and his own. Undoubtedly James viewed it as a game he wished the reader to engage in with him, which, in the late redoinings, disappears. It is rather the remembered poetic identity of the Shakespearean model which he brings into his later fiction and beckons the reader to acknowledge with him.

In "Master Eustace" the hero baldly states he is "like Hamlet"² so that we cannot miss the point. Resemblances to the royal Dane are inserted to show how Eustace exhibits "a kind of triumphant and transfigured egotism" (350). The first long passage which reveals the Hamlet matter is in the section in which Eustace's personality and character are described by the woman narrator of the tale, who calls herself his Yorick, "I was the prince's jester" (351). "He expressed his passions—expressed them only too loudly; you received ample notice of his revenges" (352). In the passages that follow, the tack Hamlet takes to the events in his life is transposed to Eustace. He engaged in "intense meditations" and his conversation "was altogether about himself—his ambitions, his ailments, his dreams, his opinions, his intentions" (352). This resumes the famous monologues of Hamlet without too much detail, since they are part of all our literary memories. It includes the gist of Hamlet's speech to Ophelia when feigning madness, "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in."³ Hamlet may disguise his true character but Eustace has been revealed to the reader.

The actual situation in "Master Eustace," the drama among the three figures—mother, illegitimate son and second husband—requires that the *Hamlet* material should be delayed until the third section. Only when Polonius summons Hamlet to his mother's closet are we at the center of the drama which interested the young American writer. Eustace has a tutor modeled on Polonius (bespectacled and foolish), but until the confrontation between the jealous son and the remarried mother, the paral-

2. *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, II (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1962), 363. Future references to this volume indicated by page number.

3. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Cambridge Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), Act 3, scene 1, line 127). Future references indicated by act, scene and line.

els are not made explicit. Eustace has gone away to school upon the advice of Mr. Cope, his presumed stepfather, who, acting as the mother's mentor, felt that "letting him go . . . will make a man of him" (355). In this he differs from Claudius who before the play-within-the-play is staged, wishes, as does Gertrude, that Hamlet remain at home and play the prince and heir apparent, a royal role which Eustace has also assumed, encouraged by his mother: "No wonder Master Eustace carried himself like an heir-apparent!" the narrator comments (349).

Even before the more recognizable *Hamlet* situations occur, images reworked from *Hamlet* are inserted. After Eustace leaves for Paris his mother "wandered about like a churchyard-ghost keeping watch near a buried treasure" (356). This is obviously a version of Horatio's interchange with Hamlet's father's ghost, "O speak! / Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life / Extorted treasure in the womb of earth, / For which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death," (I, i, 135). The fact that Mr. Cope is deaf may also remind the reader that the murder of Hamlet Senior by Claudius was done by pouring poison in his ear. Cope's deafness functioning as symbol points to *Hamlet*.

Finally, after a strong build-up depending upon *Hamlet's* third act, Eustace compares himself to the Prince of Denmark. "I knew that my mother only wanted a chance to forget me and console herself, as they say in France. Demonstrative mothers always do. I am like Hamlet—I don't approve of mothers consoling themselves" (363). It is section five of the story which constitutes itself a little *Hamlet à la Henry James*, for it demonstrates how James puts the Shakespearean matter directly into the dramatic center of his story.

Section four had been filled with the suggestion revealed at the end, that Mr. Cope is the father of Eustace, which Mrs. Garnyer is keeping a secret but which the narrator is beginning to penetrate. It is also at the end of this section that Eustace declares his resemblance to Hamlet, and intimates that if Mr. Cope proves emotionally important to his mother, his role as Hamlet may result in a tragedy like *Hamlet*.

This is, of course, what actually happens, with James's significant changes. The narrator breaks the news of the marriage to the returning son while the couple are on their wedding trip, and the fifth section ends with a dramatic encounter between mother and son. The mother feels her son has killed her with a simulated blow. In the final section of the story the encounter is between the real father and his bastard son. After Eustace's attempted suicide by a pistol shot, the noise of which kills his mother, the father tells the son who he really is.

Most of the material from Shakespeare's play has been inserted into this dramatic finale of the story to lay final stress on the analogy. When Eustace learns of his mother's remarriage there "was something almost insane in his resentment; he seemed absolutely rabid." "Married. . . without shame?" is an echo of Hamlet's speech to his mother in her

closet, "O shame! where is thy blush?" (III, iv, 82). His mother's response to Eustace echoes Gertrude's response to Hamlet. After Eustace says, "You are no mother of mine" she groans: "He's killing me—he's killing me" (369). We are reminded of the gradually repeated replies of Gertrude to her son's blasts: "O, speak to me no more! / These words like daggers enter in mine ears. / No more, sweet Hamlet!" (III, iv, 94-96), and later, Gertrude's line, "O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain" reappears in Mrs. Garnyer's line, "My heart's broken; it will never be of any use again" (370).

Before the final dénouement, however, the exchange between Eustace and his mother condenses Hamlet's complaints to Gertrude. The haste of the marriage, like Gertrude's, is also admitted by Mrs. Garnyer. "I seem to have been hasty" (369). The word "cope" in the plays of Shakespeare has a meaning which would make Mr. Cope's name in James's story indicative of his function. He presumably copulated with Mrs. Garnyer, producing their bastard, Eustace. In *Othello* "cope" has the meaning of copulation. Iago says to Othello, when making him believe that Cassio has been sleeping with Desdemona, "Where, how, how oft, how long ago, and when / He hath, and is again to cope your wife" (IV, i, 86-87). James knew *Othello* well (he quotes from it in *Still Waters*, his one act play written at the same time as this story). In addition there is also implied the meaning as we use it—to come to grips with something—consistent with Cope's and Claudius's ability to deal with reality.

Mr. Cope's character is based on a rationalist interpretation of Claudius, who can be made to appear concerned about Hamlet and anxious for peace in the household. As the terrors begin to pile up, Claudius can be seen to act judiciously. At least he attempts to "cope" with all the disasters that now are on his head, and his statement that "The queen his mother lives almost by his looks" accurately describes Mrs. Garnyer's obsession with her son. Claudius's behavior following Hamlet's trip to England, especially in regard to Laertes, may have established the kind of man Mr. Cope is supposed to be.

Even though the entire matter of Ophelia and Laertes has been omitted in James's version, the final paragraph of his story includes an echo of the graveyard scene from Act V of *Hamlet*. After Laertes and Hamlet both leap into Ophelia's grave, Hamlet suggests that they both be buried with her, "Be buried quick with her, and so will I" (V, i, 302). Speaking of the two men, father and bastard son, the narrator in James's story says, "They were never reconciled. The trench had been dug too deep. Even the poor lady buried there didn't avail to fill it up" (373).

In addition to these important analogues, other elements from the language of *Hamlet* are transposed and transformed. In the last scene the queen wants to take care of Hamlet after his first fencing bout: "Here, Hamlet, take my napkin, wipe thy brows" (V, ii, 299); "Come,

let me wipe thy face" (V, ii, 305). In "Master Eustace" Mrs. Garnyer says to Mr. Cope, "He's ill, he's mad. . . . Take his hand in yours—look at him, soothe him, cure him. It's the hot weather. . . . Let him feel your touch!" (369). The American summer heat provides the perspiration that the fencing bout does in *Hamlet*. Now it is Mr. Cope who sweats. He "had risen to his feet, passing his handkerchief over his forehead, on which the perspiration stood in great drops." "Hypocrite!" Eustace says, transposing Hamlet's line from his first and important confrontation with his adulterous mother. "Such an act," Hamlet had called Gertrude's remarriage, "That blurs the grace and blush of modesty, / Calls virtue hypocrite" (III, iv, 40). The repetition of "blush" later in the act may account for all the blushing done by Mrs. Garnyer when Mr. Cope is mentioned.

In the long typical Hamletesque monologue with which Eustace greeted the news of his mother's marriage, material has been used which is common to *Hamlet*. Eustace said, "Married . . . without notice—without shame!" ("Shame" occurs eight times in *Hamlet*.) The element of haste, often repeated in *Hamlet*, is also apparent. "She was calm enough—that she couldn't wait for her son?" (366) reflects the original, "That it should come to this! / But two months dead! Nay, not so much, not two" (I, ii, 137).

Like Hamlet, Eustace had "personal distinction" and "he admitted the corresponding obligation of being clever and brilliant." Also, "Eustace had an unsatiable appetite for stories, though he was one of the coolest and most merciless of critics" (345), a reminder of Hamlet's incisive and relentless criticism of the theatre of his day (III, ii). Eustace's "wits are so quick and his imagination so lively" that he necessarily recalls the Dane who at times "waxes desperate with imagination" (I, iv, 87).

There are two figurative references to ghosts in the story; one of them includes a phrase from the "to-be-or-not-to-be" soliloquy: "When we have shuffl'd off this mortal coil" (III, i, 67). The lines from "Master Eustace" read, "It was to be hoped that no adventurous ghost of those shuffled-off passions would climb upward to the light" (353).

It is equally interesting that as the story-telling old-maid finishes her account of a modern *Hamlet*, we hear echoes from the speech of the English Ambassador who is a character outside the main drama at the end of *Hamlet*. After the general slaughter, coming on the piled up corpses, he says laconically, "The sight is dismal" (V, ii, 379). James's narrator who recounts the old maid's tale also says at the end, "What a dismal tale!" (373).

The narrator's interpretation of the end of the drama and his authorial attitude to the characters suggest two things. The first is that James has replaced the play-within-the-play from *Hamlet* with the story-within-the-story. The second is that James, with the example of Goethe

before him in *his* character of Wilhelm Meister, has also shown how the characters in *Hamlet*, as in this presumed real life Hamlet story, can be “disposed of.” The secondary narrator confesses, “I am rather at a loss how to dispose of our friend Eustace. I don’t see how the two could very well shake hands—nor yet how they couldn’t.” The primary narrator answers, knowing the facts, “They did once—and but once. . . . They were never reconciled. . . . Yet the son was forgiven—the father never!” (373). The concluding paragraph expresses the freedom with which James as well as Goethe felt an author can retaylor the Shakespearean dramas.

James knew Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* well. He had read Goethe before he went to Europe, and had written “Travelling Companions” (the very title which is derived from a phrase in Goethe’s travel book), under the influence of Goethe’s *Italienische Reise*. We have mentioned that he had also written a few years before a review of Carlyle’s translation of *Wilhelm Meister*⁴ from which he undoubtedly received the idea of the freedom the German author felt towards Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. James must have from this point on figured out what he would retain of the story, what he would throw overboard and the means by which he could attach it to a modern legend, going way beyond the limits that Goethe had permitted himself in *Wilhelm Meister*.

In his novel Goethe had his character Wilhelm decide that there are two classes of objects in *Hamlet*. The first is composed of relations that in no way should be interfered with and that cannot be bettered: “The first are the grand internal relations of the persons and events, the powerful effects which arise from the characters and proceedings of the main figures: these, I hold, are individually excellent, and the order in which they are presented cannot be improved. No kind of interference must be suffered to destroy them. . . .” He then discusses the second class of objects: “I allude to the external relations of the persons, whereby they are brought from place to place, or combined in various ways by certain accidental incidents,” which he thinks “injure exceedingly the unity” of the play, but he adds that “these errors . . . must not be removed until we have built a firm wall in their stead.” With that in mind Wilhelm gets rid of the Wittenberg episode in *Hamlet* so that the spectator “will not be required to *fancy* anything; the rest he will *see*.”⁵ The group of actors begins to whittle away at the cast of characters, keeping only the essential ones. The “grand internal relations” are not altered.

Another perhaps minor point relates *Wilhelm Meister* to “Master Eustace” via the title of James’s story. Wilhelm Meister as a form of

4. Henry James, *Literary Reviews and Essays*, ed. Albert Mordell (New York: Twayne, 1957), pp. 267–72. (Review of *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship and Travels, From the German of Goethe*, by Thomas Carlyle. 2 v. [Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1865].)

5. Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, tr. Thomas Carlyle (New York: Collier’s, 1962), pp. 279–80.

address can be anglicised to Master William. In James's story William has been changed to Eustace, making it Master Eustace. Precedents for this transformation are found in James's first story, "A Tragedy of Error," an obvious change from *The Comedy of Errors*, and in "A Light Man," changed from Browning's "A Light Woman."

Other indices of personal changes in James's *Hamlet* can be found in Eustace's statement, "You see an angry man, an outraged man, but a man, mind you! He means to act as one" (367). He rages and takes out his pistols. His Hamlet decides to act, but when he is told he is his enemy's, his stepfather's child, his rage turns from his target to himself. This self destruction resulted when Eustace was deprived of revenge against his object.

Eustace's fixation on his presumed real father, Mr. Garnyer, parallels Hamlet's. The portrait of his father which Hamlet holds up to show his mother how superior her first husband was to Claudius reappears transfigured. Whereas Hamlet holds out an actual miniature, "Look here, upon this picture, and on this, / The counterfeit presentment of two brothers. / See, what a grace was seated on this brow" (III, iv, 53-56), the portrait Eustace had of his presumed father was one created by his own imagination: "He had formed a mental image of the late Mr. Garnyer which I am afraid hardly tallied at all points with the original. The boy knew that he had been man of pleasure, and he had painted his portrait in ideal hues" (353).

Other Shakespearean writings lend their language to the richness of the Shakespearean sources. The old maid narrator realized that the spoiling of Eustace by his mother will end up by his turning some day "in his passionate vanity" to "rend the gentle creature who had fed it with the delusive wine of her love. And yet he had a *better* angel as well as a *worse*, and it was a marvel to see how this superior spirit (a sort of human conscience) tussled with the *fiend* and . . . returned . . . to the onset" (351) [my italics]. This figure is clearly drawn from Sonnet 144 by Shakespeare. "Two loves I have of comfort and despair, / Which like two spirits do suggest me still: / The *better angel* is a man right fair, / The *worser* spirit a woman colour'd ill. . . . And whether that my angel be turn'd *fiend* / Suspect I may, yet not directly tell" [my italics].

In "Master Eustace" James begins that exploration of the primary relations among the characters in Shakespeare which he was to continue later. He had kept intact the main theme of Hamlet's incestuous relation to his mother and his jealousy of her new husband. But he changed the actual kinship between his Claudius and his Hamlet. James, with the precedent of Goethe before him, makes the audacious move of making Hamlet Claudius's bastard, an interpretation not dared even by Goethe.

II

Hamlet in Middle James: "A Play-within-the-Play"

IN MIDDLE James the figure of Hamlet and the example of the Shakespearean drama continues, blended now with the lessons of Balzac. For Hyacinth's drama in *The Princess Casamassima* James has merged the example of the play-within-the-play from *Hamlet* with the many versions of the play within the box from *La Comédie Humaine*. Gone are the recognizable although transformed quotations from *Hamlet*.

James makes a surprising claim in the preface to the novel for the consciousness of Hyacinth Robinson, linking it to Hamlet's. His sensitive hero is also one of those figures who are "finely aware—as Hamlet and Lear, say, are finely aware" and James wanted Hyacinth, like Hamlet, to "note as many things and vibrate to as many occasions as I might venture to make him."⁶ Like the "great chroniclers" who have "always . . . placed a mind of some sort . . . in possession of the general adventure,"⁷ James wished to make Hyacinth's experience meaningful because of a "prodigious consciousness," like Hamlet's which, as he continued in the next preface, was "the most capacious, . . . the moral presence the most asserted, in the whole range of fiction."⁸ The two chapters which take us to the theatre with Hyacinth conceal the play-within-the-play from *Hamlet*. This complex structure, exhibiting Hamlet as playwright, manager, actor and critic must have intrigued James, who had his own ambitions as critic and playwright. Outside of Hyacinth's consciousness, we now find only technical strategies from *Hamlet*.

Even as a small boy James had been fascinated by the play scene in *Hamlet*. When he was twelve, "the finest composition in the world" had been Maclise's painting (see fig.) exhibited in London in the Duke of Wellington's bequest to the British nation. "I could never have enough of Maclise's Play-scene in Hamlet," James wrote in his autobiography.⁹ The performance of *The Pearl of Paraguay* in *The Princess Casamassima* serves the same end for James as the play within *Hamlet* does for Shakespeare. As in *Hamlet* all the characters involved are watching a performance of an entertainment placed in a foreign land. Hyacinth underlines for us the connection with Shakespeare when sitting in the Princess's box: "so pleasant was it to be enthroned with fine ladies in a dusky, spacious receptacle which framed the bright picture of

6. Henry James, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Scribner's, 1934), p. 62.

7. *The Art of the Novel*, p. 67.

8. *The Art of the Novel*, p. 90.

9. Henry James, *Autobiography* (New York: Criterion, 1956), p. 178.

Tintner: Henry James's Hamlets: "A Free Rearrangement"



Daniel Maclise (1806–1870). *Hamlet*, Act III, scene 2, The Play Scene. The Tate Gallery, London.

the stage and made one's own situation seem *a play within the play*""¹⁰ [italics mine].

Like Hamlet's play-within-the-play, the play within the novel reenacts for our participants a parallel drama which provides an analogy for their own life situation. In the case of *Hamlet*, of course, the hero stages the play "Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King." In *The Princess Casamassima*, James stages *The Pearl of Paraguay* to rehearse Christina's history so as to remind the attentive reader that she has already been responsible for the death of one promising young man, Roderick Hudson. For "the virtuous hero" who is "hurled over the precipice" in the play can only be a reference to Roderick Hudson, who fell to his death from a precipice as a direct result of his love for the Princess, then Christina Light. We are also given a prefiguration by the "pistol shots" of Christina's second piece of destruction: Hyacinth's suicide (the direct result of the dilemma she has placed him in).

James has thus extended Shakespeare's use of the play-within-the-play in *Hamlet*. For *The Pearl of Paraguay* contains both a repetition of Roderick's fatal fall, something that has already taken place, as Hamlet's father's murder has already taken place, and a prefiguration of Hyacinth's death, something which has not yet taken place, but which is linked with Roderick's death as attributable to the Princess's influence. The prepared reader having recognized the death of Roderick can anticipate by analogy the death of Hyacinth. The play within the novel does not merely reenact an already accomplished act of violence (as in *Hamlet*): it predicts a future one. Actually, the germ of prefiguration did already exist in *Hamlet*. There seems to be no reason for Hamlet to ask Polonius whether he hadn't himself acted in his university days and for Polonius to answer that he had played Julius Caesar, who was killed by Brutus, unless Shakespeare is preparing us for Polonius's death. However, since it is placed before the play scene and is not part of the play-within-the-play, the idea of putting both the recapitulation of an act of violence already committed and the prefiguration of a violent death in the near future in the play-within-the-play seems to be original with James.

These warning signals to the reader are reflected back from the play on the stage to the play that takes place in the Princess's box, which Hyacinth had felt made his own situation "seem a play-within-the-play" (C 148). On the stage is a correlative of the Princess's past and future influence. In the box is staged a microcosm of what will develop in the novel, all presented in the "talk" between Hyacinth and the Princess. In his ear "the very punctuation of her sentences were the revelation of what he supposed to be society—the very society to the destruction of which he was dedicated" (C 153). The heart of Hyacinth's con-

10. Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima* (New York: Harper, Perennial Classic, 1968), p. 148.

flict is here prefigured. Even his successor, Paul Muniment, is introduced into the conversation, and when Christina wants to know who he is, Madame Grandoni immediately knows what she is up to.

So actually James has gone further than *Hamlet*. He has given us two plays: one, the play within the novel, and the other, the "play" in the box, which is seen silhouetted against the play on the stage. Hyacinth in his box stops watching the play on the stage to watch the play in the box, and he divides his time, during the first act, to getting used to his companions "to see how harmless they were" and looking at Millicent who also "was losing the play, thanks to her so keeping her eyes on her friend from Lomax Place" (C 148). Technically James has squeezed as much as he can from the play-within-the-play structure without forcing it into an unnatural position vis-a-vis the story's progress. He has eased it into the fabric of the novel by yoking it to the play within the box, something merely suggested in the by-play in *Hamlet* among Ophelia, Hamlet and Gertrude as *The Mousetrap* proceeds.

The association between Hyacinth and Hamlet stressed twice in the Prefaces leads us to believe that Hamlet's influence has not disappeared. The play-within-the-play with its recapitulation of the violence of *The Mousetrap* is all that really remains, and *Hamlet* will not emerge again in James's work until one of his last unfinished novels.

III

"A Sort of 'Happy Hamlet' "

MORE THAN half way through what James had already written of *The Ivory Tower*, after Betterman has died and Gray Fielder has inherited his fortune, the following passage occurs in which Horton Vint gives his impression of Gray:

[He] couldn't not have taken in the highly quickened state of the young black-clad figure so presented, even though soon and unmistakably invited to note that his own visit and his own presence had much to do with the quickening. Gray was in complete mourning, which had the effect of making his face show pale, as compared with old aspects of it remembered by his friend—who was, it may be mentioned, afterwards to describe him to Cissy Foy as looking, in the conditions, these including the air of the big bedimmed palace room, for all the world like a sort of "happy Hamlet."¹¹

The passage reads like a description of a stage-set for *Hamlet*. The black-clothed Prince of Denmark, pale with anxiety, seems to be walking across a gloomy stage erected in the imagination of Horty Vint who conveys his impressions of Gray-as-Hamlet to Cissy. So we know that the two chief protagonists in Gray's new life-drama see him as Hamlet,

11. Henry James, *The Ivory Tower* (New York: Scribner's, 1917), p. 191. Future references indicated by T plus page number.

and we may surmise that to these impoverished false friends anyone who inherits a fortune must be "happy."

Gray will not be a "happy Hamlet" (an obvious contradiction in terms) for long, for nothing in his old experience can help him with his new. But at this moment he is conscious of a "fantastic freedom . . . in which nothing seemed to depend on him or to have any time so depended" (T 109). At this point, unlike Hamlet, he enjoys *not* being responsible, *not* having to take steps to avenge a father, *not* to be liable for anything. That condition will soon change.

The young expatriated American returns to his native country as the heir apparent of the dying financier, Mr. Betterman, his half-uncle and now his surrogate father. The recognition of the corrupt society in which he finds himself at Newport and "the black and merciless things that are behind the great possessions" (T 295) soon will present the mourning hero with intolerable problems, the solution of which, like Hamlet, he will postpone.

Once the reader has been alerted to the fact that in the "young black-clad figure" Horton had seen a "happy Hamlet," the Hamlet relation begins to become more definitely contoured. Mr. Betterman has seen him as a good influence on the money-obsessed group of which he is a member. He has seen him as the "out-and-out non-producer." In his *Notes* for the novel James had declared that Gray is to be made aware that his resources "are so dishonoured and stained and blackened at their very roots, that it seems . . . that they carry their curse with them" (T 309). The "Young Man works off the distaste, his distaste for the ugliness of his inheritance" (T 341). Hamlet too had had a distaste for his inherited task, namely, revenge of his father's murder.

James continues in the *Notes* to enumerate certain characteristics of Gray which are Hamletesque. His "enlarged vision of the money world . . . promotes infinite reflection." As Hamlet is made to speculate about the rotten mess in Denmark, so the rotten financial world in America "makes a hundred queer and ugly things . . . glare at him right and left" (T 306). Once Gray gets the idea, or the "Discovery," as James calls it, of Horton's theft of his own fortune, he engages in a "process of confrontation, reflection, and resolution."

Yet James's Hamlet differs from Shakespeare's Hamlet because Gray retreats into his ivory tower, rather than into failed revenge. He spares Horton. When in the *Notes* James writes, "It isn't *centrally* a drama of fools or vulgarians; it's only circumferentially and surroundedly so" (T 340), one harks back to his *Princess Casamassima* preface: "Hamlet and Lear are surrounded, amid their complications, by the stupid and the blind, who minister in all sorts of ways to their recorded fate."¹²

Horatio is perhaps the model for Horton who reverses Hamlet's

12. *The Art of the Novel*, p. 62.

speech, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy," by saying, it is "well worth one's looking into—even if it proves, by its perversity or its folly, something of a trial to one's practical philosophy" (T 200).

The background for the tragedy of Hamlet involving his mother's incestuous relation with her second husband, the King's brother, is converted and redone in the background. Gray's mother has had a bad relation to her half-brother, Betterman, who was alienated both by her first marriage and her second marriage to a Britisher, Mr. Northover. The latter functions as Hamlet's father's ghost in his connection with Cissy Foy which is important as a link to Gray. Horton says, "what would truly alienate . . . would be his own exposure to comparison with the memory of a rocco Briton he had no arms to combat," thus admitting his "jealousy of the queer Northover ghost" (T 166). In this figure there is the faint shadow of the opening scene in *Hamlet* where the ghost is attacked by Marcellus's sword. It is interesting in the light of James's Preface to *The Princess* that whenever the *Hamlet* element intrudes what usually follows is a mention of consciousness, a word appearing at least eight times in the three completed books of *The Ivory Tower*.

But the characteristic that both Hamlet and Gray share is their indecision. When asked to open Mr. Gaw's letter, Gray answers, "I don't think I want to decide." He suspects, correctly, that it contains an attack on the character of his uncle. Horton asks, "Do you mind my asking . . . what deters you from action—and by action I mean opening your letter . . . ?" (T 226). Gray answers that he would be exposed to "an odious experience," and so rejects an active relation to that letter. Horton, the practical man, suggests destroying it. Gray responds, "that's just what I want you to help me to . . . after a little, to decide for" (T 227), but, he adds, "I shall have to take a certain time." Horty concludes that "what you really want of me . . . is to help you to fidget and fumble—or in other words to prolong the most absurd situation" (T 228).

The conversation between this delaying Hamlet and his Horatio-like friend extends to the accusation by Horton that Gray is "insanely romantic," a rewording of the madness of Hamlet and his romantic attitudes to vengeance. Gray's rejoinder is, "Romantic—yes, . . . but oh, but *oh*, so systematically!" This gives Horton the opportunity of telling Gray and the reader, "It's your system that's exactly your madness" (T 232), which recalls the famous tag that there is a method in Hamlet's madness.

The Polonius aspects of Horton have been transferred to Mr. Gaw, for Rosanna's horrible old father had been inadvertently killed because Gray had told him that Betterman had improved in health. So had Polonius too been killed inadvertently and wastefully by Hamlet.

When we are first introduced to young Gray he is involved in the

problem of choice. It could be expressed as, "To stay in Europe or not to stay in Europe? That is the question." That choice is presented to the young boy of fourteen who is so disturbed by it that Rosanna has to make it for him. She decides that he is to stay in Europe and not be raised in the world of American finance. Rosanna now feels she has a responsibility to him for having made that choice for him.

Certain patterns are repeated. Gray's adolescent unease at having that problem of decision is echoed in the great choice of his adult life—what to do with his fortune. Since we have nothing but a sentence in the *Notes* to indicate what this choice was, we cannot judge how much of *Hamlet* would have gone into the rest of the book. We might say with James (when he estimated the influence Campbell's monograph on Coleridge had had on his own story, "The Coxon Fund") that the *Hamlet* content in *The Ivory Tower* is "no more than a dim reflexion and above all a free rearrangement."¹³ Compared to the detailed borrowing in "Master Eustace," the freedom of the "rearrangement" is now striking, although the Shakespearean elements can be excavated.

Gray's coming back after a long absence in Europe corresponds to Hamlet's arrival back in court from Wittenberg for his father's funeral, and so both young heirs apparent wear black. Certain analogues are repeated as if to stress the resemblance between the young American heir and the royal heir of Shakespeare's play. Horton tells Gray, now he has inherited the Betterman millions, "that people wanting to help you will spring up round you like mushrooms, and that you'll be able to pick and choose as even a king on his throne can't" (T 198), and goes on to echo Ophelia's speech, "The glass of fashion . . .," characterizing Hamlet as a favored man: "Endowed with every advantage, personal, physical, material, moral, in other words, brilliantly clever, inordinately rich, strikingly handsome and incredibly good, your state yet insists on being such as to nip in the bud the hardy flower of envy" (T 200). The last figure recalls the figure "Your sum of parts / Did not altogether pluck such envy from him," from *Hamlet* (IV, vii, 75). When Gray says to Rosanna, "When you talk of my fate, you freeze the current of my blood," he is enfolding in his sentence a phrase straight from *Hamlet*: "I could a tale unfold whose lightest words would . . . freeze thy young blood" (I, v, 16).

The use in the *Notes* of the word "joint" (which seems to relate to the jointed sections of the ivory tower itself) also suggests, in its application to the role Gray is to play in his group, the famous quotation from *Hamlet*: "The time is out of joint;—O curséd spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!" (I, v, 189–190). Betterman had instinctively felt that Gray was born "to set" the corrupt Newport society "right!"

Gray's heir apparent role, his mourning garments, his delay in taking

13. *The Art of the Novel*, p. 229.

action, his indecision and his desire to avoid responsibility clearly recall Shakespeare's Hamlet. "The extent, Vinty, to which I think I must just *like* to drift!" (T 220) is just one of many sentences which display Gray's typically Hamletesque tendency to avoid action. These parallels are so striking that they convince me that James was redoing an aspect of *Hamlet* in *The Ivory Tower*. Indeed, Stephen Spender had drawn the same conclusion based only on the "happy Hamlet" quotation and on the graveyard figure of speech in James's novel reminiscent of the Laertes-Hamlet confrontation over the newly dug grave of Ophelia. "I think there is no doubt that James was trying to 'do' Hamlet in modern dress."¹⁴

New York City

14. Stephen Spender, *The Destructive Element* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1936), p. 100.