

*Shakespeare  
in Performance*

# Hamlet

ANTHONY B. DAWSON

Manchester  
University Press

Manchester and New York

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Published by Manchester University Press  
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9NR, UK  
and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA  
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

Distributed exclusively in the USA by  
Palgrave, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010, USA

Distributed exclusively in Canada by  
UBC Press, University of British Columbia, 2029 West Mall,  
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z2

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*  
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN: 0 7190 4625 4 paperback

ISBN 13: 978 0 7190 4625 4

First published 1995 by Manchester University Press

First paperback edition published 1997 by Manchester University Press

First digital, on-demand edition produced by Lightning Source 2007

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production. Of course Hall had meant to question Hamlet's apathy; but he had also clearly set out to castigate the oppressive 'Establishment'. In his statement, Hall is giving to Shakespeare the very authority and legitimacy that his production sought so deftly and successfully to interrogate in the realm of the political. Perhaps it was inevitable, but this *Hamlet* of the time was itself blinded by the time. Hall could not see how his version of Shakespeare was itself politically inflected, and in some crucial ways *part* of the status quo – since it upheld a vision of self and society that underlay the political arrangements Hall wanted to resist. There is a further irony. For how could Hall know that the lack of commitment that he both appealed to and deplored, along with his tendency to overload his critique with existentialist alienation ('we need to discover and understand the universe in anguish' – programme), would in a few short years seem well out of date, of the 1950s more than the 1960s? Ironically, that disillusion was about to find a way to make a mark politically – apathy was about to be transformed into activism, a shift that might itself have been registered by the very committed response on the part of the youth of the time to this crucial and contradictory production.

## CHAPTER VI

### Royal Shakespeare and Royal Court in 1980

#### The Prince and the Player

1980 saw the opening of two important productions of *Hamlet*, both of which announced themselves in different ways as representative of the new decade. In April came the more surprising and more radical of the two, featuring Jonathan Pryce and staged by Richard Eyre at a bastion of oppositional theatre, the Royal Court, while in the summer the RSC mounted their first production of the play since 1970, directed by John Barton and starring Michael Pennington, who had played Fortinbras to David Warner's Hamlet in the 1960s. Where the Royal Court version was political and critical, and centred its attention on the actor's body, Stratford's was metaphysical and speculative, concentrating on the blurred lines between the play-acted and the real.

Since Pennington's *Hamlet* was the first at Stratford in ten years, there was plenty of talk of its being a new *Hamlet* for the new decade – what would this 1980s Hamlet turn out to be like? But in interviews before the show opened, Pennington was at pains to shrug off this particular responsibility. The idea was to present a classic 'scholar Prince, rather than a redbrick, Yahoo Prince'; he saw Hamlet as a 'very conservative rebel' (interview with John Higgins, *Times*, 2 July). This deliberate turning away from timeliness may have been prompted partly by the response earlier in the year to Pryce's Royal Court Hamlet. As Robert Cushman wrote of Pryce in *The Observer* (6 April), 'for the first time since David Warner played the role 15 years ago, a generation has found and crowned its prince'. The differences between the two 1980 productions might stand as a warning against any facile, if tempting, generalizations about the relation of a particular interpretation to the culture from

which it emerges. That culture is far from simple or uniform, and particular productions are likely to respond to separate strands in a complicated network. If a version such as Hall's in 1965 manages to find a few of the most prominent and colourful strands, then it is likely to be hailed as peculiarly characteristic, even though it is of course highly selective in the ways it mediates the 'form and pressure' of its time. This becomes obvious if we look at the vivid contrasts between Barton's and Eyre's interpretations, each developed within the same sub-culture and mounted within a few months of each other.

They were of course presented in different theatres, and this certainly matters. The Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, the capital of the worldwide Shakespeare industry, has, despite the efforts of a string of directors to combat it, an atmosphere of worship. Shakespeare is its mission, and the place a focus of pilgrimage – even though by 1980 the tone had changed from 1948, when Dover Wilson gave his plea for Shakespearean and British moral leadership. Despite the attempts in the 1960s and 1970s to undermine the established iconography, Stratford still carried cultural weight. (Paradoxically, the fact that the RSC led the struggle against 'establishment Shakespeare' reinforced its own centrality.) That the emphasis of this 1980 *Hamlet* was to be on the power of theatre, and its Prince a scholar and a gentleman, might not surprise us in such a milieu. The Royal Court, on the other hand, had not come to its 'Royal' designation with quite the same authority, the name having been adopted by Maria Britton in 1871 as an attempt to upgrade the theatre's image and sell more tickets. Since the days of Shaw and Granville-Barker, the theatre had been associated with a taste for controversy and radical experiment. Neither 'Shakespeare' nor the classics generally had been in its repertoire, and the cultural establishment was as much its target as its support. Home base of the Angry Young Men in the 1950s, the Royal Court had been deeply associated with the revival of British theatre that began with the production of *Look Back in Anger*. Hence this theatre, even though it could hardly be regarded as fringe, was a surprising venue for a major production of *Hamlet*.

The souvenir programmes tell us something of the story – that of the RSC glossy and impressive, making a telling contrast with the Court's smaller and pulpier, but also more com-

bative, offering. The RSC cover shows a full-front chiaroscuro photograph of Pennington's face and upper body, handsome, sensitive, slightly pained, with an unbuttoned shirt, a dignified high forehead and a ring of slightly dishevelled hair. Its centre-fold features a long passage from Anne Barton's Introduction to the New Penguin edition of the play, just then about to appear, with a rehearsal photo of the play scene, and the phrase, 'actions that a man might play' in large type. Barton's essay stresses how '*Hamlet* as a whole is ... concerned to question and cross the boundaries' between 'dramatic representation' and 'life'. Hamlet himself, she claims, cherishes a private 'understanding of how art may acquire a temporary and unpredictable dominion over life'.<sup>1</sup> Her views presumably influenced her husband's decision to mould the production as he did, a fruitful example of academic and theatre worlds meeting not only in the seminar room or rehearsal hall but over the breakfast table. The Royal Court cover offers a Magritte-like photo of a dark young man in a suit with his back to the viewer, facing what seems to be a mirror that reproduces an identical image, doubling the view from the back instead of giving us the expected reflection of his face. On a shelf in front of him, between the two images, is an old edition of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. The picture has a vaguely 'thirties, east European air – Kafka caught in one of his own surreal frames. Inside, there is an essay (written by Rob Ritchie) on 'Hamletism,' developing the traditional picture of Hamlet as a figure of melancholia (hence the reference to Burton), isolated from his own cultural context and indeed from life itself, a victim of his own intellect. The argument runs that this romantic view of the character has produced an image of inertia deriving from a sense of alienated superiority. Rather coyly, the essay refuses to place itself in relation to the production, but the implication is clear: *this* version will not reproduce the same old image. Instead of giving us an idea of the direction the interpretation will take, as Anne Barton's thematic analysis does for the RSC, this piece merely clears the ground.

To see how the Bartons' ideas worked out in relation to both text and performance, let us glance at a moment when acting and the theatre's relation to personal reality take centre stage. The actors have arrived, greeted with enthusiasm by Hamlet and announced by Polonius in jester's cap and bells. Hamlet

asks the leading Player for a sample of his art, a speech from an obscure, highbrow play reminiscent of Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. In most productions, Hamlet's motivation is unclear, but Barton and Pennington wanted to link his request directly to his dilemma. The speech concerns a Greek hero, Pyrrhus, who hesitates before acting, but then *acts*, and a grieving wife and mother, Hecuba, who, unlike the soft and untrustworthy Gertrude, is willing to follow her dead husband to the underworld. As the Player describes the scene, Pyrrhus stands frozen above the prostrate Priam, his fell sword 'Which was declining on the milky head / Of reverent Priam' seeming to stick in the air. Thus Pyrrhus, 'like a neutral to his will and matter, / Did nothing' (II.ii.478-82). Pennington's Hamlet, intent on this theatrical representation of his own situation, 'audibly anticipated' the last two climactic words (Warren, 152; the promptbook confirms that the phrase was spoken by Hamlet alone). This bold move helped to establish that intimate and unpredictable bond between the theatre and life that was the main theme of the production. But the analogy between Pyrrhus and Hamlet, highlighted by Anne Barton in her programme note and much commented on by reviewers, was itself purchased at a certain price. It was constructed, not found in the text. For what has caused Pyrrhus's hesitation? Is it pangs of conscience, melancholy, intellectual doubt, a wide-ranging consciousness of the sort typically associated with Hamlet? In Barton's version, there was no clear cause or motivation – and so, as with Hamlet, a certain mystery prevailed over the scene ('Pyrrhus hesitates *strangely* before letting his sword fall' says Anne Barton in the programme (emphasis added)). However, in the text there is a very clear and simple explanation for Pyrrhus's 'delay': there has been a deafening noise as 'senseless Ilium ... with flaming top / Stoops to his base, and with a hideous crash / Takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear' (474-7). Although the collapse of Troy's walls draws off the murderous Greek's attention for an instant, he soon returns to his bloody task. But, wishing to emphasize the uncertainty of that crucial pause, Barton cut these explanatory lines and so propped up his reading.

There is nothing at all wrong with this procedure. As we have so often seen, the extreme length of *Hamlet* usually necessitates substantial performance cuts. Such cuts are rarely neutral, and, at moments like the one just described, can acquire special

significance. What is important for our purposes is that the constructed nature of the 'fit' be recognized – there are no 'innocent' interpretations, particularly of a text like *Hamlet*. Barton wanted a strong way to link theatre and life, and to emphasize the ambiguous relation between them, as not only a crucial thematic element but a dilemma for Hamlet as a character. The whole production was designed to bring this out.

In III.i, in a famous soliloquy, Hamlet faces life and death. 'To be or not to be,' however, is rendered ambiguous in a context that dislodges the foundations of being, where playing is as real as truth. To mark the ambiguity, Pennington's Hamlet seized a prop from the players' basket at the side of the stage and contemplated suicide with a dagger of lath. If we are accustomed to forgetting that Hamlet is fictional, accustomed to accepting the stage prop as real, this production refused its audience such comforts and forced a consciousness of the constructions by which such 'reality effects' are produced. While this can fascinate, it can also, and in the eyes of some critics did, fail to excite. For if we are acutely aware of Hamlet's fictional status, will we care enough about the dilemma he faces to share the pangs of conscience that can make cowards of us all? But then again, *should* we lose ourselves in the excitement of a simple, fast-paced drama? Doesn't *Hamlet* force uncertainty upon us? The play is full of interrogatives.

Take the issue of Hamlet's madness. Always a key issue in criticism, the extent and nature of his antic disposition have been endlessly debated. Some see a Hamlet who is clearly sane, occasionally unorthodox or impulsive perhaps, but always in control. Others see him losing his grip at key moments: with Ophelia, perhaps, or his mother, on the platform after the Ghost scene, or after the play. One virtue of Barton's production was that it kept the ambiguity always before us. There was no question about Pennington's play-acting near the start: he donned an appropriate costume – a beret slapped on his head, with a quill behind the ear and an inkhorn slung over his shoulder, and short, ballooning trousers (B. A. Young, *Financial Times*, 3 July 1980); with Polonius he indulged in a kind of friendly mockery. But at other times, especially with Ophelia in the nunnery scene, the 'performance' began to 'take hold of the performer' (Peter Jenkins, *Spectator*, 12 July 1980). To play perhaps *is* to be. The one mode infiltrates the other.



As the plot developed, his behaviour became more erratic: he went so far as to knock Ophelia down in the nunnery scene; later, he stabbed Polonius repeatedly in his mother's closet but then bid him a tender farewell. So, when he insisted to his mother that he was 'essentially ... not in madness / But mad in craft', it was unclear whether he was to be believed. Even at the end, when traditional Hamlets generally reassert their spiritual heroism, uncertainty hovered around Pennington's pained Prince. On the point of gaining his long-sought-for revenge, there was a hollowed-out moment when the act of killing the King, to which of course the whole plot has been moving, seemed exposed as a theatrical gesture – Hamlet rattling his sword at Claudius who contemptuously brushed it aside as an exercise in false heroics (*Jewish Chronicle*, 11 July).

Ralph Koltai's simple acting platform and stage props for the RSC matched Barton's conception by foregrounding the theatrical. The platform occupied only a part of the large, mostly empty stage; there were a few benches around the platform (sometimes used by 'offstage' actors) and various theatrical accoutrements, such as a thundersheet and costume racks, but there was no attempt to provide a 'set'. In such an atmosphere, the Players must necessarily loom large. 'Brief chronicles of the time' as well as purveyors of artifice, they were professionals in a world of amateurs. Barton treated them soberly. They played 'The Mousetrap' straight, as though they had taken Hamlet's advice to heart. The idea was to make them seem more substantial than Hamlet's dream-like problems, closer to some intrinsic 'reality' than the fictional world that they to some extent represent; this was to reverse the usual hierarchy in which 'reality' prevails over fiction. The arrival of the Players was low-key despite Polonius's comic announcement; they merely set their prop-basket down and moved to the sides. For the Pyrrhus speech the First Player moved to the platform and as he built the speech from softness to intensity, his fellow Players joined in; on 'anon the dreadful thunder / Doth rend the region', one rattled the thundersheet, another a drum, while a chorus of wailing arose to simulate the stricken Hecuba's 'instant burst of clamour'. The audience was to witness how performance is born, how the 'real' is not only represented but constructed. As he finished, the Player, in tears, deliberately held the mood until a sympathetic Polonius broke in

quietly with 'Pray you no more', a solicitous hand on his shoulder. At that, the actor 'smiled and switched off the performance to Polonius's laughing admiration' (Warren 152). This sequence, including Hamlet's echoing of Pyrrhus's suspended animation, marked most thoroughly the interpenetration of theatre and life that the production was designed to illustrate. Here was a patently fictional situation being gradually charged with life, and in the process linking to and illuminating a 'real' situation (that of Hamlet), which is itself fictional.

Hamlet himself begins the recitation, and to do so here he went to the players' prop-basket and took out a sword and cloak which then, together with a white mask, became markers of theatrical 'reality'. As he finished his bit, he threw down the sword and cloak. The Player advanced, knelt by the discarded props, and then used them in his performance, the sword first ('For lo, his sword ...'), then the cloak and mask for Hecuba ('the mobled queen'). Afterwards, as he left, the Player slid the sword to Hamlet, providing a visual transition to the remarkable soliloquy in which Hamlet's tortured analysis seems both to tighten and untie the knots that link theatrical and real. As he mused how the Player could feel so deeply 'For Hecuba', he knelt and touched her cloak, then picked up the enigmatic mask. If the Player were to enact *his* story (so he says), the stage would be awash with tears – and here was Hamlet marking his emphasis with acknowledged stage props, on an improvised platform, Hamlet himself only a poor player strutting and fretting. He became all the more an *actor* in the next part of the speech, where he whirled and tossed, flung down the cloak, brandished the sword, and then, crouching, suddenly caught himself in the embarrassment of playing the part of the conventional wild revenger: 'Why, what an ass am I'. Having determined on a play to catch the conscience of the king, he left carrying the various props. This was a clear departure from the Irving/Barrymore/Gielgud style of intense melodrama. Such details illustrate the way theatrical meaning can be delivered, abstract notions given concrete embodiment. All truth is provisional and tied to representation – or that at least is how this production sought to explain how the theatre remakes the world we call real.

The play scene itself was, fittingly, mounted on the main platform, the very space in which the action of *Hamlet* was played, the court audience seated on the benches that flanked

the platform. Done quietly, it was also highly pointed. The Player-queen cast accusing glances at her 'real-life' counterpart, which, along with Hamlet's abusive comments, made Gertrude increasingly uncomfortable until, provoked by the needling, she interrupted the play: 'The lady doth protest too much, methinks' (III.ii.230). The Player-king died aggressively, rolling in agony to the very feet of Claudius. At this the real King stood, 'contemptuously breaking up the play, his chest resting against Hamlet's prop sword' (Warren 152). There was, perhaps, an insufficient sense of danger here, the play metaphor reducing rather than enhancing the moment's power. Certainly Hamlet's own triumph was somewhat undercut by what followed: as he expressed his elation to Horatio, the players began to unpack their performance, moving their basket and props upstage and changing their costumes. Hamlet's 'half a share' in a 'cry of players' was thus ironically revealed as precisely that, a merely theatrical accomplishment, well removed from the sources of actual power. There is no doubt that acting can suddenly illuminate, but it may also be revealed as ineffectual, disastrously divorced from action.

This consideration underlies a basic problem with the production: its failure to provide a fully realized social environment. Gone was the busy and oppressive court world of productions such as Peter Hall's; like everyone else, Claudius was an actor, and Elsinore was a stage, not a political milieu. Even though politics can be a highly theatrical practice, the sense of high stakes present in political struggle was largely missing. A production devoted to exploring the vagaries of what it means to act, of how the theatre interprets and remakes life, generating 'counter-illusions' to penetrate the 'illusions' of material reality (Anne Barton's terms), is almost bound to come up 'short on the public aspects of Elsinore' (Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 3 July). There was, it would seem, no attempt to establish the court as a political or administrative centre, or even as a court (Warren 151). Once again we are reminded that any production is bound to be partial; this one was openly so.

The production's theatrical self-reflexiveness did not always sit easily with the psychological emphasis in the acting. Michael Pennington is an actor who can project Romantic grace and charm, a characteristic much praised by critics and audiences who remembered Warner's puzzled and ungainly

graduate student, or who wanted to draw a contrast with Pryce's tormented and brain-sick madman. Words like 'gentle', 'aristocratic', 'gracious' keep turning up in the reviews, and most especially 'sweet', a word used more often in this play than in any other of Shakespeare's and applied here to Pennington's conception, in tune with Horatio's and Ophelia's view of him. G. L. Evans noted how he greeted his inferiors with 'charmingly studious etiquette' (*Stratford Herald*, 1 July). Critics were more divided about Pennington's handling of the darker side of Hamlet. For Irving Wardle, Pennington's 'sweet, impish charm' was not so delicate as it first appeared; he 'encompasse[d] all the part's violence without surrender of its essential goodness' (*Times*, 3 July). But Roger Warren felt that the Romantic, princely Hamlet required the 'tailor[ing]' of certain key scenes where the harsher features of the character were not sufficiently in evidence. Pennington himself saw Hamlet as moving from passivity to violence, from a 'torpor [that] is deep and disturbing to watch' to 'an openly expressed viciousness' in both nunnery and closet scenes. During rehearsal, he discovered 'a strong current of violence [in Hamlet], particularly toward the women in his life' (Pennington 122-3), which emerged strongly in the nunnery and closet scenes.

The problem, however, is whether such psychological realism fits into the insistently fictional play-world created by the production. Compared with the thoroughgoing meta-theatrics of some contemporary European productions, Barton and Pennington's humanist emphasis might seem a tame compromise between post-modern play and traditional naturalism. In 1979, in Cologne, Hansgunther Heyme directed a version in which everything that happened on stage was subjected to electronic multiplication via a bank of TV monitors; the actors trained video cameras on each other, turning themselves and others into media images. The main part was split between two actors, one of whom remained on stage, lost in crude sexual fantasies, while the other spoke the sonorous lines of Schlegel's classic translation from the auditorium.<sup>2</sup> Such experiments externalized into theatrical imagery what in productions such as Barton's remained internal and character-oriented, despite the theatricalization.

A fine example of effective character acting was Barbara Leigh-Hunt's Gertrude. So long merely the stereotype of the

weak and sensuous woman and even in 1965 not much more than a commentary on that stereotype, Gertrude at last developed some of the complexity afforded to Polonius and Claudius in many twentieth-century productions. The actual extent of her guiltiness was, like so much else in this version, left ambiguous, but that she was 'sensitive enough to suggest moral guilt' as well as 'powerful in sexual presence' was noted by several critics (Evans; see also Warren, Billington, Jenkins). In the play scene it was she who first interrupted, angrily cupping Hamlet's face in her hands for 'The lady doth protest too much' (Billington, *Guardian*, 3 July). In the closet scene, the Ghost's arrival occasioned a bold move: although invisible to Gertrude in the text and in virtually all previous productions, the Ghost here was not so easily dismissed. Pennington makes it clear that the intention was to have Gertrude see him (118), and most reviewers noted the innovation, though some stressed the ambiguity of the moment. Gertrude certainly tried to avoid the vision that was thrust upon her. She lay face down in terror, refusing to look again after a brief glance. She spoke her lines denying the vision as though 'trying not to admit [her] guilty realization' from earlier in the scene (on 'As kill a king?'), thereby making the vision and its denial part of a process of coming to terms with what she now knows (Warren). There was a pause as she lifted herself up from the floor (there was no Oedipal bed) and stood, as though to clear herself of the unwanted vision. 'This is the very coinage of your brain' seemed therefore like a doomed attempt to escape what she knows and return to normalcy. Afterwards, she greeted Claudius with an embrace, but their growing alienation was emphasized by their sitting on benches on opposite sides of the raised platform and exiting separately. Despite Claudius's exhortation, 'O, come away! / My soul is full of discord and dismay', she remained sitting, defeated and played out, her 'besotted love' for Claudius (Evans) now drowned. The guilt that possessed her persisted through her difficulties with Ophelia's madness and led to another bold moment at the end where she seemed to recognize her own complicity in the poison that laced the cup from which she drank (Jenkins). Leigh-Hunt's guilt and growing self-awareness thus seemed to develop in intricate relation to Pennington's intensity and barely repressed violence, the mother taking her cue from her son's perturbation.

It was appropriate that if Gertrude was to recognize him, the ghost should be 'exceptionally solid' and corporeal. On the battlements, with a 'dusty Napoleonic greatcoat' thrown over his shoulders, he simply sat 'on a bench and [told] Hamlet quietly what ha[d] happened' (Billington, his emphasis; the Zeffirelli film takes a similar approach). The Ghost's initial entry, hastened by extensive cutting of the first scene (including four of the already terse opening eleven lines),<sup>3</sup> didn't hide his theatrical status but combined it with a concrete physical presence. The play began with Francisco behind the platform 'getting ready for his entry rather than on patrol' (Warren). At Barnardo's entrance and first words, the simple rehearsal lighting (a few naked bulbs) shifted to stage lighting, signalling the beginning of the 'play', and a moment later Marcellus merely raised a trap and up climbed the Ghost. There was nothing heightened or spectacular, but no attempt either to deny the theatrical making of the ghost's reality. The paradox of theatrical reality, which amalgamates our awareness of fiction and our experience of physical, bodily sensations, was vividly etched by such a presentation. So too when the Ghost reappeared in Gertrude's closet, both its harrowing effect and Gertrude's frightened vision were enhanced by its ordinary physical actuality. This palpable but at the same time palpably fictional figure seemed more 'real' to many critics (though not to all), than the contrivances indulged in by many productions.

According to one critic, Gertrude's prominence in the production tended to turn 'Claudius into another player king, a usurper trying to live up to a part' (*Spectator*, 12 July). Her guilt was more complex and interesting than his. Certainly Derek Godfrey's King was a bit of a throwback to an earlier conception – a red-coated hussar, he was an 'extrovert half-way between old sport and bloody roué ... impervious to guilt' (Evans, *Stratford Herald*, 1 July). Whether this made him the more dangerous for being 'so hail-fellow well met' (as Evans thought) or whether the tendency to melodrama and rant (Warren 152) reduced him to a caricature was left moot. The prayer scene, where the complexity of the character is given some scope, was reduced, not so much by the cuts, which were moderate, but by the stage business. As he spoke of his guilt, his distance from it was marked by his changing to a robe and slippers (promptbook),



the cosy domesticity undercutting some of the sharpness of the feeling. Then, for the silent prayer, he lay face down on the platform, spread-eagled, as Hamlet entered from upstage. The exaggeration of the posture and the easy familiarity of the undressing suggested self-conscious play-acting. This may have been a deliberate device to provide an image of a villain correspondent to that of the revenger from which Hamlet shied away with embarrassment. However it was conceived, it led to a less than fully realized characterization, one that contrasted sharply with Tony Church's rich and rounded portrayal of Polonius.

Church had played the role years before, in Peter Hall's epochal production of 1965. He retained many of the subtleties of the part that he developed then, but certain elements had to be adjusted to fit the very different focus that Barton wanted to give this production. The shrewd politician had been the centre of the character, but now where the court world had faded into the world of the stage, that was no longer appropriate. Instead, looking closely at the story, Barton and Church decided to emphasize the effects of Polonius's death on his children – one goes mad, the other returns to Denmark, ready to lead a rebellion. 'Surely this must mean that there had been great love in the children for their father?' (Church 108-9). Accordingly, as in Noble's production in 1992-93, the first domestic scene (I.iii) was played to emphasize family harmony and understanding. Horseplay with Laertes, affection with Ophelia, a general air of tunefulness, marked the occasion. Laertes was packing his foils, so Polonius took one and made a fake thrust, Laertes pretending to die (adding an ominous foreshadowing to the fun). Polonius's long-winded advice to his son was played with genial self-awareness – he knew they were smiling at him behind his back and he didn't mind. After an affectionate farewell to Laertes, Ophelia played her lute and Polonius whistled an accompaniment – a tune that, in the mad scene, she would reprise in a darker key (once again suggesting the fragility of the happiness). Even the warning to Ophelia to avoid Hamlet was concerned rather than harsh, though by the end of the scene it was clear that Polonius was the kind of genial father who *must* be obeyed.

Later, after her troubled confession about Hamlet's strangeness, he comforted her by wrapping her in his robe, another

motif picked up in the mad scene when she entered wearing it. (All these elements found an answering echo in Noble's version.) And after the nunnery scene, where his offhand lines to her ('How now Ophelia? / You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said, / We heard it all') seem to indicate a callous indifference, he held her in his arms while addressing the King, and then helped her off. From this point, anger at Hamlet overwhelmed his earlier easy tolerance of the Prince. The first scenes of their interaction were marked by 'good natured banter' (Warren). In the scene with the players in II.ii, Polonius's comments were judicious, not philistine, and his obvious concern for the player's feelings after his Hecuba performance combined sympathy and admiration. But all this changed after the nunnery scene. Though with a different motive, his intention at this point merged with that of 1965 – get rid of Hamlet. And his death was unusually sympathetic: he hid behind the same simple blanket that he and Claudius had used to spy on Hamlet and Ophelia earlier, creating a visual link between his two eavesdropping scenes, and providing a focus in each case for Hamlet's violent outbursts. Here the deliberately theatrical nature of the production, where a prop could do double or triple duty free of the restrictions of naturalism, paid a dividend. Hamlet pounced upon Polonius and stabbed him three times, but then recoiled in remorse. Polonius, the 'arras' wrapped around him, staggered to an upstage bench beside the platform. As he slid to the floor, Hamlet took his hand and bid him a genuinely tender goodbye: 'Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! / I took thee for thy better' (III.iv.31-2).

The treatment of Polonius illustrates some of the strengths of Barton's production – his concern for detail, his weighting of others' stories to balance that of Hamlet, his desire to unlock the complex human motives behind behaviour. But to some degree this aim conflicted with the other, more speculative, focus of the production on the theatre and its construction of reality. Barton's insistence on the blurring of the boundaries between theatre and life and on the ways that our lives are constructed according to theatrical modes of representation, has links to post-modern theory's emphasis on textuality and the all-encompassing reach of representation. But such theory tends to ignore the interest that the theatre generates in human persons and their dilemmas. In pursuing the theme of the

infiltration of theatre into life, this production bypassed those very aspects of life that make it *not* theatre – its untidiness, for example, or, at a deeper level, the various political engagements and personal inevitabilities that impinge upon us. The theatre as an art form may render reality problematic, but it doesn't make reality disappear.

### A paradise for eavesdroppers

Barton, in stressing the 'play' element, lost the sense of the social and political context, the feel of the palace as the working centre of a realized world. At the Royal Court, in keeping partly with that theatre's political interests, this side of the play was kept in the foreground – chiefly through the ingenious set designed by William Dudley who created a suggestive Renaissance interior, a '*studilo* of some Italianate palace' (James Fenton, *Sunday Times*, 6 April) with marquetry decoration and hinged pews attached to the side walls. The pews could then swing out to form narrow interiors. The overall feel, according to Michael Billington, was part Holbein and part Kafka (*Guardian*, 3 April), at once elegant and claustrophobic (the latter effect deriving in part from the narrowness of the Royal Court stage and the fact that the set tended to thrust the action forward on to the forestage). Painted *trompe l'oeil* doors with 'marquetry eavesdroppers' that then turned out to be the real thing, each with armed guards at the ready behind them, produced an uneasy ambiguity: 'what they depict[ed] they also conceal[ed]' (Fenton, *Sunday Times*, 6 April). When the whole palace was searching for Hamlet (IV.ii), the set came 'alive with treacherous possibilities ... all possible exits bristling with arms' (Fenton). Trying to escape his pursuers, Hamlet opened 'door after *trompe l'oeil* door' only to find behind each one an 'armed listener' (Lucy Hughes-Hallet, *Now*, 16 April). He could do nothing but 'yield meekly to the strait jacket' (Fenton). The set allowed for an assertion of power linked to a control of information. Power was evoked by the strategically placed guards – when, for example, Laertes raised his voice in the plotting scene with Claudius (IV.vii), posing a potential threat to the King, 'a servant appear[ed] from behind a panel' (Hughes-Hallet, *Now*, 16 April). Gathering information in such a space was facilitated by the possibilities of spying it provided.



6 Hamlet (Jonathan Pryce) mocks Polonius (Geoffrey Chater) in a scene showing the nooks and crannies of William Dudley's set for the Royal Court, 1980.

With its 'elegant series of adjoining timbered cubicles', this Elsinore was a 'burnished beehive ... a paradise for eavesdroppers' (Cushman, *Observer*, 6 April), ominously suggesting 'chambers and corridors beyond itself' (Christopher Edwards, *Cambridge Review*, 2 May).

The set was an indication of a desire to fit the personal and family drama into a believable, and ominous, political context. In this it was reminiscent of the Hall/Warner production of 1965. But here the power structure was less firmly established, more furtive and desperate. Despite a ceremonial pageant at the outset, apparently based on Holbein drawings (Hilary Spurling, Critics' Forum, Radio 3, 12 April), the court machinery was not particularly 'well-oiled', and the playing of both Claudius and Polonius added to the sense that the contest for power was less unequal than in Hall's production. Michael Elphick, as Claudius, succeeded in conveying 'that he, like Hamlet, [was] in over his head, lumbered with a destiny he would far rather escape' (Cushman). His anxiety grew during the performance, since he recognized clearly that the kind of prince created by Pryce (much more authoritative than Warner) could be extremely dangerous. Unconsciously, it seemed, he cast frequent furtive looks back over his shoulder. With Gertrude, he was alternately weary and affectionate. All in all he seemed obsessed with the insecurity of power (Colin Ludlow, *Plays and Players*, May 1980). Even the *trompe l'oeil* but real doors played their part in the ambiguity of power, since they induced a sense of enclosure and security that turned out to be partly false.

Geoffrey Chater's Polonius added to the sense of a nasty and brutish power structure rather than a comfortable and established one. Cushman thought him the very embodiment of the setting: 'prying, self-satisfied, rabbiting both to and about his children, but showing no affection for them whatsoever'. John Carey called him 'a bully, a sycophant [and] a miser' though he was no caricature (Critics' Forum). Very different from Tony Church's affectionate father in Barton's production, and different too from Church's earlier astute, but still genial, politician (in 1965), Chater inspired wariness rather than warmth. Pryce's gentleness after stabbing him derived from nothing intrinsic to Polonius's character, but rather from the shock that Hamlet himself felt at what he had done. This contrasted with Pennington's tender goodbye to Church's Polonius, which grew

out of their earlier banter and Hamlet's appreciation of this Polonius's basic good humour.

From the moment it got started, Eyre's production made its iconoclastic intentions clear. The initial shock was the complete excision of the opening scene. The play began with a subdued reading of the court scene (I.ii), with Hamlet entering late into a roomful of courtiers. Pryce's was a 'spindly grief-stricken Prince, utterly without hostility or provocative reflexes' (Wardle, *Times*, 3 April); his figure was so 'palpably heartbroken' and his face so 'cadaverous' that one critic was prompted to wonder, 'how could he wear anything but black?' (*Observer*, 6 April). Before long, the reason for the missing first scene became plain. There was to be no visible Ghost. What exactly Horatio and the others might have seen on the battlements, if anything, never became clear, but what the audience witnessed certainly was. The Ghost was *inside* Hamlet. No longer an objective, if ambiguous, fact, he became an inner torment speaking in a strange, distorted voice, which was wrenched out of Hamlet in the midst of extreme pain and violent retching. Such innovation gave the critics rich opportunities for eloquence: Hamlet was 'a medium at an unlooked-for seance, half-booming, half-burping up the words of his father's spirit' (Nightingale, *New Statesman*, 11 April) and his voice 'an unearthly robot croak well[ing] up from his guts' (*Times*, 3 April); he 'struggles and retches as if in the grip of diabolic possession' (*Observer*, 6 April).

This crucial decision had several consequences. It made Hamlet's hesitancy about believing the ghost a matter of self-doubt, more a psychological than a metaphysical puzzle. It raised the stakes in the suspicions about Hamlet's madness; even his friends were unsure of his sanity, Horatio and Marcellus, for example, casting puzzled looks at him during the swearing scene. It also produced dividends in the closet scene, solving at a stroke the conundrum of Gertrude's not seeing the Ghost (which of course Barton solved by having her see it). In this instance, the invisible Ghost was silent as well, but Hamlet's violentretchings signalled its reappearance and had the added effect of raising the already feverish temperature of the interchange with his mother. And, climactically, it led to a poignant final moment when, on 'The rest is silence', a sudden epileptic shudder recalled the earlier possession and

suggested the relief of exorcism (Alan Drury, *Listener*, 10 April and Jenkins, *Spectator*, 12 April). Nothing could have been further from the almost casual, wholly untheatrical ghost in Barton's production. Less happily, driving the ghost inside did violence to the text of the play, tending to reduce it to a merely psychological or even psychosomatic problem on Hamlet's part, rather than an external manifestation with some claim to objective reality. If Hamlet is possessed, how is it that what the demonic spirit speaks turns out to be correct? If he is mad, is he also clairvoyant?

That such questions did not in general come up is a tribute to the dynamism and momentum of Pryce's performance, 'unstoppable' in its drive and vitality (Benedict Nightingale, *New Statesman*, 11 April). Wild, dangerous, violent, erratic, menacing – such are the terms most often used to describe him. But, strangely, their seeming opposites came up almost as frequently – intelligent, reasonable, lucid. Abrupt veering from one pole to the other seemed to mark the interpretation. Jenkins felt Pryce had been 'deranged' by his father's murder and mother's remarriage: 'there is a revengeful method in his madness but mad he is, as likely to feign lucidity as lunacy' (*Spectator*). His behaviour in the nunnery scene offers an example. It began, in another much noted 'innovation' (though it is consistent with all the early texts and had been done only a few years before by Derek Jacobi at the Old Vic), with the 'To be or not to be' speech spoken in a perfectly reasonable way to Ophelia, a 'man talking to a friend in order to work something out in his mind' (*Listener*, 10 April), the two of them 'seated in adjacent alcoves' (*Spectator*, 12 April). Most observers saw this as a mistake, stripping from Hamlet the chance to explore and reveal a meditative and private inner life. But it also helped establish a companionable relation with Ophelia that was then developed in the first part of the nunnery dialogue, when he delivered his 'advice' in a gentle, affectionate and rueful way (*New Statesman*, 11 April), with an edge of self-mockery and even a touch of nostalgia ('I *did* love you once' quiet and sad – *Observer*, 6 April). All this was utterly broken when he realized she was in league with her eavesdropping father and the king behind the arras (here of course the production was following old theatrical traditions). In an abrupt switch, he turned on her with a sudden 'ravens frenzy' (*Guardian*, 3 April), a violent

charge of erotic fury expressed in 'distraught grabbing [and] kissing' (*New Statesman*, 11 April), his hand thrust coarsely up her skirt in what looked to Irving Wardle like 'attempted rape' (*Times*, 3 April). In most respects, Pryce's unpredictable and eruptive manner contrasted with the sweet gentleness of Pennington's. But there was a strong similarity in their handling of the nunnery scene. Both started gentle and then broke into an anger that was inseparable from sexual desire. Can we hazard a generalization about the 'time' from such a consonance? It is certainly tempting to see a rather frightened male response to the new threat posed by the assertive woman of the 1970s, a response perhaps to a feminism that men fear may exclude or surpass them. Such a reading seems plausible, but it is troubled by the fact that, in 1925, Colin Keith-Johnstone's performance for the Birmingham Rep was characterized by much the same oscillation and the same confusion of anger and desire. Of course, that too might have sprung partly from an ambivalent recoil from a freer sort of woman, linking the 1920s and the late 1970s in their attitudes toward varying forms of emancipation. Although it is true that performances are not simple and clear reflections of their cultural milieu, the fact that each of these 1980 productions found a connection between sex and male anger at a moment when the independence of women was a major cultural issue can hardly be coincidental.

There was as well a parallel similarity in the two versions of the closet scene, despite the absolute opposition in the treatment of the ghost – seen and heard by Gertrude as well as Hamlet at the RSC, while invisible and silent at the Royal Court, present only in the twists of Hamlet's body. Both Pryce and Pennington played the scene with mounting intensity and violence, though Pryce was more unleashed and dangerous. At the same time, each reacted with sympathy and remorse to the murder of Polonius, and in both versions the dead body of the eavesdropping councillor was left in full view during the ensuing encounter between mother and son, keeping the fruits of violence directly and ominously before the audience. Pennington was touched by what he had done to Polonius and took his hand to bid him farewell. For Pryce, the moment was even more germane. In an interview before the opening, he explained the effect he was after: for Hamlet, the sudden 'shock and distress', the realization of the seriousness of what he has



done, strikes him hard and he becomes very distraught (*Guardian*, 29 March). Accordingly, the following scene was played to the hilt, with both Hamlet and Gertrude 'in tears for a good ten minutes, tears of panic rather than remorse'; for a whole range of critics, the effect was 'ugly and disturbing' (Benedict Nightingale *Harper's*, June 1980) and at the same time 'totally involving' (*Listener*, 10 April). There was little holding back: when Hamlet produced the contrasting images of uncle and father to stun his mother into guilt, he did so with a 'hand red with blood', thrusting (in a neat solution to an old problem) different coins of the realm into the face of a 'whooping, groaning' Gertrude (Martin Dodsworth, *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 April). The scene was played as if from Gertrude's point of view – at least her conviction of Hamlet's madness could not but grow, especially when the 'ghost' made its epileptic appearance. So the audience's experience of the scene (since for it too the ghost was invisible) was aligned with Gertrude's bewilderment and pain. This to some extent made up for the fact that Jill Bennett did not trace the subtle development of Gertrude's guilty involvement as Barbara Leigh-Hunt managed to do in the RSC version, so that her performance stayed more on one level. She did, however, show a tender maternal side to Laertes when he burst in on Claudius in Act IV. In a warm and natural move such as she never displayed to Hamlet, she crossed to Laertes and held him till he suddenly dropped the aggressive bluff and wept on her shoulder. This added point to her later very gentle presentation of Ophelia's death to him (John Carey, *Critics' Forum*, Radio 3, 12 April).

In the family scene with Laertes and Polonius (I.iii), Ophelia (Harriet Walter) refused to take her brother's advice seriously, and generally showed herself 'full of spirit' (*Sunday Times*, 6 April). Her unhappy capitulation to her martinet father's commands almost immediately began to drain her of that spirit, so that the seeds of a possible madness were sown early on. Walter's choice to give us an Ophelia whose madness stems from some inner source rather than floating in operatically when the text suddenly demands it, was in line with most recent productions. Generated by twentieth-century commitment to psychology and by a desire to give as full range as possible to a woman's part that in the text is left truncated and undeveloped, this 'new' Ophelia (who began to make her appearance as early as

1925) is clearly a response to different ways of thinking about the place of women in society. In one recent version, directed by Derek Jacobi for the Renaissance Theatre Company in 1988, Ophelia made a number of unscripted appearances that enhanced her presence. She entered with the Players upon their arrival (II.ii) and was with them during their preparations; she remained on stage after the play for the recorder scene, and was even visible above the closet scene, a kind of hovering conscience reminding the audience of the consequences of male aggression.

Some sense of the continuity in the role as it is currently conceived by modern actresses may be gleaned from what Frances Barber has to say about playing Ophelia in today's world. It is no longer enough to see her as pretty, weak, and defenseless – a figure of pathos whose decorative madness reflects, and even contributes to, patriarchal control (see Showalter). Barber, who played the part for the RSC in 1984, remembered having seen Harriet Walter's performance four years earlier; that, she says, 'dispelled any traditional images of the weak, stupid girl which may have been lurking in the minds of the audience. I carried this memory with me for many weeks preparing for the role' (Barber 137). She seized on Walter's portrait of Ophelia as externally acquiescent but inwardly resentful, full of guilt, and as much as possible on Hamlet's side. Walter's characterization complemented the general sense of political and social pressure, and became one of the nodal points where that pressure was felt most acutely. Like several Ophelias since, she began to descend into madness with her soliloquy after the nunnery scene, her awareness of the blasting of Hamlet's mind seeming to extend to herself and 'her father's treatment of her as a manipulable chattel with no feelings' (*Listener*, 10 April). Her earlier defiance was thus revealed as less tough than it might have seemed, especially to herself. Overall, like most recent Ophelias, she did not just supplement Hamlet's tragedy, but shared it. Her madness dovetailed with his.

Madness was in fact one of the keynotes of the production. The old questions about the extent of Hamlet's madness have generated a wide range of answers; audiences have been witness on the one hand to the sanest and stateliest Hamlets (like John Phillip Kemble's or Ben Kingsley's) and on the other to



the most mercurial and even demented (like Kean's or Pryce's). In tandem with Barton's pursuit of theatricality in his production, Pennington rendered Hamlet's madness ambiguous, a sort of comment on the whole critical tradition. Was it a theatrical ruse, or was it genuine? Could there be anything genuine within such a deliberately staged construction? Perhaps madness was simply another representation, and play-acted madness a representation of a representation? The endless reflexiveness of such possibilities framed the conception. In Eyre's production, madness was visceral, a matter of the body as much as the mind. Review after review stressed the physicality of Pryce's 'possession', both the guttural voice of his father's spirit and the brutal erotic tension that manifested itself in his dark groping after Ophelia.

If madness is an affliction of the spirit, it is also written on the body. As Michel Foucault has shown, the body of the madman, like that of the criminal, has always carried on the skin and in the defeated outline of the limbs the markings of authority. Ophelia's bowed person, her very crookedness in almost all recent renditions of the mad scene (like her Pre-Raphaelite wispiness in the nineteenth century), speaks not only of pathos, but of power, and it is first and foremost the power of men that she has no force ultimately to resist. Her father, Claudius, even Hamlet himself, *embody* patriarchy. But men's bodies, as well as women's, are subjected to the inscriptions of power. Pryce created a Hamlet whose possessed spirit left visible traces on the body – but whose body, the actor's or the character's? That ambiguity is always in play in theatrical representation, and this version highlighted it, theatricalizing the body in a unique way. In the script, Hamlet first of all performs madness – he acts and enacts it, in order to act against Claudius; but his performance comes perilously close to actuality. For Pryce to make his madness such a moment of sheer bravura acting while at the same time accentuating its authenticity was to stretch the paradox of madness in the play to its limit. Madness was rendered both absolutely theatrical, played for all it was worth, forcing thereby an awareness of the skill of the actor on the audience, and at the same time inescapably physical and, at the level of the body, utterly convincing.

In a sense, then, the two 1980 productions ended up in a similar paradoxical place. Both insisted on the authentic while

asserting the performed, though in radically opposed ways – one, that of Barton and Pennington, by reminding us constantly of the fact of performance, the other by trying to make us forget. But in the latter case, because of the body's double commitment (it being both the actor's and the character's), that forgetting was rendered impossible; the *actor's* body was strongly foregrounded. This could then lead, momentarily, to a privileged form of knowing – in the sense that audience awareness of the body's doubleness could become briefly an awareness of the paradox of performing itself. The theatre, that is, through the physical presence of the body on-stage and the institutional arrangements that make it culturally viable, brings together stage and world, actor and spectator, in an ongoing act of negotiated belief. The actor's body, in its double being as physical presence and fictional 'person,' is central to the persuasive process of convincing the spectators. Its rhetorical and instrumental force guarantees the truth of its *representational presence* to those who watch.

Although Pennington and Pryce brought out some similar features of their character – fear of and aggressiveness toward women, potential violence, theatrical assertiveness – their productions never converged into a single vision, nor could they have done. In seeking the crystallized version of the play 'for the 1980s,' if such a chimera exists at all, we would do well to combine features of the productions rather than select one as exemplary: violence and inwardness mixed with painful uncertainty; an awareness of the essential emptiness of political reality together with a feeling of the brutal oppressiveness of power; a sense of the ubiquitous invasion of privacy and a yearning, however nostalgic, for wholeness; and perhaps most of all a conviction of the theatrical construction of selfhood interwoven with an equally compelling sense of the truth of the self's vision of things. Such perhaps were some of the contradictions of the 'time' and its multiplex forms and pressures.