*Hamlet:* the Limits of Constancy

If, as I have maintained elsewhere, Shakespeare takes friendship as his *summum bonum*, then fickleness, bereavement and the various responses to loss become important subjects for philosophical consideration.[[1]](#endnote-2) I will argue that Shakespeare presents a structured exploration of the limits of constancy in *Hamlet*, in which even minor details may be highly significant. Thus it is the humble Horatio who models the way in which the passionate man should devote himself constantly to his friends, while responding prudently to a mutable world.At first Horatio seems primarily thoughtful: he is generally known to be a “scholar,” and Hamlet sees him as a sceptical materialist who denies that there are any “things in heaven and earth” beyond those which are amenable to “philosophy” (1.1.42, 1.5.166-67).[[2]](#endnote-3) He writes off Marcellus’s initial reports of a ghost as “fantasy,” saying that he will believe them only when they have received “the sensible and true avouch of [his] own eyes,” and even when he has actually seen the ghost he still addresses it as an “illusion” which is “usurp[ing]” the king’s form (1.1.23, 1.1.127, 1.56-58, 1.1.46-47). When Marcellus associates the ghost with certain Christian superstitions, Horatio drily remarks that he does “in part believe it” (1.1.157-65). Later Horatio’s precise and measured description of the apparition is contrasted with Barnardo’s and Marcellus’s exaggerations (1.2.237-39).

Horatio is not moved by the proud and spirited sense of honour which drives many of the other characters in the play: he tells Marcellus to attack the ghost only “if it will not stand” and admits freely that the apparition fills him with “fear and wonder,” while unashamedly “trembl[ing] and look[ing] pale” (1.1.140-41, 1.1.44, 1.1.53). In contrast, the elder Fortinbras, then the king of Norway, was “prick’d on by a most emulate pride” to challenge the old King Hamlet to a duel, while the latter, whose ghost has a “martial stalk,” once interrupted “an angry parle” to attack “the sledded Polacks on the ice” (1.1.83, 1.1.62-66). The old kings’ spirited desire for honour has merely initiated a cycle of violence, for we are told that Fortinbras’s son has just “shark’d up a list of lawless resolutes” in a bold attempt to avenge his father’s defeat (1.1.95-104). Horatio, on the other hand, is simply concerned to stabilize the political situation: he attempts to counter Barnardo’s tendency to see the ghost as a “portentous” warning from a dead king, who “was and is the question of these wars,” by presenting the ghost as a mere “mote” in “the mind’s eye” compared to the far more dramatic “harbingers” that foreshadowed the death of Caesar, and reduces the “majestical” and “invulnerable” figure which Marcellus describes to the status of a “guilty thing,” cravenly obedient to the “fearful summons” of “the god of day” (1.1.108-25, 1.1.143-56). Thus, although it seems that Horatio is himself neither honour-loving nor pious, he is prepared to manipulate those who are more prone to feel awe and piety than himself: when Marcellus worries that “something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” he immediately assures him that “Heaven will direct it” (1.4.90-91).

Given Horatio’s prudent concern for political stability, it is particularly surprising that he immediately decides to tell Hamlet about the ghost, since the prince’s volatile reaction might easily have been predicted by such an old friend. In explaining that it is “needful in our loves, fitting our duty” to keep Hamlet informed, he implicitly prioritises the obligations that flow naturally from an intimate relationship over more conventional moral imperatives (1.1.172-73; see also 1.2.222-23). After Hamlet has rushed off in pursuit of the ghost, Marcellus focuses on the “rotten” state of Danish politics, but Horatio is left to fret anxiously about the prince’s state of mind as he “waxes desperate with imagination” (1.4.62-91). Hamlet seems to have invested almost as much as his friend in this unusually trusting and loyal relationship, for when Horatio declares himself to be his “poor servant,” he immediately expresses a wish to “change that name with [him]” (1.2.162-3). Hamlet’s delight in meeting his friend, whom he almost immediately invites to “drink deep,” contrasts sharply with the casual greetings that he offers Barnardo and Marcellus (1.2.165-67, 1.2.175). The prince’s admiration for his “fellow student[‘s]” reliability and commitment to his studies is evident as soon as they meet, while his later reference to his friend’s materialist “philosophy” suggests that he has been admitted fully into Horatio’s intellectual confidence (1.2.169-73, 1.5.166-67).

Thus in the opening section of the play Shakespeare shows that Horatio discriminates carefully between two spheres: he is benevolent and coolly pragmatic in promoting political stability, but prioritizes his deep attachment to Hamlet above all other concerns.

Claudius is more purely pragmatic than Horatio, adopting coolly prudent means in order to achieve intensely ambitious ends. Although he claims in his initial speech that his calm reaction to his brother’s death is the result of “discretion [fighting] with nature,” he is of course in reality a cool murderer who is largely unaffected by the intimate attachments which might otherwise interfere with a prudent “remembrance of ourselves” (1.2.5-7). Thus in his opening speech he focuses on the public display of grief rather than the emotional experience, describing the kingdom as “contracted in one brow of woe” (1.2.4). In an elective monarchy the “better wisdoms” of the court have “freely gone with” Claudius’s accession to the throne when Hamlet would have been the more natural choice, probably because they consider him to be better equipped than the prince to deal with the threat of young Fortinbras’s invasion at a time when the state seems “disjoint and out of frame” (1.2.15-21). The wisdom of their decision is immediately underlined as Claudius manages to avoid a war, simply by informing the Norwegian king of the situation and waiting for him to restrain his rash nephew (1.2.26-33, 2.2.60-71). The success of this plan reveals the parallels between the royal families of Norway and Denmark, for in both cases a war-like king has been succeeded by a brother who is prudent rather than passionately or honourably vengeful, but who has to exert himself to control a more hot-headed nephew. While Hamlet’s barely suppressed grief and anger threaten to disrupt the fragile political order, albeit less violently than young Fortinbras’s projected invasion, Claudius’s indifference to his brother’s death and to the code of honour that drove the old king to perpetuate the feud with Norway are precisely what allow him to protect the national interest in a more effective way than either Hamlet himself or his father might have done, perhaps saving hundreds of lives in the process. Without the ghost’s and Hamlet’s interventions it is quite probable that Claudius would have stabilised the fragile political situation in Denmark.

We can see Claudius’s limitations, however, when he attempts to persuade his nephew that “to persever in obstinate condolement is a course… to reason most absurd” because “death of fathers” is a “common theme” of nature (1.2.88-106). Claudius cannot experience the deep joys of true intimacy or feel the commensurate pains of loss, which means that he is unable to comprehend Hamlet’s shocked reaction to his mother’s early remarriage. Whereas the king and his court are ruled by prudent ambition and so have only “the trappings and…suits of woe,” Hamlet’s desperate grief “passeth show” (1.2.85-86). In his fragmented and incoherent opening soliloquy the prince only refers to Claudius and his father in order to highlight his mother’s fickleness (1.2.139-42, 1.2.151-53). His desolation is of course a measure of the strength of his previous attachment to Gertrude: all his life he has been sustained by the simple and natural belief that his mother is as loyally affectionate as he knows himself to be (1.2.143-45). Many in the audience will understand immediately that to lose trust in those whom one loves may be to lose one’s very *raison d’etre*, so that the whole world will inevitably seem “weary, stale, flat and unprofitable” (1.2.133-34).[[3]](#endnote-4) Nevertheless, Claudius’s arguments for resigning oneself to a mutable world raise one of the central questions of the play: it would surely be unhealthy for Hamlet to devote himself to his memories of harmonious family life forever, but at what point is it natural to move on and can reason play any role in limiting grief in the way Claudius assumes?

Hamlet is capable of “hold[ing his] tongue,” but it “break[s his] heart” to do so. The brooding sarcasm of his responses to Claudius shows that he is as far from being a pragmatic and restrained politician as the king is from being a loyal and open-hearted lover (1.2.159, 1.2.65-67, 1.2.74). Hamlet’s passionate loyalties frequently lead him to push against the restrictions imposed by his public role, as Laertes implicitly acknowledges when he warns Ophelia to distance herself from him on the grounds that, regardless of the possible sincerity of his current attentions, the prince himself is ultimately “subject to his birth” and only able to marry “with the main voice of Denmark” (1.3.10-44). Laertes’s advice --that romantic attachments fade as “the inward service of the mind and soul grows wide withal”-- might have been well judged if applied to a less passionate man, but here it merely highlights Hamlet’s obdurate fidelity and his lack of political ambition (1.3.10-14). It is noticeable that the prince seems completely indifferent to Claudius’s public nomination of him as his heir, and is not prevented by any concern for his political status or responsibilities from directly opposing his uncle’s wish that he should not return to university, but only by his continuing loyalty to his mother (1.2.108-20). Mindful perhaps of the constraints to which Laertes has alluded, Hamlet has stopped short of proposing marriage to Ophelia, but he has made her “almost all the holy vows of heaven” (1.3.113-14). It is likely, however, that he would have seen these private pledges as completely binding had they had been fully reciprocated, for he loves his mistress more than “forty thousand brothers” and has assured her in an ardent poem that his love is as reliable as the sun and the stars (5.1.269-71, 2.2.116-19).

Ophelia protests only three times when Polonius orders her to end her relationship with Hamlet and thereafter obeys her father completely, but later on in the play she sings as much about jilted love as the death of her father, implying that the loss of “the honey of [Hamlet’s] music vows” is a major factor in her subsequent madness (1.3.99-136, 4.5.23-66, 3.1.155-56). Polonius does not acknowledge her sacrifice, however, or indeed show her any sort of affection. In fact even his request that she should see no more of Hamlet is delivered only as a result of a chance encounter -- as is his famous advice to Laertes, which is given quite casually after the latter has formally taken leave (1.3.52-57, 1.3.88-90). Unlike Laertes, who shows a heartfelt desire to protect his sister’s reputation for her own sake, Polonius is simply worried lest Ophelia will “tender [him] a fool” by allowing herself to be seduced (1.3.33-44, 1.3.109). Whereas Laertes and Ophelia are driven by love and a sense of mutual obligation to correspond regularly, Polonius’s disapproval of borrowing and lending --“for loan oft loses both itself and friend”-- shows a complete failure to understand the ways in which gratitude can cement a close friendship (1.3.2-4, 1.3.75-77). As the play unfolds Polonius’s cool concern with his own status is shown to be typical of the political world.

It is significant that the spirited ghost and the chaste Ophelia both conform perfectly to the conventional code of honor as it relates to their respective genders. In both cases their virtue is disruptive, but in almost opposite ways, since the demands of the political and personal worlds are themselves opposite: whereas Ophelia allows her sense of duty to destroy her chance to find fulfilment in a loyal relationship, the noble and spirited insistence of the ghost that Hamlet “remember” his murder threatens to destabilize the reign of a king who has already proved himself to be prudent and efficient. One may infer that, whereas the conventional code of honor seems shallow when compared to a lover’s devotion, it is at the same time too loyally constant to be compatible with the fickle world of politics.

The ghost is, however, passionate as well as honourable: his opening condemnation of Claudius turns out to be no more than a brief preamble to his sad reflections on Gertrude’s inconstancy and her preference for his brother’s “wit and gifts” (1.5.42-57). Although he appears in “complete steel” and “warlike form,” has a “martial stalk” and insists initially that his object is revenge, his central demand is not in fact that Hamlet should kill Claudius, and indeed not necessarily that he should take any sort of violent action at all; rather, he is to prevent the “royal bed” from becoming “a couch for luxury and damned incest…howsomever [he] pursues this act” (1.4.52, 1.1.47, 1.1.66, 1.5.7, 1.5.25, 1.5.82-84). Although he may have been driven from purgatory by the pain of Gertrude’s beyrayal, it is ironic that time and the ghost’s underlying attachment to the queen seem to have moderated any urge he may originally have felt to punish her: his “countenance is more in sorrow than in anger” according to the observant Horatio, and he orders Hamlet not to “contrive against [his] mother aught” (1.2.231-32, 1.5.85-86). His attitude to Gertrude shows that in the long run calm sadness or pity is the natural response to the loss of a beloved, but one can infer from his threatening appearance and initial emphasis on vengeance that he would rather see himself as driven mainly by a fierce desire to punish Claudius than resign himself to such humiliating passivity. Shakespeare draws on the traditional view of unquiet and unpurged spirits to suggest that the ghost’s behavior is unnatural and perverse: not only is his noble anger likely to be politically disruptive, but it conflicts with his own concern for Gertrude’s welfare in the end, since his desire to purify “the royal bed” seems likely hurt the queen as much as the king. In reality, however, the gentle sympathy which he feels for Gertrude constitutes a deeper form of constancy than his spirited determination to remember and punish injustice.

Shakespeare is concerned in act 1 to portray Hamlet as passionate, noble and thoughtful in equal measure. He resembles the ghost himself in that his intense bitterness regarding Gertrude’s behavior overshadows his honourable desire to punish Claudius for usurpation and murder, even though it is the latter motive which officially drives his revenge.[[4]](#endnote-5) Thus it is no surprise that Hamlet’s first instinct after hearing the ghost’s revelation is to ignore the injunction not to “taint” his mind against the “pernicious” Gertrude, whom the ghost has now exposed as an adulteress (1.5.85-86, 1.5.105).[[5]](#endnote-6) Nevertheless, Hamlet’s austere criticism of the annual revels, which, he maintains, lead Denmark to be “traduc’d and tax’d of other nations,” demonstrates that he too is noble as well as passionate (1.4.18, 1.4.23-38). In this aristocratic society of Christianized Vikings the prince has clearly been brought up to respect proud spiritedness as the key male virtue. Shakespeare uses Hamlet’s critique of the revels to hint for the first time at the artificiality of this noble code, which may condemn “some vicious mole of nature” even though “nature cannot choose his origin” (1.4.24-26). In an effort to conform to the fierce imperatives of this code Hamlet initially attempts to force himself into a violent hatred of Claudius by repeatedly calling him a “villain,” but when the crisis has passed he reveals that his real state of mind is much less spirited, as he broods resentfully on the “cursed spite” that he “was born to set…right” a “time [which] is out of joint” (1.5.106-08, 1.5.188-89). Thus the ghost’s appeal to Hamlet’s sense of shame --he would prove himself to be “duller than the fat weed that roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf” should he “not stir in this”-- falls on fertile ground, since the prince’s noble virtue will lead him to feel that he must attempt to punish and reform corruption, regardless of his own natural inclinations (1.5.91-111, 1.5.32-34). Hamlet’s nobility should therefore be seen as a second driving force in his character, completely separate from his passionate reaction to his mother’s disloyalty.

The third element in Hamlet’s soul is revealed by his request to “go back to school,” which is contrasted with Laertes’s wish to return to France to live the life of a fashionable young gentleman (1.2.112-13, 1.2.50-56; see also 2.1.53-59). Hamlet’s unexpected and bathetic recourse to his “tables” after the ghost has vanished seems more likely to calm him down than psyche him up, while the similes which he uses to express his apparently fierce determination to “with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love…sweep to [his] revenge” remind us of his innate thoughtfulness even as he is consciously determining to act (1.5.107, 1.5.29-31). It is Hamlet’s calculating side which takes over after seeing the ghost with a characteristically dizzying abruptness, as he prudently swears his companions to secrecy while planning to adopt an “antic disposition,” or pretence of madness (1.5.119-80). Whereas Ophelia capitulated to paternal authority and conventional conceptions of honour and duty, Hamlet’s behavior suggests a much more thoughtful, and indeed Horatio-like, determination to mull over his father’s demands.

Overall in act 1 the unusually obtrusive back story that is one of the play’s most distinctive elements invites an audience to wonder whether it would be better to resist change or surrender to it. The ghost’s and Hamlet’s insistence that they will “remember” is imprudent, since such obdurate constancy seems likely to disrupt the reign of an efficient king, but on the other hand Horatio, and indeed Hamlet himself, show a capacity for loyalty that seems deeply endearing, especially when contrasted with the fickle court (1.5.91-104). This contrast implies that the priorities of the political and the personal spheres are absolutely opposed; whereas efficient statesmen seem to be prudently fickle, true lovers are distinguished by their passionate loyalty. Codes of honor or virtue can confuse the two worlds, however, encouraging spirited constancy in politics while discouraging the fidelity of lovers. Horatio, who has no noble principles, models an effective balance between the two spheres, coolly manipulating his acquaintances in order to promote civic order, but in the end prioritizing his relationship with Hamlet even over his political prudence. Polonius of all people summarizes this discriminating approach, albeit in simplistic form, when he advises Laertes not to utter or act on “unproportion’d thought,” but to “grapple” his few “tried” friends to his “soul with hoops of steel,” while remaining merely “familiar, but by no means vulgar” with “each new-hatch’d, unfledged courage” (1.3.59-65).

In act 1 Shakespeare also introduces an important exception to the lover’s passionate loyalty: one would not have to agree fully with Claudius’s arguments for controlling grief through reason to feel that it might be natural for the “hoops” of friendship to loosen in the course of time after the loss of a beloved through death or inconstancy. The calm pity which the ghost feels for Gertrude represents his natural response, but his insistence that the “royal bed of Denmark” be purified illustrates the tendency of the noble man to override such humiliatingly passive feelings. Not only could the ghost disrupt the state through his noble obduracy, but he tortures himself needlessly when he could have aligned himself with the deeper, gentler constancy of the true lover. All these points are also true of Hamlet’s relationship with Gertrude and so are developed further as the play goes on. Shakespeare presents Hamlet as epitomizing the human capacity for thought, nobility and passion --a “courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s eye, tongue, sword”-- in order to explore how each of these qualities contributes to, or obstructs, loyal friendship on the one hand and, on the other, the inconstant prudence of the politician (3.1.151). He structures the play around these three qualities, concentrating on passion in act 2, nobility or virtue in act 3 and thought in acts 4 and 5.

At the start of act 2 Shakespeare expands on the contrasts between the political and the personal spheres, juxtaposing Hamlet’s method of gauging Ophelia’s loyalty, which is to burst indecorously into her room and simply scrutinise her face closely, as if he “would draw it,” with Polonius’s devious plan to assess Laertes’s behaviour in France (2.1.6-65, 2.1.84-88). Whereas Hamlet’s yearning for passionate constancy dictates his direct methods --typically, his disguise, or “antic disposition,” in contrast to the “trappings and the suits” of the court, serves precisely to liberate him from the demands of convention-- Polonius’s concern for the status of his family is shown to be compatible with the most unscrupulous strategies. The latter’s habitual, cool detachment is evident in his dispassionate analysis of Hamlet’s fervent love letters, which he reads aloud to the king in order to prove that his daughter is the cause of the prince’s madness (2.2.110-51). He comments only on the style of Hamlet’s love poems, which certainly show more passion than art, and seems unable to speak without using some elaborate rhetorical device. We can see Polonius’s limitations when he dismisses the tragic climax of the Trojan play as “too long” and is merely embarrassed by the way in which the actor has “turn’d his color and has tears in’s eyes” (2.2.498, 2.2.519-20).

Because of his innate coolness, the fickle world of politics is Polonius’s natural element, as it is Claudius’s. Polonius is dominated by his immoderate ambition, which is both concealed and promoted by a prudent self-restraint that leaves no room for intimate attachments. The mask almost drops at one point, when he becomes obdurately intent on promoting the very match which he earlier forbade Ophelia to contemplate, as soon as he realizes that he might be able to use what he now sees as the prince’s desperate devotion to his daughter to advance his own status (2.1.98-16, 3.1.176-78). His typically disingenuous claim to have forbidden Ophelia to consort with a “prince out of thy star” actually serves to highlight his ambition, for it was in fact Laertes who made this point --and in the process wisely acknowledged that Hamlet could be a serious lover-- while Polonius took the prince’s inconstancy for granted and could never bring himself to admit that his daughter’s social inferiority was a factor in the situation (compare 2.2.141-42, 1.3.14-28, 1.3.117-23).

The differing motives which drive Claudius and Gertrude to employ Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet highlight the fundamental disjunction between the personal and the political world. It is clear that the Queen loves Hamlet: she “beseech[es]” these old school friends “instantly to visit [her] too much changed son,” whom she refers to as a “poor wretch,” and shows a sympathetic and guilty understanding that the cause of his madness is “his father’s death and [their] overhasty marriage” (2.2.19-26, 2.2.56-57, 2.2.168). In contrast, the king clearly primes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to draw the prince out on the issue of thwarted ambition (2.2.252-62). Later the queen’s simple sincerity is contrasted with the machinations of Claudius and Polonius, as she expresses a heartfelt hope that marriage to Ophelia might cure her son’s madness (3.1.37-41). Both Polonius and Claudius use the same pragmatic strategies in their personal relationships as they do in their public life. Polonius’s tactics of tricking his son’s acquaintances into informing against him and using his daughter to expose the causes of the prince’s agitation are echoed in Claudius’s employment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet and his cunning decision to involve Gertrude in the plan to find a “remedy” for his affliction, while the way in which Claudius disguises his self-protective intentions may remind us of Polonius’s pretense that his matchmaking is motivated by a concern to cure the madness that “all we mourn for” (2.2.17-18, 2.2.146-51). The intense ambition which drives these two characters finds its fulfillment in the political sphere, whereas the prince’s yearning for loyalty and intimacy constantly leads him to behave in a way that clashes with his public role.

The King’s misreading of Hamlet’s motives may remind us of Polonius’s tendency to “cast beyond” the truth in an overly cautious way, which causes him to ignore the signs that the prince is sincerely attached to his daughter (2.1.110-14). Claudius and Polonius both assume that Hamlet shares their own desire for power and status, whereas in reality it is only in characters like themselves that pride floats free of any moderating codes and attachments, limited only by cautious calculation as to the best means of self-advancement. In fact all three of Hamlet’s main characteristics play a part in rendering him unusually unambitious: his pride manifests itself purely as virtuous nobility and he treats the prestige of high office with witty and increasingly philosophical scepticism; but above all he is too full of an erotic yearning for loyal intimacy to be at all interested in politics (2.2.263-64).

The pious Hamlet, who is himself intransigently constant as we have seen, can only make sense of the fickleness of the court by considering it “more than natural,” perhaps even diabolic, but the truth seems to be that he has simply underrated the extent to which hearts less passionate than his own are swayed by shallower considerations (2.2.366-68). Significantly --and in fact highly unusually for Shakespeare-- both of the play’s female characters are relatively passive, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are so colourless as to be practically interchangeable (2.2.33-34). One of the elements which gives the play its distinctive character is the large group of well-meaning, yet weak characters who form sincere attachments, but lack true constancy. All three of the key motives that drive the action of the play --namely, honor, passion and prudence-- are shown to play a role in distracting such characters from their own deeper loyalties. As we have seen, it is Ophelia’s sense of honor and deference to her father which lead her to break off her affair with Hamlet, while Gertrude is driven to infidelity primarily by the sensual intensity of her attachment to Claudius (1.4.53-57, 3.4.82-95). Most intriguingly, when Rosencrantz cites as his motive for spying on Hamlet his worry that “ten thousand lesser things” would be drawn into “the boist’rous ruin” if the king were to be killed, he is making an entirely prudent point, which I will argue even echoes Shakespeare’s own political teaching as reflected in the Trojan speech, but nevertheless, he too appears abjectly fickle when measured against the standards set by Horatio, who finds himself in exactly the same situation as Hamlet’s old school friends, but remains scrupulously loyal to the prince, regardless of his disruptive behavior (3.3.11-23).

Whatever their individual priorities, Ophelia, Gertrude and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern resemble each other in their passive compliance with the demands of the conventional hierarchies. Rosencrantz’s rueful remark that Claudius and Gertrude could have “put [their] dread pleasures more into command than to entreaty” when asking them to spy on their old school friend suggests that he sees himself --or wishes to see himself-- as forced to accede to the royal request, and Guildenstern agrees that they are bound to “obey” an implicit order, although he almost immediately conceals this thought, blandly assuring Claudius that they are throwing themselves wholeheartedly and “freely” into the project (2.2.26-32). In the same way, Ophelia probably sees herself as compelled to obey her father’s orders in full, while Gertrude slides easily into a second marriage, once the “better wisdoms” of the court have approved its political expediency (1.2.15-16). Even though these characters are more complex than the Player King’s cynical analysis of an endemic inconstancy will later suggest, their actions nevertheless support his view that “fortune [leads] love” rather than the reverse: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “shall receive such thanks as fits a king’s remembrance;” Gertrude’s relationship with Claudius clearly allows her to retain her status as queen; while it would normally be very much in Ophelia’s interest to preserve her reputation for chastity, as Laertes points out (3.2.203, 2.2.25-26, 1.3.29-44). Rather than being abjectly bent on self-advancement, however, these characters simply lack the depth of passion to maintain truly constant relationships and so allow society’s demands and compensations to override their personal attachments in a more or less passive manner.

Nevertheless, these shallower characters are still swayed by their deeper feelings, even though they attempt to override them: in the end Ophelia regrets bitterly her decision to reject her lover, comparing herself to the “baker’s daughter” who was turned into an owl for spurning Christ’s offer of bread, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are shamed into “a kind of confession in [their] looks” when Hamlet discovers their duplicity and appeals to the “obligation of our ever-preserv’d love” (4.5.42-43, 2.2.278-92). Gertrude “lives almost by [Hamlet’s] looks” and has probably been plagued by guilt regarding the “black and grained spots” of her adulterous affair and “o’erhasty marriage” right from the start of the play, when the ghost astutely urged the prince to leave her to the “thorns that in her bosom lodge,” which “prick and sting her” (4.7.11-12, 3.4.89-91, 2.2.56-57, 1.5.87-88). Even Claudius himself shows in the end that he is unable to ignore his deeper ties completely, as he rushes from the play in order to pray for forgiveness for having committed an act which he acknowledges is instinctively repulsive or “rank,” since it has “the primal eldest curse upon’t” (3.2.265-70, 3.3.36-38). All these characters pay a heavy emotional price for turning away from their deeper sympathies and attachments. If one contrasts them with Horatio, who, as we shall see, is ultimately rewarded for his loyalty by gaining Hamlet’s complete trust, one can find the radical implication that sensual passion, honourable virtue and even prudent thought are only truly valuable insofar as they can regulated by, and subordinated to, an intransigent determination to remain constant to one’s intimate friends in the face of all dangers and temptations.

Hamlet confronts Rosencrantz and Guildenstern directly and, once they have confessed to spying, he rewards them with an honest, if incomplete, account of his depression (2.2.293-308). Hamlet is not naïve, but his priorities are simply not political: his measured account of his own sadness allows the audience to contrast the prince’s world of deep and enduring feeling with the fickleness of the court, who “would make mouths at [Claudius] while [Hamlet’s] father liv’d,” but who now “give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats a-piece for his picture in little” (2.2.363-66). At the same time the calm coherence of this speech suggests that his initial shock and grief have by now naturally subsided into a more distanced sadness, where he is no longer yearning for “self-slaughter,” but has merely “lost all…mirth, forgone all custom of exercises” (2.2.295-97; compare 1.2.129-32). This relative calmness is more to do with the passage of time than any deliberate attempt at self-restraint along the lines advocated by Claudius: Hamlet is aware that “there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so,” and that man is in reality “noble in reason…infinite in faculties,” but these insights do nothing to lessen his current conviction that humanity is a mere “quintessence of dust” (2.2.249-51, 2.2.303-08).

Not only Hamlet would have to fire himself up artificially to keep his promise to the ghost, but such noble constancy would seem deeply incongruous with a political world which is ruled by ambition and prudence (1.5.95-104). As the act progresses, there are growing signs that the young prince himself is reflecting on the impracticality of his vow to take revenge: the odd phrasing of his prediction that the popular young actors who are threatening to supersede the older group who have just arrived in Elsinore “exclaim against their own succession,” because their own voices will eventually also break, seems to hint at the risks involved in killing Claudius, since revenge would be seen as usurpation and so would be likely to destabilize the monarchy (2.2.338-44).

The speech that Hamlet now asks to hear addresses the same themes, but in a particularly oblique way, for the prince’s comment that it was only valued by the few with real judgement, and was “set down with as much modesty as cunning” --so much so in fact that “it was never acted, or if it was, not above once”-- may be taken as a hint that there are strong reasons at this point for proceeding with the argument indirectly (2.2.434-40). The lines which Hamlet has the actor recite deal with the siege of Troy; surely the most famous example of a military action inspired purely by passion and honor. The play portrays Pyrrhus as a villain rampaging around Troy with his “black complexion smear’d …with blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,” even though his determination to seek vengeance is entirely honourable (2.2.450-64). He finds Priam, the Trojan king, but “in rage strikes wide,” at which point the city topples to the ground, “seeming to feel this blow,” thus distracting Pyrrhus with the “hideous crash” from his assault on the old king, so that his sword “seem’d i’ th’ air to stick,” and he himself, “as a painted tyrant,” or, “like a neutral to his will and matter, did nothing” (2.2.468-82). If, as appears likely, Hamlet is implicitly comparing himself to Pyrrhus as he hesitates before avenging an act of adultery, the image of a ruined Troy must surely hint at a very natural reluctance on his part to cause a civil war in Denmark for the sake of a personal vendetta.

Hamlet has good cause to worry about the fragility of the political situation, for we learn later that Claudius himself has been forced to refrain from punishing his nephew for Polonius’s murder because he is so “lov’d of the distracted multitude” that they would blame “th’offender’s scourge” and “never the offense” (4.3.3-7). This implies that those who see the prince as “the glass of fashion and the mould of form” still resent the way in which he has been denied the throne (3.1.153). One may infer from Fortinbras’s assumption that the state is “weak…disjoint and out of frame” because of old Hamlet’s death, not to mention from the ease with which even Laertes is able to drum up support for a “rebellion [that] looks so giant-like” in order to avenge Polonius’s death, that Denmark is in danger of splitting into a number of factions (1.2.20, 4.5.122). As we have seen, when Rosencrantz compares the king to a “massy wheel” with “huge spokes…which when it falls, each small annexment, petty consequence, attends the boist’rous ruin,” concluding that “never alone did the King sigh, but with a general groan,” he is making precisely the same point as the Trojan speech, as interpreted above, and indeed using almost the same metaphor of a general “ruin” to portray the political repercussions of regicide (3.3.17-23).

The Trojan speech also hints at another argument for restraint, which has nothing to do with politics. If the above interpretation of the Trojan play is correct, then the moving description of Hecuba mourning her husband --sufficiently pitiful to make “milch the burning eyes of heaven”-- suggests that Hamlet’s real attitude to Gertrude is by now as moderate and sympathetic as that of the ghost (2.2.513-18). In the first two acts, in direct contrast to the rest of the play, Hamlet treats inconstancy gently. Even early on in the play, when there is no doubt that he is shocked and revolted by his mother’s fickleness, he promises that he will “in all [his] best obey” her when she asks him not to go back to university, and he merely sighs sadly in his silent visit to Ophelia’s chamber, rather than blaming her for her infidelity (1.2.120, 2.1.91-93). He makes a typically direct, emotional appeal to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “conjur[ing]” his old friends --to whom there is no-one “he more adheres”-- “by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preserv’d love” to be honest with him and admit that they “were sent for,” and, after he has forced them to confess their mission, even feeds them just enough information to ensure that they stay in Claudius’s favor (2.2.20-21, 2.2.283-86, 2.2.293-95).

In act 2 Shakespeare concentrates on the gulf between the passionate man and a fickle, political world. Whereas politicians and weaker or cooler characters who surrender themselves to inconstancy thrive in this world, albeit at the expense of their own “heart’s core,” the passionate man prioritizes his deep attachments, but may therefore approach politics in an imprudently direct and open manner. Hamlet’s interest in the play shows, however, that he has sympathies which run deeper than his spirited concern for justice: he requests the Trojan play not only because it is “passionate,” but also because it is “set down with as much modesty as cunning” (2.2.432-45). Deep attachments contain their own moderating principle, while the considered response of the passionate soul to a fickle political world is compassionate.

Shakespeare uses the two major soliloquies which follow the Trojan speeches to shift the focus of his argument from passionate to noble constancy. Although Hamlet’s assertion that the player would “drown the stage with tears,…cleave the general ear with horrid speech” and “appall the free, confound the ignorant,” if he had his own “motive…for passion,” does come close for the first and last time in the play to acknowledging openly the potentially explosive repercussions of any direct action against Claudius, this insight is almost completely overshadowed by the prince’s explicit aim in the soliloquy, which is to shame himself into taking revenge by contrasting his own “dull and muddy-mettled” behaviour with the noble eloquence of the actor (2.2.560-87). On this overt level he presents the situation to himself as a simple test of his manly honor, equivalent to being called a “villain,” or being “tweak[ed] by the nose,” even though he must know that Claudius would never respond to a direct challenge (2.2.571-75). Again he attempts to work himself up artificially into a state of mind in which he can take decisive action, as he did immediately after seeing the ghost: “remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain” (2.2.581). The baffled and exasperated way in which he wonders whether he is “pigeon-livered and lack[ing] gall” shows the power of the gentlemanly code to alienate Hamlet from his own real feelings, rendering his prudent compassion too shameful to be acknowledged (2.2.576-77). Nevertheless, the fact that he uses an actor’s speech to illustrate honourable conduct seems to imply an acknowledgement on his part that a noble man might have to “force his soul” to create an artificial “dream of passion” and “all for nothing” (2.2.550-60). Whereas we have seen that the deepest passions are innately moderate, honor prides itself on its intransigent spiritedness.

Towards the end of the soliloquy Hamlet abandons his extravagant self-castigation with characteristic abruptness and develops a thoughtful plan to use the players to prove, or even flush out, Claudius’s guilt (2.2.588-605). He gives no reason here for not having already “fatted all the region kites with this slave’s offal,” but by changing the subject makes a silent admission that the situation cannot be resolved by the simple duel for which his upbringing has prepared him (2.2.579-80). Since he has shown no previous sign of doubting the ghost, it seems likely that Hamlet’s plan is mainly designed to allow him to procrastinate with a good conscience, while at the back of his mind he is clearly hoping that it might even enable him to avoid taking any sort of direct action, since Claudius might become one of those who “have proclaim’d their malefactions” when they have seen them represented in a “cunning…scene” (2.2.588-94). Again, however, the prince’s shame at his own inaction leads him to keep this possibility in the background and present the plan primarily as a way of testing the ghost’s story before taking revenge in the most straightforwardly noble manner: “if ‘a do blench, I know my course” (2.2.597-98). These ambiguities, which characterize all of Hamlet’s remaining soliloquies, show how his code of honor leads him to censor his real thoughts.

In the “to be or not to be” speech Hamlet treats the subject of suicide in a much more measured way than in his first soliloquy, where he expressed a truly desperate yearning for “self-slaughter” (1.2.129-32). As with the previous soliloquy, he focuses on virtuous rather than passionate motives for action: his question is whether it would be “*nobler* to take arms” [my italics] against his own life than simply “to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (3.1.55-59). In the end the prince chooses prudent passivity over spirited virtue, but at the same time, with characteristic deference to his noble code, blames himself for allowing “enterprises of great pitch and moment [to] turn awry and lose the name of action” through being “sicklied o’er by the pale cast of thought” (3.1.82-87). Here Hamlet’s portrayal of self-destruction as an example of ‘healthy,’ virtuous action opposing the ills of the world seems odd to say the least, since suicide would of course only “end” Hamlet’s *feeling* that he is shamefully inactive, while the “sea of troubles” itself would continue unabated. The soliloquy implies, however, that this might also be true of more conventionally noble attempts to oppose corruption, since “the oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely, the pangs of despis’d love…the spurns that patient merit of th’unworthy take” clearly constitute an overwhelming “sea” of corruption and inconstancy, which would be unaffected by the actions of any individual, however virtuous (3.1.70-73). On the deepest level of the play I would therefore argue that Hamlet’s putative revenge is used to illustrate what one might call the narcissism of virtue: for the noble man any action, however futile or destructive, which makes him feel that he is “tak[ing] arms” against injustice is preferable to shameful passivity.[[6]](#endnote-7)

The indirectness of this soliloquy is typical of the moments when the prince comes closest to analysing his own inaction: Hamlet distances both himself and the audience from the issues raised in the Trojan speech, not only by using the classical analogy, but literally, by inviting the player to recite it, while in the “rogue and peasant slave” soliloquy we have seen that the prince’s scornful attitude to his own prudent thoughts leads him to relegate them to a subversive undercurrent, running directly counter to the stream of self-criticism that dominates the soliloquy (2.2.550-87). The ambiguous analogies of suicide and acting help Shakespeare to conceal his thought. The fact that revenge is not the explicit subject of the third soliloquy at all means that the arguments against “taking arms” to punish Claudius which presumably parallel Hamlet’s fear of the afterlife are never clarified. Although unusually direct --albeit under the cover of the suicide analogy-- in favoring cautious inaction, this soliloquy resembles the previous one in that “the native hue of resolution” is made to seem much more attractive than “the pale cast of thought” even as it is rejected in the argument (3.1.56-59, 3.1.82-87). Shakespeare’s underlying implication that it would be wiser simply to “suffer” the murder of one’s father is bound to offend against any standard of justice, whether modern or Elizabethan. Reluctant, no doubt, to provoke his audience, or to criticize in any explicit way codes which in many contexts help to promote social stability, Shakespeare uses Hamlet’s attempts to repress his prudent thoughts to conceal his own deeper meaning.

Whereas we have seen that time and compassion have moderated the passionate grief which oppressed Hamlet most intensely at the start of the play, his noble code almost defines itself by its obdurate rigidity and explicitly opposes “the pale cast of thought” as unhealthily timorous (3.1.82-84). Since Hamlet presents suicide as just one example of noble action, the implication is that he might eventually feel duty bound to “take arms” against corruption in a more conventional manner, as he becomes progressively more ashamed of his inaction. This would be constancy writ large as a moral or political end, since it would involve not only punishing “th’oppressor’s wrong” but presumably even avenging “the pangs of despis’d love…and the spurns that patient merit of th’unworthy takes” (3.1.70-73). Taken together, the second and third soliloquies suggest that Hamlet’s noble principles are too deeply instilled to be easily resisted. In act 3 Shakespeare goes on to show the disruptive effects of the prince’s virtue.

Hamlet’s response to Ophelia, whom he encounters immediately after his soliloquy, should be divided into three stages. He greets her gently at first, asking to be remembered in her prayers; then responds with understandable anger when she attempts to return his gifts; and finally, almost certainly after realizing that Polonius and the king are eavesdropping, curses her with a startling vehemence (3.1.88-89, 3.1.102-14, 3.1.129-46). I would suggest that his first two responses are sincerely passionate, but that the third is deliberately manufactured as part of his “antic disposition.” The cruelty of Hamlet’s curse, which clearly hurts Ophelia deeply, represents a radical change of approach, indicating that the prince is prepared to prioritize his noble mission over his real feelings (3.1.150-61). His nobility is highly imprudent as well as inhumane, since it is his decision to goad Claudius by predicting that “all but one” of those currently married “shall live” which prompts the king to develop a typically cool and efficient plan to have him sent to England to be killed (3.1.148-49, 3.1.167-70).[[7]](#endnote-8)

Although Hamlet is driven to attack Ophelia so vehemently, his real state of mind is implied by his advice to the actor: “in the very…whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness” (3.2.5-8). In a long and important eulogy of Horatio, he praises the way in which his friend’s “blood and judgment are so well co-meddled, that [he is] not a pipe for Fortune’s finger to sound what stop she please,” which means that “in suff’ring all [he] suffers nothing,” and so avoids becoming “passion’s slave” (3.2.66-72). “Suff’ring” is now redefined as deliberate stoicism; an attitude adopted by the wise man to preserve his equanimity in a corrupt and inconstant world. Horatio is not, however, coolly fickle like Polonius or Claudius: his “judgment” does not rule his “blood,” but is “so well co-meddl’d” with it as to enable him to distinguish and cultivate potential friends, even as he holds himself aloof from his more superficial acquaintances (3.2.68-69). Hamlet’s intimacy with Horatio, which grows steadily in a world where almost every other passion seems to fade, shows friendship to be a solid and lasting good, capable of fulfilling our deepest longings. His decision, made when his soul could first “distinguish her election,” to “wear” Horatio “in [his] heart’s core, ay, in [his] heart of heart” is based on a careful --and indeed accurate-- judgement of his friend’s character as exceptionally “just” (3.2.63-65, 3.2.73, 3.2.54-5). It is in the context of such a friendship, and in this context alone, that complete fidelity is not only natural but essential. The true tragedy of the play is that Hamlet could have found fulfilment in this enclave of constancy, but is driven instead to engage with a fickle world.

The dialogue between the Player King and the Player Queen allows Shakespeare to focus directly on the discussion of the limits of constancy which underlies the play. The Player King tells his wife that, despite her vows to the contrary, she will disengage from him easily when he dies, since society is ruled by prudent self-interest rather than passion, while such genuine attachments as do exist are intrinsically fleeting; the “passion ending doth the purpose lose,” just as “mellow” fruit “fall[s] unshaken” from the tree (3.2.188-209). One cannot dismiss the Player King’s meditations: not only does he describe the fickle world of the court accurately, but there are similarities between his position and that of Horatio, who “suffers all,” and indeed that of Hamlet himself, who has, as we have seen, more than half a mind simply to endure an overwhelming “sea” of injustice and ingratitude rather than attempting to reform society. The king may be right about society in general, but he surely underrates the constancy of true lovers, for, unlike Gertrude, the dumb show queen makes “passionate action” when she “finds the king dead” and responds in a “harsh and unwilling” manner to the blandishments of his poisoner (see the stage directions which follow 3.2.135). Although the Player Queen is also faithful, it appears that she is overrating her own ability to remain constant after her husband’s death when she makes her great oath of loyalty, since she does eventually accept the murderer as her lover (3.2.175-85, 3.2.216-233, 3.2.263-64). The idealistic queen has, I would suggest, failed to reckon with the fact that her fidelity has always been rooted in the actual experience of love. This does not demonstrate that all passions are fleeting or that “fortune [leads] love” in the play as a whole, for not only is Horatio as faithful as the Player Queen, but Hamlet’s own loyalty to his lowly friend is, as he points out, completely unaffected by considerations of “pomp” or “thrift” (3.2.203, 3.2.56-62). Rather, the suggestion is that after the death of a beloved the intensity of even the truest lover’s loyal attachment will eventually fade in some measure, however deeply he mourns his loss.

Shakespeare presents attempts to perpetuate loyalty beyond this natural limit as motivated by honourable virtue rather than passion: Hamlet’s own determination to use the play within the play to trigger his mother’s guilt is a case in point, since he seems to have decided that the noblest option is to remain loyal to a memory of close knit family life and to attempt to force Gertrude to do the same, even though there is evidence, not just in the Hecuba speech but, I will argue, throughout act 3, that his original grief and anger are now giving way to a calm pity (3.2.181, 3.2.224, 3.2.229-31). The implication is that the passionate and thoughtful man should steer a course between the Player King’s cynical resignation to a pervasive fickleness and his queen’s noble protestations of enduring love, allowing his own innate qualities of “blood and judgment” to determine the extent of his constancy. Thus Horatio combines absolute loyalty to his friend with a cool, pragmatic approach to an inconstant world and, as I shall argue later, an unsentimental recognition that Hamlet’s death brings all his obligations to the prince to an abrupt end. In act 3, in contrast with Horatio, Hamlet nobly refuses to resign himself either to personal loss or to society’s pervasive fickleness, although the fact that he requests --and indeed helps to write-- a play in which the arguments for thoughtful “suff’ring” are given their full weight suggests that a part of him still doubts the value of his own virtuous constancy (2.2.540-45).

As one might expect, Horatio does not share his friend’s exultation when the play within the play has proved Claudius’s guilt; in fact his only responses are to point out that the plan has been no more than “half” a success (perhaps because Claudius stopped short of revealing his guilt publicly, thus obviating the need for direct action on Hamlet’s part) and that he has failed to complete the rhyme in his impromptu poem comparing the king to a peacock –a traditional emblem of pride and lust (3.2.275-85). The latter criticism is implicitly directed at Hamlet’s moralizing approach, since the expected rhyme-word, which is clearly “ass” rather than “peacock,” would have implied that Claudius should be mocked as a fool rather than condemned as a knave.[[8]](#endnote-9)

When Hamlet refrains from killing Claudius as he prays, the pretext he offers for rejecting the opportunity --that murdering him at this point might represent “hire and salary, not revenge” since it might lead to his “salvation” in Heaven-- seems designed to appear honourably vengeful rather than prudent, but in fact the savage vindictiveness of the thought serves to reduce the revenge ethic to absurdity (3.3.89-95). Although the moral stance which Hamlet adopts contrasts sharply with Horatio’s detachment, it is significant that his actual behavior is fairly restrained. His deeply ambivalent attitude to revenge is implied in his presentation of himself as a Pyrrhus-like warrior, who strikes at “witching time,” and “drinks hot blood,” and in his insistence during the performance of the play within a play that the poisoner is the king’s nephew, rather than his brother as one might have expected (3.2.388-92, 3.2.244).[[9]](#endnote-10)

Hamlet is less passionate than he seems when he confronts his mother: he has hesitated for months before speaking to her and, in contrast with his abrupt appearance in Ophelia’s chamber earlier in the play, he allows himself to be passively summoned to the queen’s closet (3.2.128, 3.1.180-83, 3.2.311-12). Just before launching his verbal assault on his mother, Hamlet prays that his “heart” should not “lose [its] nature,” so that he is “cruel, [but] not unnatural” (3.2.393-95). What follows is typically ambiguous:

I will speak daggers to her, but use none.

My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites—

How in my words somever she be shent,

To give them seals never my soul consent. (3.2.396-99)

At first one assumes that Hamlet’s “soul” is possessed by a real desire to “use” the daggers and therefore that his hypocrisy stems from an unnatural self-restraint, but this is to ignore the fact that he has twice spoken of his nature as a moderating influence. Moreover, if this initial assumption is correct, then Hamlet would be employing “soul” in two opposite senses in the same sentence, for when the word recurs in such a curiously awkward manner it seems to refer to his moderate nature. As is usual in Hamlet’s soliloquies the less spirited meaning is the one that should be pursued: rather than seeing the prince as finally venting his intense pain in the closet scene and only just stopping short of a physical assault on Gertrude, I will argue that we should think of him as deliberately reinvigorating his residual grief and anger, while ignoring his sympathetic “nature.” His actions could be seen as prudently honourable, since, if he manages to shame Gertrude into avoiding his “uncle’s bed,” he will have kept his promise not to let “the royal bed of Denmark be a couch for luxury,” while avoiding the disruptive consequences of a violent revenge (1.5.82-83, 3.4.157-70).

It is Hamlet’s reaction to the sudden reappearance of the ghost which provides the crucial evidence that his motives in this scene are primarily noble rather than passionate. When the ghost appears, now wearing a night-gown rather than armor, he announces that his “visitation is but to whet [Hamlet’s] almost blunted purpose” --presumably to exact a violent revenge-- but in reality it is clear that he has chosen to intervene at this moment to protect Gertrude, for after this vague opening remark he focuses in detail on the queen’s confusion, begging the prince to show compassion for her “fighting soul” (3.4.103-14). Ironically, it is the ghost who prioritizes his love for Gertrude over his proud indignation at this point in the play, even at the expense of interfering with Hamlet’s attempt to fulfil his promise, while the prince himself clings obdurately to his noble purpose. Hamlet sheds light on his own behavior, not just in this scene but throughout act 3, when he begs the ghost not to “convert [his] stern effects,” so that what he has “to do will want true color –tears perchance for blood,” since he implies here that his “color” of anger has been adopted as a deliberate strategy and maintained with some effort in order to shame his mother out of her inconstancy, when he would rather weep with compassion (3.4.127-30). Later in the scene he tells the queen that he “must be cruel to be kind” (3.4.178). All this suggests that the current manifestation of the ghost, which is visible only to the prince, may simply be a symptom of Hamlet’s own suppressed compassion (3.4.131-39).

Thus, as one of the play’s most astute critics puts it, “Hamlet’s tragedy is indeed the forced triumph of filial duty over sensitivity to his own heart.”[[10]](#endnote-11) The closet scene offers further evidence that the prince now conceives of himself as on a “stern” moral mission to lambast what he goes on to call “the fatness of these pursy times” (3.4.153). This mission is dictated by his virtuous principles, which drive him to work his passions up artificially beyond their natural pitch and forbid him the relief that tears would bring, even though his real attitude to his mother is by now similar to that of the ghost. Ironically, Hamlet’s intense sensitivity to shame, evident here in his immediate assumption that the ghost has come “his tardy son to chide,” will lead him to feel that his current strategy is not sufficiently vengeful, even though one might infer from Claudius’s later reflections on the way in which “time qualifies the spark and fire of [love]” that he has succeeded in driving a wedge between the royal couple and so fulfilled his promise (3.4.106-08, 4.7.111-18).

Even this relatively prudent and moderate achievement could be seen as needlessly destructive, however. Hamlet merely triggers a dormant guilt in Gertrude, reminding her of “black and grained spots” which she acknowledges “will not leave their tinct,” rather than forcing her, as he affects to believe, into an artificially rigid determination to “assume a virtue, if [she] have it not,” and to use “custom” to “change the stamp of nature” (3.4.89-91, 3.4.160-68). Gertrude makes real attachments, but lacks sufficient depth of passion to remain absolutely loyal: she says that her son has “cleft [her] heart in twain” and for the rest of the play she does indeed show a dual allegiance, devoting herself with an equal degree of desperate determination to defending her husband and to keeping the secret of her son’s sanity (3.4.156, 4.5.129, 4.1.7-12, 5.1.284-88, 4.1.24-27, 3.4.181-88, 3.4.197-99). Hamlet’s tirade leaves her in a state of constant panic, convinced that her soul is “sick” (4.5.17-20).This shows the futility, and indeed cruelty, of Hamlet’s attempts to reform characters who simply lack the depth of passion to align themselves fully with the demands of their own heart. Moreover, in attempting to treat the fickleness of his beloved mother as if it were a moral issue he has allowed abstract principles of justice to alienate him from his own “heart’s core,” where truly intimate attachments create enduring mutual needs. He prevents himself from crying with some difficulty after the ghost’s intervention, as we have seen, and only acknowledges his desire for reconciliation right at the end of the scene: “when you are desirous to be blest, I’ll blessing beg of you” (3.4.171-72).

When Hamlet stabs Polonius as he is hiding behind the arras in his mother’s room, he is clearly hoping to kill the king in direct response to a shameful act of espionage (3.4.26). However, the extreme imprudence of this sort of noble action becomes evident when it emerges that in the current political climate even Polonius’s death is nearly enough to cause a civil war (4.5.112-22). Hamlet’s unnaturally cold reaction to his death is of the same calibre as his recent treatment of Gertrude and Ophelia: he merely says that he will “lug the guts into the neighbour room,” while summing Polonius up, again in moral terms, as a “knave,” albeit a “foolish prating” one (3.4.215). He sees his killing of Polonius as justified, not only by the code of honor, but by the mission that “heaven hath pleas’d…to punish [him] with,” in which he must play the role of God’s “scourge and minister” (3.4.173-75). Hamlet’s religious faith has been a feature of his character from the start of the play, when he contrasted his own belief in the supernatural with Horatio’s materialistic “philosophy” (1.5.166-7). Several of his soliloquies reveal his belief in an afterlife, at least in the first half of the play, while he habitually uses religious language when castigating Gertrude and Ophelia (1.2.131-32, 3.1.59-81, 3.3.79-86, 3.1.120-49, 3.4.76-84, 3.4.161-72). In the closet scene, however, as in the play as a whole, Shakespeare keeps his criticism of Hamlet’s piety and sense of honor indirect, and thus allows many in his audience to welcome the prince’s belated decision to “take arms” against a pervasive fickleness.

Hamlet’s next encounter with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern again illustrates the futility, and indeed cruelty, of attempts to judge innately weak characters by the highest standards. Whereas Hamlet seemed straight-forwardly warm-hearted earlier in the play when he appealed to “the rights of [his] fellowship” with his old school friends, he now he dismisses his conversation with them as a “trade” and scorns Rosencrantz’s appeal to their former friendship in a way that seems calculated to humiliate him (2.2.283-88, 3.2.334-36). The sharp contrast between these two conversations shows how Hamlet’s natural responses have been distorted by his noble principles over the course of the play. Ironically, the prince adapts the pipe image which he previously used to convey his respect for Horatio’s stoical self-control to express his scorn (3.2.350-72, 3.2.68-71). Hamlet, it seems, can avoid becoming “passion’s slave,” but his nobility is more obdurately persistent and less amenable to thoughtful restraint than his passion. Despite showing a clear understanding that the king is exerting pressure on his old school friends, the prince still condemns them as “adders fang’d,” just as he attacked Ophelia even though he knew that she was acting on Polonius’s orders (2.2.293-95, 3.4.203, 2.2.181-86, 2.2.403-12). If one compares his conversations with Ophelia and Gertrude, one can see that he becomes increasingly harsh during act 3 as he strives to demonstrate his own nobility.

Shakespeare has shown in act 3 that Hamlet’s noble and pious principles drive him to retain an artificial bitterness long after he should have allowed his “purpose… [to] fall unshaken” like “mellow” fruit (3.2.188-91). Whereas it is in the nature of intimate attachments to demand high standards of loyalty, these standards are shown to be too rigorous to be of any use in regulating a fickle society.

The play’s examination of constancy and its limits is structured around Hamlet’s three key characteristics: having focused on passion in the first two acts and honor in the third, Shakespeare concentrates in the last two acts on thought itself. Having shown that passionate constancy is alien to the political world in the second act, Shakespeare now reverses his emphasis, highlighting the efficiency of prudent politicians who are unfettered either by noble scruples or passionate attachments. At the start of act 4 we are shown Claudius’s prudent ability to anticipate the opinions of “the distracted multitude,” which loves Hamlet to such an extent that “the offender’s scourge [would be] weigh’d” rather than “the offense” were he to try to punish the prince for the murder of Polonius (4.3.4-7). The reasons for Claudius’s delay are revealed to be similar to Hamlet’s own as implied in the Trojan speech, for the king confesses to Laertes that his hands have been tied, not only by the threat of civil war but by his love for Gertrude, who “lives almost by [Hamlet’s] looks” (4.7.11-25). These parallels provide further evidence that Hamlet’s delays are sensible, since the prudent Claudius is nothing if not an effective politician.

In the end, however, Claudius’s ultimate priorities are of course very different from Hamlet’s: he overrides his concern for Gertrude’s feelings, developing a plan to dispose of his nephew in an indirect manner calculated to preserve political stability, simply by sending him to England to have him killed, and ultimately even allows his wife to drink poison rather than revealing his complicity in the plan to murder the prince (4.3.58-68, 5.2.290). Claudius illustrates the pragmatic insincerity of the political world when he dignifies the king of England’s fear of the “Danish sword” as “love” and disguises his own prudent inconstancy as loyal patriotism, declaring that Hamlet’s “liberty is full of threats to all, to you yourself, to us, to everyone” (4.3.58-61, 4.1.14-15). In contrast, the loyal and idealistic prince has come to be considered too “dangerous” to be allowed to remain in Denmark in such divided and “distracted” times, not just by Claudius, but also by his “wisest friends;” presumably the “better wisdoms” who had earlier supported Claudius’s claim to the throne over Hamlet’s (4.1.38-39, 4.3.1-11, 1.2.14-16).

Hamlet’s philosophical nature comes to the fore in the last part of the play. His four main soliloquies show the structure of Shakespeare’s argument, since the first focuses on passion, the second and third on nobility and the fourth, concerning Fortinbras, on thought itself (1.2.129-59, 2.2.550-87, 3.1.87, 4.4.32-46). In the latter soliloquy the initial assumption seems to be that “godlike reason” must express itself in pious and honourable action, but Hamlet then admits that thought “quartered hath…ever three parts coward” and even notes that this leaves “one part wisdom” (4.4.38-43).[[11]](#endnote-12) The prince drily mocks those who are “puff’d” with “divine ambition” in his portrayal of Fortinbras’s assault on an insignificant piece of disputed ground in Poland, which is undertaken for “no cause without,” but simply to vent his noble desire to avenge his father’s death, and is likely to end in the “death of twenty thousand men,” who will die “for a fantasy and trick of fame” (4.4.49, 4.4.25-29, 4.4.60-62). Hamlet’s foregrounded aim in the soliloquy is to present Fortinbras’s very irrationality (and by implication his own) as a guarantee of nobility --he is willing to dare all “for an egg-shell” or “a straw when honor’s at the stake”-- but from another perspective the prince’s emphasis on the insignificance of the disputed territory highlights the wanton destructiveness of the campaign (4.4.48-56). Hamlet himself draws the parallel to his own mission, and the oddness of his phrasing when he refers to “a father kill’d, a mother stain’d” as “excitements of…reason” serves to reinforce the point that spirited anger is rarely rational.

The three major soliloquies on the subject of nobility are linked by the way in which the examples of acting, suicide and pointless invasion subvert Hamlet’s official argument. The prince’s emphasis has, however, shifted in act 4: whereas in the “to be” soliloquy he chose thought while favouring nobility, in the Fortinbras soliloquy he mocks nobility, while resolving that “from this time forth [his] thoughts be bloody or nothing worth” (4.4.65-66). From now on Hamlet becomes increasingly unpredictable, as his increasingly philosophical mode of thought clashes with his determination to allow his spirited sense of honor to rule his actions.

Although Horatio’s nature is more like Hamlet’s than Claudius’s, he serves the king prudently and ignobly, gaining his trust to such an extent that the wily king actually asks him to keep “good watch” over Ophelia and, later, to accompany the prince himself (4.5.74, 5.1.293). Although Horatio’s motive in taking on this role is almost certainly to protect his friend, he is as prudent as Claudius might wish in his approach to Ophelia, who he thinks might “strew dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds” (4.5.14-15). If Ophelia’s suicide were anywhere near as long drawn out as the queen’s graphic --although admittedly highly misleading-- account of her ‘accident’ would suggest, the assumption must be that the watching Horatio allowed her to die (4.7.166-83). It may be significant that the grave-digger’s later argument, that a man cannot be accused of suicide if he merely lets “the water come to him” rather than actively entering it, would also imply that a passive witness of a suicide would be innocent of murder (5.1.9-20). If Horatio did indeed ‘suffer’ Ophelia’s death, this would of course illustrate his pragmatic approach to those who are not his friends and his indifference to commonly accepted codes of piety and nobility --although in the light of Ophelia’s utter desperation one could see his decision not to act as entirely compassionate. By serving Claudius Horatio shows that a thoughtful and passionate man can become involved in politics and even emulate the ambitious politician’s prudence in many situations. His pragmatism will, however, always be limited by his devotion to his friends: Horatio supports Hamlet to the bitter end, yet the prince is potentially far more dangerous to the state than Ophelia.

Laertes’s response to his father’s death demonstrates the need to exercise prudence in political life. Shakespeare invites the comparison to Hamlet in an unusually explicit way, for the prince admits that he can “by the image of [his own] cause…see the portraiture of [Laertes’s],” and implies that he envies “the bravery of his grief” (5.2.77-80). Unlike Hamlet, Laertes is at first naively passionate, consigning “conscience and grace to the profoundest pit” without pausing to check the truth of the rumours that Claudius killed his father or worrying about causing a civil war as he leads a “riotous…rabble” against the king (4.5.100-39). Luckily Claudius is precisely the right man to respond peacefully and prudently rather than honourably or passionately to what amounts to an attempted coup, and his immediate suggestion that he should be tried before Laertes’s “wisest friends” probably prevents a civil war and saves many lives (4.5.203-13). By the time it has eventually been proven that Hamlet is the murderer, Laertes is calm enough to appreciate Claudius’s argument that any would-be avenger would be best advised to proceed with great caution lest his “arrows…revert….to [his] bow again,” since the people will always “convert [Hamlet’s] gyves to graces,” (4.7.16-24).

Although the unphilosophical Laertes’s actions demonstrate that he accepts Claudius’s prudent but ignoble reasons for delay, he resists even more obdurately than Hamlet the thought that he should simply tolerate “a noble father lost” (4.7.25-29). Laertes avoids the internal debates which have allowed Hamlet to entertain, if not explicitly acknowledge, the radical notion that it might be best not to take revenge at all. We can see the differences between the two men most clearly in the contrast between Laertes’s blind acceptance that honour must be satisfied even if this were to involve “cut[ting Hamlet’s] throat i’ th’ church” and the prince’s decision to spare the praying Claudius, which, despite his own rhetoric, was essentially prudent and moderate (4.7.126). Claudius and Laertes together now come to embody the distorted combination of passion, honour and cunning which a completely thoughtful revenge would require in this context, as the cunning king attempts to direct the younger man’s passionate and noble spiritedness in such a way as to ensure that Hamlet will be disposed of without political disruption (4.7.134-39). In contrast to Hamlet himself, Laertes refuses to be thwarted by the constraints imposed by the political situation, but so thoroughly does he contort his honourable anger in response to these pressures that it is he who introduces the idea of poison, after Claudius has suggested killing the prince in an apparently sporting duel with an uncapped rapier (4.7.139-48). After deciding to “further think,” Claudius adds the poisoned chalice to ensure the success of the plan (4.7.148-62). In a world which is necessarily dominated by ambition and a prudent concern for political stability, Laertes’s passion and nobility ultimately serve only to make him Claudius’s willing puppet.

Like the ghost and Hamlet himself, Laertes is both passionate and honourable. Claudius plays on both motives at once when he questions whether he is merely “the painting of a sorrow, a face without a heart,” lacking any real constancy, and refers casually to the “envy” evinced by the prince after hearing a “masterly report” of Laertes’s swordsmanship (4.7.95-123). Just as with Hamlet, Laertes’s deepest feelings are not focused on his father, whom he simply describes as “noble,” but in his case on Ophelia, “whose worth…stood challenger on mount of all the age for her perfections” (4.5.155-64, 4.7.25-29). Again like Hamlet, however, his anger and grief have faded by the time he comes to fight the prince, for he declares himself to be “satisfied in nature,” and admits that he is driven to carry on with the plan only by the traditional “terms of honor,” which offer no precedent for simply suffering the murder of one’s father (5.2.244-52). The sincerity of this speech is clearly demonstrated when he hesitates to employ the poisoned sword, confessing to himself that “it is almost against [his] conscience,” and as a result, despite being generally acknowledged to be the better swordsman, eventually falls victim to his own poison (5.2.296, 5.2.209). As Laertes dies he makes a plea to “exchange forgiveness” with the prince (5.2.329-31). Thus Laertes’s story echoes Hamlet’s in such a way as to bring out two of Shakespeare’s main criticisms of moral constancy: not only does the passionate and noble man’s intransigent spiritedness jar with the political world, but it also conflicts in the end with his own deeper nature.

Having demonstrated the need for prudent inconstancy in public life, Shakespeare now shifts his focus for the last time from the political to the personal sphere. He has hitherto given the two spheres equal weight, but his deepest concern is to delineate the limits of constancy in personal relationships. His starting point is that the faith of the “true-love” must transcend all prudent restraint: the “cockle hat and staff” which distinguish such a lover in the mad Ophelia’s song are the conventional trappings of a pilgrim, emblematic of his single-minded fidelity (4.5.23-26). Ophelia’s intense grief reminds us, however, that such limitless devotion has its dark corollary. She mourns for her violets, traditionally symbolizing fidelity, which “wither’d all when [her] father died,” while most of her song concerns the bitterness of a foolish maid who allowed herself to be “tumbled” by a fickle lover (4.5.184-85, 4.5.48-66). Although Ophelia herself fails to control her actions, Shakespeare uses her gifts of herbs to suggest that such control is possible: thus Laertes is advised to “remember,” but with “thoughts,” while Ophelia gives Gertrude some of her rue --representing repentance-- reminding her that it is a “herb of grace a Sundays” and exhorting both herself and the queen to “wear [it] with a difference” (4.5.175-83). While one cannot simply discard one’s inner “rue,” the implication is that one can choose how to act upon it. Unlike Laertes and Ophelia, Gertrude attempts to turn her misery to positive use and, as we have seen, protects her son in a careful and prudent manner, perhaps hoping to atone for her actions and achieve “grace” through the mutual “blessing” which Hamlet promised her (3.4.171-72).

Ophelia’s immoderate bitterness is diametrically contrasted to the cynical detachment of the first gravedigger. At first the graveyard scene seems to suggest that philosophical thought exposes the futility of any attempt to resist the passage of time: the gravedigger’s punning demonstration that men were “gard’ners, ditchers and grave-makers” long before they “bore arms” hints at the artificiality of both the noble man’s war-like spirit and his hereditary status, and implies that human life in its natural form consists of nothing more than working for a living and dying (5.1.29-37). His second joke, which hinges on the fact that graves can last longer than ships, houses, sets of gallows and, by implication, even churches, suggests --in an understandably oblique way-- that codes of piety and justice should be seen *sub specie aeternitatis* as artificial constructs, which simultaneously protect and remove us from nature, as ships and houses do, but are no more enduring than the cultures which create them, despite their apparent solidity (5.1.41-60). The gravedigger’s materialistic assumption that death strips us completely of our identity is evident in his bantering demonstration of the futility of respectfully digging a grave for something that used to be Ophelia, but is now merely an object (5.1.130-36). His familiarity with death seems to have fostered a calm acceptance of the insignificance of society’s most revered institutions and values, which has led him to wish for nothing more than to carry on in the ignoble role that he has performed cheerfully for thirty years (5.1.161-62).

Hamlet himself has increasingly been drawn to a materialistic philosophy which reduces Polonius and the king to the status of mere “thing[s]” to be “eaten” by worms and beggars (3.3.36-71, 4.2.28-30, 4.3.19-31). His mocking contemplation of the futility of the politician’s ambition, the courtier’s concern with manners and the lawyer’s devotion to legal “quiddities” shows that he has abandoned his initial piety by now and come to share the gravedigger’s radical scepticism (5.1.78-117). He points out that the lawyers “seek out assurance,” like “sheep and calves” themselves, in “parchment made of sheep-skins…and of calves’-skins,” implying that they can only concern themselves so earnestly with securing property rights by ignoring the fact that their own “lands” will ultimately be narrowed to “this box” (5.1.103-117). A sober contemplation of death undermines the conventional codes of justice and honor to which the lawyer and courtier --and indeed the noble avenger-- adhere, all of which seem designed to reinforce society’s illusory sense of its own lasting significance.

Through his song, a garbled version of a poem by Thomas Lord Vaux entitled *The Aged Lover Renounceth Love*, the gravedigger --Hamlet’s alter ego in this scene-- displays a resignation to the transience of even the most constant attachments which is reminiscent of both Claudius’s rueful remark that love carries within its flame “a kind of week or snuff that will abate it” and the Player King’s resigned acceptance of “passion[s] ending” and purposes lost (4.7.110-18, 3.2.194-95). Crucially, however, when Hamlet attempts to mock his childhood attachment to Yorick, the court jester, now thirty years dead --“where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment”-- his stance of detached scepticism is immediately undermined by the vividly affectionate quality of his memories of riding on Yorick’s back, laughing at his jokes and kissing him countless times (5.1.184-195). Whereas the mortality of the grandees of society reveals the futility of their claim to an enduring significance, Yorick’s death in no way detracts from the joy which he gave the young Hamlet. Moreover, precisely because Yorick was simply concerned to enjoy his relationship with the young prince, he inspired in Hamlet a lasting devotion which was far more intrinsically satisfying than the pride of the courtier, the lawyer or the politician. It is perhaps only in this humble and limited way that one can truly resist mutability: the lover’s fulfillment is of course fragile, perpetually threatened by the mortality of his beloved, but the lasting grief which Hamlet feels for Yorick is itself a sign of the intense loyalty which a joyous friendship can generate. It is typical of Hamlet that, despite his attempt to depreciate the significance of the relationship, he models a natural and moderate response to loss: his calm, yet bittersweet memories of Yorick position him somewhere between Vaux’s cynical “aged lover” and the desperate Ophelia.

Just after Hamlet’s meditations on Yorick Horatio seems to contradict himself: for the first time in the scene he criticizes his friend for “consider[ing] too curiously” as he contemplates the ultimate insignificance of Alexander’s “noble dust,” although earlier in the scene he agreed with the prince’s mockery of the politician “that would circumvent God” and in fact repeatedly supported the prince’s satire on a variety of forms of pride (5.1.195-06, 5.1.78-81, 5.1.87, 5.1.113-15). Why should the humble and philosophical Horatio, who seems the last person to admire Alexander’s conquests, suddenly contradict himself in this way? The most likely answer, I would argue, is that he has been disturbed by the way in which Hamlet has bracketed his friendship with Yorick with the futile ambition of politicians and military commanders. It would be characteristic of the pragmatic Horatio to defend proud spiritedness along with passionate friendship, despite his awareness of the futility of Alexander’s ambitions, on the grounds that it would be better for Hamlet to retain his noble delusions than to extend his sceptical philosophizing so far as to depreciate the value of love itself. One can deduce from Horatio’s changing responses in this scene that the philosopher should indeed conduct a radical critique of the social conventions which bolster pride, but should never attempt to distance himself from his own heart’s senseless core. To put the matter baldly: careful thought reveals that nothing is worth one’s constant devotion except intimate friendship, but also that such friendship is always worth it.

It is not devotion to Ophelia which leads Hamlet to leap into her grave during her funeral and grapple with Laertes, for he later admits to Horatio that the “tow’ring passion” which led him to declare his desire to “fight until [his] eyebrows will no longer wag” in order to prove that he loved her more than “forty thousand brothers” was merely a spirited desire to rival “the bravery of [Laertes’s] grief” (5.1.255-84, 5.2.76-80). Actually we have seen that Hamlet has moved on from his relationship with Ophelia to form a much deeper friendship, but this scene implies that he feels too ashamed of his own inconstancy to admit this to himself. At this point, for the first and only time in the play, what we might call Shakespeare’s covert satire on noble spiritedness becomes too obtrusive to be dismissed easily even by a casual reader or observer, since Hamlet openly admits that his desire to exceed Laertes’s “quantity of love” is childishly competitive (5.2.70). Moreover, Hamlet’s actions are made to contradict his deeper thinking in a particularly graphic way, since he wrestles Laertes in the very grave that has just provoked his reflections on the futility of Alexander and Caesar’s pursuit of honor.

Shakespeare presents Hamlet’s professed loyalty to Ophelia in this scene as a pointless display of noble pride and shame, which perpetuates his mourning after his real passion has cooled. He uses the graveyard scene as a whole to show that on the one hand we “consider too curiously” if we attempt to use philosophy to detach ourselves from the lasting grief which stems from a deep attachment, but on the other that we should accept the ignoble fact that the intensity of such an attachment cannot be sustained when it is no longer stimulated by the actual experience of friendship. Shakespeare not only criticizes the Player King’s cynical resignation to a universal fickleness, but implies that the Player Queen’s urge to commit herself permanently to the memory of her husband, however natural in its origin, would eventually come to seem nothing more than a futile gesture, dictated by conventional ideas of virtue. In the last part of the play Shakespeare uses Ophelia’s story to promote what one might call a healthy inconstancy in mourning, in which destructively passionate and pointlessly noble responses to loss are prudently avoided, while the core experience of grief, which is not itself amenable to reason, is gradually allowed to soften into to a calm bittersweet affection.

By apologizing for having “forgot[ten] himself” in Ophelia’s grave, albeit while simultaneously determining to “court [Laertes’s] favors,” Hamlet shows not only that he retains an ability to restrain his noble spiritedness, but also that he continues to rely on his deepening friendship with Horatio (5.2.75-78). Nevertheless, the prince increasingly gives rein to his honourable spiritedness as the play goes on, freeing himself to act decisively by adopting a new attitude of pious fatalism, which, like Fortinbras’s noble campaign, almost defines itself by its irrationality. Thus he praises “rashness” and “indiscretion” and declares that there is “a divinity that shapes our ends,” superior to “deep plots,” even though his real view is implicit not only in the thorough going materialism of his reflections in the graveyard, but in his dying comment that “the rest is silence” (5.2.6-11, 5.2.358). This new stance allows him to send Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths in what Horatio will later call “casual slaughters” and to dismiss them as “baser nature[s]” who “did make love to this employment” and so are justly caught in a clash of “mighty opposites” (5.2.57-62, 5.2.382). He claims that the deaths of his old school friends are not “near [his] conscience,” but still feels guilty enough to defend his actions from Horatio’s implicit reproach (5.2.56-58). His only response to Horatio’s worries regarding Claudius’s intentions is to declare that “a man’s life is no more than to say ‘one’,” while he rationalizes his decision to fight a duel with Laertes with the uncharacteristically glib thought that “there is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow,” adding that “since no man, of aught he leaves, knows what is’t to leave betimes, let be” (5.2.74, 5.2.219-24). Just as Horatio might have feared, this last remark suggests that Hamlet’s overly “curious” meditations on the ephemerality of all things have led him to a desperate nihilism of the type that might be familiar to a modern audience: since all deeds are equally insignificant and life no better than death, he reasons that he might as well act nobly and disdain the sort of misgivings regarding the proposed duel that “would perhaps trouble a woman” (5.2.215-16).

Horatio more or less warns Hamlet to suspect foul play when he is challenged to the duel, but the prince has “a kind of fighting in [his] heart,” where all is “ill,” which leads him to court the “felicity” of death (5.2.4-5, 5.2.212-18, 5.2.347-48). This “fighting” is a reminder that there is still a part of Hamlet which is opposed to direct action against Claudius, despite his noble talk. The prince might well see death at the hands of Laertes as an honourable means of avoiding such action, as well as an effective way of escaping personal misery. Thus Hamlet finally chooses the option of noble, but futile self-destruction which he contemplated in the “to be” soliloquy. Nevertheless, the fact that he does at last act decisively against Claudius, but only in response to Gertrude’s poisoning, demonstrates that his passion is in the end stronger than his nobility (5.2.309-27). At the same time his delays have ensured that Gertrude never has to grieve for a murdered king and, perhaps more by luck than judgement, that Claudius’s guilt becomes clear enough to the assembled lords to justify his violent death and so to remove the risk of civil war. In this way amidst the devastation of the ending Shakespeare unobtrusively endorses Hamlet’s extended procrastination, showing it to be more prudent and compassionate than the noble alternative.

Horatio’s self-restraint is shown in the way in which he agrees emphatically with Hamlet’s remarks about a controlling “divinity,” perhaps because he considers noble piety preferable to nihilistic philosophy (5.2.6-11). Later, however, as he begins to realize that Hamlet is in real danger, he ignores the profession of belief in a “special providence” by which the prince rationalizes his acceptance of Laertes’s challenge and the spirited account which he gives of his own swordsmanship, where he has “been in continual practice,” urging his friend instead to use his “mind” before accepting the challenge, and undercutting his noble pride with the terse assurance that he “will lose” (5.2.209-18). When Hamlet at last actually asks his friend whether he would not now be “damned” if he did not take revenge --albeit framing the question as a matter of “conscience” in such a fervently pious manner as to make it appear rhetorical-- Horatio simply makes the pragmatic point that “it must be shortly known to [Claudius]” that he has escaped from the ship (5.2.63-72). Here again Horatio ignores what we might call the moral issues and is simply concerned to anticipate the next move of a murderous king. Rather than prudently “suffering” the self-destruction of his disruptive friend, he focuses his thoughts entirely on protecting Hamlet, initially by supporting his pious fatalism, but then, when there is real danger, with a pragmatic realism which implicitly undermines his noble illusions.

Horatio’s response to Hamlet’s death illustrates his characteristic mixture of “blood and judgment.” Typically, he presents his attempt at suicide as honourable in the “antique Roman” style, but his extreme distress is evident in his repeated efforts to resist Hamlet’s efforts to wrest the poisoned cup from his grasp (5.2.340-43). Horatio is not in the end the stoical rationalist that he might appear to be: his attempted suicide underscores his passionate affection for his friend. Nevertheless, even though Horatio obeys Hamlet for one last time and agrees to live on to “tell [his] story,” it is already clear from his blunt summary of “accidental judgments” and “casual slaughters” that his aim will not be to clear the prince’s “wounded name,” as the latter requested (5.2.382, 5.2.344-49). Horatio decides that an honest account of recent events must be:

Presently perform’d

Even while men’s minds are wild, lest more mischance

On plots and errors happen. (5.2.393-95)

For precisely the same reasons one might have expected Horatio to tell Fortinbras immediately that Hamlet has nominated him to be the next king of Denmark, but, surprisingly, he chooses not do so (5.2.356-58). He mentions the nomination only when the hot-headed Fortinbras has already started to press his claims to the throne, and then so vaguely --“of that I shall have also cause to speak”-- as to suggest that his motive in so doing might be to forestall rather than install the spirited young prince (5.2.391). Horatio’s careful prudence is also evident in his response to Hamlet’s last words, “the rest is silence,” which he seems to realize could be understood --probably correctly-- by the assembled court on this very public occasion to mean “all that remains is non-existence” (5.2.358). The pragmatic Horatio, who, it should be remembered, reveals his materialistic philosophy only to his intimate friends, reassures the listening crowd that “flights of angels” will “sing” the prince to a “rest” which through a clever pun he now manages to identify with the peace of heaven rather than the silent void (1.5.166-67, 5.2.359-60). Because Horatio does not feel duty bound to honor Hamlet’s memory, he is free to “wear [his] rue with a difference,” promoting social stability in his characteristically manipulative manner, while he waits for his sadness to fade gradually, as it must do in the course of nature.

Thus Horatio’s “blood and judgment” combine in such a manner as to render him utterly devoted to Hamlet while he is alive, but completely pragmatic in his approach to the prince’s final wishes, which he realizes are noble rather than prudent. The contrast between this approach and Hamlet’s own noble commitment to honor his dead father’s request hints at Shakespeare’s critique of conventional ideas of virtuous loyalty. Throughout the play Horatio has obeyed all of Hamlet’s requests except where he judged that the prince’s life was in danger, but, unlike Hamlet himself and the Player Queen, he seems to realize that his loyalty has always been motivated by the actual experience of love, which means that the prince’s death frees him from all the obligations associated with friendship. Nevertheless, although Horatio seems now to be coolly focused on preserving political stability, it should not be forgotten that he would have committed suicide and left Denmark to its fate had not Hamlet begged him to remain alive to tell his story. Thus the play ends as it began; by showing us Horatio prioritizing his own passionate attachments, but dealing prudently and compassionately with a fickle and mutable world, even though this is never his primary consideration. In contrast, Hamlet’s dying speeches are perhaps his most foolish, since he concentrates on saving his reputation rather than on cementing his friendship with Horatio.

To sum up on the argument of the whole play: although the passionate man will be shocked and disturbed by the fickleness which he is bound to encounter both in politics and in his personal life, his sympathetic nature will eventually temper any urge he might feel to “take arms” against this pervasive inconstancy. Nevertheless, insofar as he is noble as well as passionate, he will be prone to value moral constancy over his natural inclinations, and may therefore be driven by his rigorous principles to attempt to punish or reform a fickle world. On a personal level this attempt is likely to be both cruel and futile, since most of those whom he loves are bound to be less deeply passionate than himself and therefore innately prone to inconstancy. On a political level his idealism may well be highly disruptive, since the state is often most efficiently managed by those whose detached, self-protective prudence enables them to prioritize political stability over both passionate attachments and moral principles. The play centres, in both a literal and metaphorical sense, on Hamlet’s speech in praise of Horatio, who reserves his devoted constancy for his friends, but has rooted out any noble or moral impulse to apply similar standards to a pervasively fickle society, although he does support political stability wherever possible in a coolly compassionate manner.[[12]](#endnote-13)

A thoughtful man will draw a distinction between noble or pious aspirations to a more lasting significance, which are shown in the graveyard scene to be illusions rooted in social convention rather than nature, and constant friendship, which offers substantial and enduring rewards, albeit on a humbler scale. Thus the only actions in the play which are truly effective are those by which Horatio demonstrates his unlimited and imprudent loyalty to Hamlet and so gains the prince’s complete trust. Friends are mortal, however, and grief is no more amenable to rational restraint than love, but at least the thoughtful man contains his grief and allows it to run its natural course. He recognizes that bereavement frees him from any obligation to remain loyal to his beloved, since true constancy is not dictated by a moral code, but arises naturally from the fulfilling experience of friendship. Thus, returning to the three key elements around which the play revolves, Horatio’s loyalty remains entirely passionate, since his thoughtful nature allows him to root out any trace of noble constancy.

Shakespeare’s attempt to separate noble from natural constancy might seem irrelevant to the modern age, which generally attempts to base morality on sincere feeling rather than honor, but I would argue that “the struggle for recognition,” to use Fukuyama’s phrase, remains a key motive for virtue.[[13]](#endnote-14) In fact one could argue that, paradoxically, moral action appeals particularly to the noble pride of the modern man precisely because it now presents itself as selflessly compassionate or indignant. Thus in our times the thoughtful and passionate are even less well placed than their Elizabethan counterparts to understand the intricate and ambiguous ways in which pride and shame can interact with natural passion to reinforce idealism. As I have argued elsewhere, Shakespeare’s core value is constancy in love, and what one might call the natural nobility of the lover as he strives to achieve fulfilment through perfect unity with his beloved.[[14]](#endnote-15) In *Hamlet* he reminds us of his *summum bonum*, but, in order to prevent passionate readers from being distracted from the deepest demands of their own hearts, focuses mainly on a critique of noble constancy which is so radical that it is likely to startle audiences in any era, if it is fully understood.

1. For friendship as Shakespeare’s *summum bonum* see Richard Burrow, “Fulfilment in ‘As You Like It,’” *Interpretation: a Journal of Political Philosophy* 41/2, Fall (2014), 91-122. This should be seen as a companion piece to the current essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. All references to *Hamlet* are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G.Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. See A.C.Bradley, “Shakespeare’s Tragic Period-‘Hamlet,’” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of “Hamlet,”* ed. David Bevington (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1968), 19-21; E.M.W.Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s Problem Plays* (London: Chatto and Windus), 19-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Marilyn French, “Chaste Constancy in ‘Hamlet*,*’*”* in *“Hamlet”: Contemporary Critical Essays,* ed. Martin Coyle (London: Macmillan, 1992), 97-99, 106-07. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in “Hamlet”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 293-94. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. For a sympathetic account of the arguments against “taking arms” see Helen Gardner, “The Historical Approach to ‘Hamlet,’”in *Shakespeare: “Hamlet”; A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 145-48. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. For a useful summary of the critics who view Hamlet as cruel and destructive, as well as those who oppose this view see Philip Edwards, “Tragic balance in ‘Hamlet,’” in *“Hamlet”: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Coyle (London, Macmillan, 1992), 19-21, 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 1213n284. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Leonard Tennenhouse, “Power in ‘Hamlet,’” in “*Hamlet”: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Coyle (London: Macmillan, 1992), 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. David Leverenz, “The Woman in Hamlet,” in *“Hamlet”: Contemporary Critical Essays* ed. Martin Coyle (London: Macmillan, 1992), 133. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. D.G.James, “The New Doubt,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of “Hamlet,”* ed. David Bevington (New Jersey: Prentice Hall inc., 1968), 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Whatever is at the centre of an esoteric work is “the least exposed”: Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 161. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Richard Burrow, “Fulfilment in ‘As You Like It.’” [↑](#endnote-ref-15)