

Hamlet, Osric, and the Duelⁱ

The principal events in the last act of *Hamlet* seem to be incidental and arbitrary. Hamlet and Laertes both do more to impede their own respective plans than to advance them, and Claudius' promise of a foolproof scheme for Hamlet's death is hard to square with the general atmosphere of unrehearsed happenstance in everything leading up to the fatal duel.

We know, for example, that Claudius proposed and apparently worked out the main details of Laertes' treacherous duel with Hamlet as early as 4.7.ⁱⁱ but its actual occurrence seems to depend heavily on the accident of Hamlet's impetuous leap from concealment at Ophelia's funeral. Even then, the all-important duel remains contingent and does not become an actual threat to Hamlet's life until he accepts Osric's invitation, which he does in apparently casual or perhaps impulsive disregard of the obvious perils.

The prevailing critical views about the play offer nothing to dispel the suspicion that the climax occurs accidentally.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet, it is impossible to talk about meaning in the play without assuming that some operative principle of cause and effect connects Hamlet's death with the events that immediately precede it. Was it the natural and logical result of some specific onstage event? Was it the expression of some intuitively satisfying but undiscovered rule of poetic justice? Was his death accidental and arbitrary? Until we know what happened to Hamlet we cannot know what happens in *Hamlet*.

I will try in this paper to show that the answers to these questions are contained in the text itself. Shakespeare made Hamlet's motivation completely clear to his contemporary audience by creating a verbal and visual frame of reference for the key events in the last two acts by which he conveyed an express meaning that was easily understood in his day but has become obscure if not invisible to modern audiences and readers. He did so through a sequence of four references, by Claudius, Laertes, Hamlet, and Osric respectively, to the classical myth of the *gigantomachia* -- the rebellion of the giants against Jupiter in the course of which they attempted to pile Mount Pelion on Ossa to scale Mount Olympus and overthrow the divine order of the world, as maintained by the Olympian gods. In the development of this allusion through the course of the play Shakespeare integrates the final calamity with all that precedes it, at two distinct levels of meaning. First, it constitutes a line of thematic that illuminates the unrecognized motivations for Hamlet's consent to the duel. Second, it operates within the plot itself, supplying the immediate motive for actions we see take place on stage.

One of the reasons that the key events are regularly misinterpreted is the universal but unlikely assumption that the treacherous plot hatched by Claudius and Laertes in act four is the same one we see unfold in act five. There is better reason to ask instead how the duel could possibly have taken place at all, after the fiasco at

Ophelia's funeral. Laertes' premature show of violent hostility toward Hamlet destroyed the assumption on which it depended, in Claudius' words that Hamlet was unwary, so "generous and free from all contriving" (4.7.134, TLN 3125) and that he would never suspect Laertes to act other than honorably and sportingly in the proposed duel. Yet, Shakespeare made it expressly clear that Claudius' plan was hinged on just this assumption.

Critics (and actors) regularly disregard Claudius' stated intention not to proceed with his plan unless it could be executed subtly enough to escape Hamlet's notice: "If this should fail,/ And that our drift look through our bad performance,/ 'Twere better not essay'd." (4.7.159-51, TLN 3142-44) In other words, Claudius intends to abandon the plan rather than risk discovery. As we will see, Claudius saved his plan by changing it; the pretense of a friendly display of swordplay no longer tenable after Hamlet's and Laertes' overt display of mutual hostility at the funeral, he made a vital addition to the plan by introducing a new ruse that made Hamlet recklessly eager to oppose Laertes in the duel. Since it was no longer plausible to invite Hamlet to participate, he would be incited to do so.

It was Claudius' insight into the special nature of the provocation which overcame Hamlet's self-control at the funeral that allowed him to reintroduce the same provocation by way of Osric, and to save his plan by manipulating Hamlet to serve his own murderous purpose. The catastrophe does not simply follow the apparently spontaneous and haphazard events of the fifth act, but depends on them. The scenes in the graveyard and then with Osric each add steadily and logically to the dramatic tension, alternately advancing the plot and explaining to the audience what is happening.

Most critics assume that the proposed fencing match is a clear danger which Hamlet either refuses or fails to avoid, maintaining by implication that the trap is as obvious to Hamlet as it appears to us while at the same time assuming that Claudius, a master of artful stratagems, doesn't see how obvious the trap has become and naively expects a now alerted Hamlet to walk into it. As a result, they all overlook Osric's crucial role in saving Claudius' plan to have Hamlet killed in a duel.

The greatest of the unrecognized problems is presented by Osric's remarkable story of a "great wager" between Claudius and Laertes which, on close consideration, is a transparently unconvincing inducement for Hamlet to gratify Claudius and a manifestly inadequate pretext for Claudius to rely on. Why should the audience believe in Hamlet's ready consent to participate in a duel that both endangers his life and jeopardizes his revenge? Why especially one arranged by Claudius and Laertes, when Hamlet has good reason to anticipate treachery from both? There must be something more at work than the literal challenge delivered by Osric, in order for the last scene to carry the sense of dramatically logical urgency, of forces overtaking Hamlet and carrying him away with them, suitable to the events taking place onstage.

The answers to all these questions lie in the mythical story of the giants' rebellion against Zeus, which becomes a controlling motif in the last scenes. Its first unambiguous appearance, in the middle of act four, occurs on Laertes; return from Paris as king-designate over a disorderly army of rabble. When he forces his way into the king's presence, Claudius receives him with studied dignity and calm.

What is the cause, Laertes,
That thy rebellion looks so giant-like? (4.5.120-21, TLN 2866-7)

In the words of J. A. Thomson,

"The point of this has been missed. The rebellion of the Giants against the king of the gods was the great classical instance of *lese majeste* . . . No subject was more popular with ancient artists, and it was well enough known to Elizabethans for Shakespeare to use it here."^{iv}

The earth-born giants were the polar opposites of the divine Olympians. Variousy described as impious, foolhardy, impetuous, treasonous, indiscreet, inglorious, beastlike, dangerous, vile, and tyrannous, their cause was always a reprehensible one. Elizabethans, hearing that Laertes' rebellion was "giant-like," would immediately recognize it for an act of lawless and impious audacity. It was more than a private crime, it was an attack on sovereign authority and the divinely appointed order of the world itself, that threatened the well-being of the nation.

Four centuries later, one may doubt whether this classical allusion was widely familiar enough to be recognized by an Elizabethan audience. However, representative examples of writing for different tastes and social stations, including one by Shakespeare himself, support Thomson's claim that it was.

Francis Bacon explained it from a scholarly point of view in "The Wisom of the Ancients (1609):

The poets tell us that the Giants, being brought forth by Earth, made war upon Jupiter and the gods, and were routed and vanquished by thunderbolts, whereupon Earth, in rage at the wrath of the gods, to revenged her sons brought forth Fame, youngest sister of the Giants.

The meaning of the fable appears to be this: by Earth is meant the nature of the common people; always swelling with malice towards their rulers, and hatching revolutions. This upon occasion given brings forth rebels and seditious persons, who with wicked audacity endeavor the overthrow of princes."^v

In the *Faerie Queene*, when Britomart stands temporarily appalled at the task of assaulting the castle of the mighty enchanter Busirane, Spenser's casual use of the dame image takes it for granted that the story was a familiar one.

“What monstrous enmity provoke we here,
Foolhardy as th’Earthes children, the which made
Battell against the Gods? So we a God invade.

Danger without discretion to attempt
Inglorious and beastlike is. . .” (3.11.22-23)

Guazzo’s *The Civile Conversation*, translated into English by George Pettie in 1581, assumes that even the untutored will recognize the reverence for its cautionary moral. A courtesy book, or handbook of correct behavior, *The Civile Conversation* was intended not for the learned but as a self-help guide for those socially unaccomplished persons who wished to refine their manners. The aspiring courtier is admonished not to presume to question the deeds of Princes, whose acts are “yrreprehensible and incomprehensible” to their subjects, lest he err in the manner of the giants:

“ . . . for that being Gods on earth, it is to bee thought, that all which they doe is done well: and that to reason and call ito question their dooings, is nothing else, but with the Gyants, to lay siege to heaven.”^{vi}

Shakespeare himself invoked the image in *Measure for Measure* with strict appropriateness, to compare a tyrant’s lawless use of political power with the giants’ lawless use of their great strength:

“O, it is excellent
To have a giant’s strength, but it is tyrannous
To use it like a giant. “ (2.2. 108-110)

J. W. Laver, editor of the new Arden edition, comments on the passage:

“The revolt of the giants against Jove was a familiar myth, especially as told by Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I. Because they had the divine attribute of strength, without divine wisdom or forbearance, their actions were tyrannous, a travesty rather than an imitation of God.”^{vii}

Claudius’ question “What is the cause, Laertes, that thy rebellion looks so giant-like can now be understood in its original meaning as a stern rebuke for his young subject’s ill-considered and doomed enterprise, rather than a concession that it constituted a huge or overpowering threat. Claudius’ confident reception of his rebellious subject is less dependent on physical courage, a somewhat doubtful proposition in any case, than his assurance that he is for once at least in a position of relative moral superiority.

“There’ such divinity doth hedge a king
That treason can but peep to what it would,
Acts little of his will.” (4.5.123-125, TLN 2868-70)

Claudius characteristically ignores the fact that his sanctimonious platitudes utterly condemn him for his own deeds, but the irony of the situation does not relieve Laertes' moral disadvantage; Claudius is undeniably Denmark's king, elected and crowned with all due formality and entitled to command from Laertes all the respect due to a lawful sovereign. The same universal order that keeps the sun enthroned in the heavenly "burning zone" which the earth-born giants might not invade, sustains his sanctified authority as God's regent in Denmark.

Laertes invokes the same myth promptly after his reappearance in the fifth act, when we see him at Ophelia's funeral.

"Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead,
Till of this flat a mountain you have made
T'o'ertop old Pelion, or the skyish head
Of blue Olympus." (5.1.244-7, TLN 3445-48)

The remarkable aspect of Laertes' speech is that he obviously does not know the point of the familiar myth that he invokes; he takes the heaping up of Pelion to be a type of heroic achievement. And in so doing he makes himself ludicrous and turns his lamentation into a travesty by applying the giants' deed to his own situation, managing thereby both to reveal the extent of Claudius' superiority and control over their previous meeting, and also to show why Claudius feared him so little and gulled him so easily.

The effect of Laertes' speech on Hamlet is equally remarkable. Hamlet treats it as a personal affront, leaps from his safe concealment to confront Claudius and the mourners, and announces himself defiantly in the heroic idiom, "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane." (5.1.250-51, TLN 3452-3) Later, apparently taken aback by his own impulsiveness and at a loss to understand what came over him, Hamlet's attempt to explain himself to Horatio confirms that his behavior was irrational and unplanned: "But sure the bravery of his grief did put me / Into a tow'ring passion." (5.2.78-79, TLN 3583-4)

"Bravery" refers to Laertes' ostentatious and ignorant display, not valor, and Hamlet's fierce reaction to it draws attention to the fact that the focus of his resentment is not on Ophelia's death or Laertes' grief but on Laertes' style of expressing it, what Hamlet calls his prating, his mouthing. We see here the dark side of Hamlet's quick-witted intelligence, in his pedantic and intolerant fussiness over words and usage. He repeatedly spends his brightest wit on verbal one-upmanship; whether speaking to Claudius, Polonius, Gertrude, or even Horatio, Hamlet cannot restrain the unlovely habit of turning everyone's words around to defeat their intended meanings. While nothing in the text forbids us from supposing that the discovery of Ophelia's death stirred Hamlet to intense feelings of shock, grief, and even remorse, all we actually see is that he puts himself in Claudius' hands for no better purpose than to mock Laertes' foolish speech with a withering parody of his own.

In the course of his derisive taunt a strange transmutation takes place in the grammatical perspective of Hamlet's own language. It shifts from an objective point of view to a subjective one and, as it does, the line separating scornful mockery from undignified rant disappears. Hamlet reinvokes the myth of the giants by applying it to himself in the same inappropriate sense as Laertes did and, by the time he finishes, there is little to distinguish his own cause from that of Laertes and the giants.

“Swounds, show me what thou’lt do.
Woo’t weep, woo’t fight, woo’t fast, woo’t tear thyself
Woo’t drink up easel, eat a crocodile?
I’ll do’t. Dost come here to whine,
To outface me with leaping in her grave?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I.
And if thou prate of mountains, let them throw
Millions of acres on us, till our ground,
Singeing his pate against the burning zone,
Make Ossa like a wart. Nay, an thou’lt mouth,
I’ll rant as well as thou.” (5.1.269-279, TLN 3471-3481)

Claudius could not but realize that this revealing spectacle and the tussle that followed it meant the end of his original plan, that any duel with Laertes would not find Hamlet innocently unawares; to the contrary, he is likely to be acutely sensitive to danger everywhere, both mischief from Laertes and further treachery from Claudius. Further, if any change were to be made it would have to be done without Laertes' knowledge. He is a weak reed, too hot-headed to rely on for any new subtlety. Accordingly, Claudius adapts himself to the new situation, and does so brilliantly through an instant recognition how to turn Hamlet's passion to his own purpose. He coolly transforms the incident which upset his original scheme into a device for carrying it out more effectively than ever, a device that relied on the effect of a single provocative word, “impon’d.” So he turns to Osric, with all his absurd speech affectations, as the one courtier capable of employing it “to keep his anger still in motion”^{viii} without appearing to do so.

Osric has a mission of the utmost delicacy, to provoke Hamlet to behave imprudently without Hamlet's ever noticing that he is being played upon. Osric's characteristic vice is *cacozelia*, or “affected diction, especially the coining of fine words out of Latin.”^{ix} “Imponed” was an unusual word in English, rare enough to catch Hamlet's attention, but for the same reason liable to alert him to the artifice and potential treachery behind any proposal by Claudius for an innocent fencing match. However, in Osric's mouth the same uncommon word will be no more than a single drop in a chaotic flood of extravagant Latinisms. Yet it remains potent enough to retrigger Hamlet's towering passion against Laertes.

The first eighty-five lines of dialogue between the funeral scene and Osric's appearance are taken up by Hamlet's narrative of discovery and escape from death by reason of the treacherous commission Claudius meant to have delivered secretly in England. However, the tenor of what follows constitutes an abrupt and significant change in tone and subject matter, from a quietly proud tale of derring-do on the high seas to the rueful recollection of a much less commendable performance: Hamlet's embarrassing loss of self-possession in the face of graveside Laertes' ranting – "But sure the bravery of his grief did put me/ Into a tow'ring passion."

Hamlet's attitude toward Laertes is necessarily complex, particularly in his sense of fellow-feeling toward a man whose cause, like his own, is the violent death of a father, and surely intensified by his own responsibility for it. Laertes is a "noble youth" whose favor Hamlet intends to court so as to overcome the offense of his own conduct at the funeral. But in act five the attention of the audience is directed particularly to another fact, Hamlet's hair-trigger sensitivity to Laertes' verbal bombast.

Because Osric makes his entrance on precisely this note, Hamlet's lines take on a special meaning and function in preparing the audience for what is to come. Hamlet has just finished describing Claudius' first attempt at treachery; the recollection of his "tow'ring passion" is a reminder of how he unwittingly escaped the second; and Osric is just about to launch a third attempt by reviving the very passion which Hamlet is confessing. Hamlet's recollection reminds the audience that he does not suffer pompous diction gladly, and also prepares it for a comparably explosive response to Osric, whose egregious "waterfly" apparel prefigures his outlandish rhetoric, on which Hamlet will descend like a hawk on a heron. One could hardly visualize a more ill-chosen messenger to deliver an invitation Hamlet is supposed to consider seriously.

That, of course, is exactly the point. Hamlet must not take Osric seriously and must not be permitted to consider the invitation closely at all. He is to be distracted from his customary alertness by Osric's extravagant language, with the calculated intent to engage his attention and challenge his wit in order to divert him from recognizing or even considering the implausibility of Claudius' invitation.

Since both the invitation and Hamlet's acceptance take place onstage in %.@. We can see exactly how Claudius set his trap and how it worked:

Osric . . . My lord, his Majesty bade me signify to you that a has laid a great wager on you head . . . The King, sir, hath wagered six Barbary hoses, against the which he has impon'd as I take it, six French rapiers and poniards, with their assigns, as girdle, hangers, and so. Three of the carriages, in faith, are very dear to fancy, very responsive to the hilts, most delicate carriages, and of very liberal conceit.

Hamlet What call you the carriages?

Horatio I knew you must be edified m=by the margin ere you had done.

Osric The carriages, sir, are the hangers.

Hamlet The phrase would be more german to the matter if we could carry an cannon by our sides – I would it might be hangers till then. But on. Six Barbary horses against six French swords, their assigns, and three liberal-conceited carriages – that’s the French bet against the Danish. Why is this – impon’d, as you call it?

Osric The King, sir, hath laid, sir, that in a dozen passes between yourself and him he shall not exceed you three hits; he hath laid on twelve for nine. And it would come to immediate trial if you lordship would vouchsafe the answer.

Hamlet How if I answer no?

Osric I mean, my lord, the opposition of your person in trial.

Hamlet Sir, I will walk in the hall. If it please his Majesty, it is the breathing time of day with me. Let the foils be brought . . . (5.2. 100-172, TLN 3606 – 3639)

Actors and critics generally play and interpret the scene with Osric as a purely comic interlude, a theatrical device to relieve the audience from the intensity of the graveyard scene in order to prepare it for the emotional demands of the final duel. Because a modern audience knows in advance that Osric will deliver Claudius’ invitation and Hamlet will accept, it fails completely to recognize the dramatic tension arising from the real uncertainty of Hamlet’s response. He may yet “answer no” and save himself. The general hilarity of Osric’s discomfiture is only a secondary element of the scene, the comical counterpoint to Hamlet’s all-important decision whether or not to fence with Laertes. The deeper and more important dynamics of the scene are obscured by overfamiliarity, with a large assist from the widely held assumption that Osric’s message is itself incomprehensible. To read the scene as purely or evenly principally comic is to misread the crucial passage that makes the ending intelligible. Its value as an emotional change of pace for the audience is subordinate to its dramatic function, which is to establish and explain the connection between what happened in the graveyard and the duel that followed.

Horatio provides us with the needed clue to Osric’s character and function in the play by identifying him with the deceitful lapwing – as Chaucer says, the “false lapwyng, ful of trecherye”^x – thus marking Osric with the lapwing’s double stigma

of presumption and deceit. It is the lapwing's reputation to decoy nest-robbers by feigning injury and vulnerability, fluttering weakly ever farther from its nest and then flying safely away when the hunter is hopelessly off the track. The epithet labeled Osric unmistakably to an Elizabethan audience as Claudius' decoy and a knowing participant in the plot against Hamlet.

Everything about him is emblematic of Osric's deceptive purpose and, despite Hamlet's apparent verbal successes, it is he who is in control of the repartee between them. Conforming to his lapwing character, he draws Hamlet away from considering the wisdom of entering the proposed duel with a verbal fluttering of wings and a distracting exchange of Latinate repartee and dubious coinage. Diverted from the dangerous reality that Osric's report is the first sortie in Claudius' third and final attack, Hamlet succumbs to the seductive illusion that he is playing cat and mouse with a harmless nonentity. And so Osric delivers him into Claudius' power.

We may allow ourselves to imagine the exchange through Elizabethan eyes. Lapwing-like, he distracts Hamlet from recognizing the trap ahead by creating a diversion which tempts Hamlet to pursue him into the thickets of a verbal fencing match. The bloodless wordplay between Hamlet and Osric, not unlike the dumb show which precedes Hamlet's *Mousetrap*, are a dramatic prologue prefiguring the earnest swordplay to follow and the concealed deadliness of the wound to be inflicted. Lapwing-like again, Osric must encourage Hamlet away from any further reflection on whether or not to accept, and allowing Hamlet to win the first hits is the sure way to increase his confidence and dull his alertness.

Osric delivers the victories to Hamlet immediately. Though his description of Laertes is so ornate as to be nearly unintelligible, Hamlet masters him with a spontaneous parody that exceeds Osric even in excess, leaving him nearly speechless and Hamlet triumphant. So, too, the by-play over Osric's bonnet ends with the hat squarely on his head and Hamlet gains another easy win. But while Hamlet busies himself scoring verbal hits, the scene operates emblematically in the form of a tableau vivant to convey a contrary message that stands in ironic contrast with the literal sense of the dialogue. We see lapwing-Osric standing proudly at the center of attention, the living emblem of his own deceitful errand. His gaudy attire proclaims the upstart affluence of his spacious land holdings, and the eggshell-hat ostentatiously on his head does double duty as the lapwing's prominent crest and also the symbol of its presumptuous precocity. Hamlet, his scintillating performance over, stands looking complacently at his seemingly hapless victim.

Yet this is all prologue. The purpose of Osric's mission was to reignite Hamlet's "tow'ring passion" by reminding him of Laertes' infuriating performance at the funeral and inciting him to try and take the young fool down a peg or two; and the key element to his success was to be the use of "impon'd," a word which immediately and explicitly invokes the myth of the giants' revolt against Jupiter, and Claudius' earlier use of the same mythological reference to chastise Laertes.

The chaotic spellings of the folios and quartos have caused endless confusion and obscured Shakespeare's intent. The Second Quarto spelling, "impauned," is unhelpfully ambiguous, admitting either the Folio reading "impon'd" or the Fourth Quarto "impawned," both of which are unusual in English but not unknown. "Impon'd" simply Englishes the Latin *imponere*, "to pile [something] upon" with no change in meaning. However, "impawned" has won favor with editors on the mistaken premise that the Folio reading makes no sense in the context of Claudius' wager with Laertes, and the assumption that the sum or object staked in a wager suggests a pawn or pledge for future performance.

There is however good reason for describing Laertes' bet as a "piling on," for because "imponere" has a special connection with the story of the giants' rebellion that makes the First Folio reading an essential feature of Osric's message. In particular, the word is familiar from Vergil, that staple of Elizabethan grammar school education, in his description of the episode in the *gigantomachia* where the giants attempted to overthrow the Olympian order, and thus reduce to chaos the divinely ordained order of the world itself.

Ter sunt conati **imponere** Pelio Ossam scilicet, atque Ossae
frondosum involvere Olympum.

(Thrice did they attempt to pile Ossa on Pelion and over Osso to roll
leafy Olympus) (Georgics, I 281-2, emphasis supplied)

At this point, with Osric apparently defeated and disarmed, his purse empty and all his golden words spent, Hamlet's appraisal of him as a "waterfly" or "chough," a trifling chatterer, seems to be confirmed. Yet Osric has one golden word left, "impon'd," and he spends it with telling effect to describe the "great wager:" Claudius' rich offer of six Barbary horses and Laertes' unheard of response – Osric can hardly credit the audacity of it – to "imponere" on the king's wager a further stake of six French rapiers and their assigns.

Let us consider exactly what it is that Osric is telling Hamlet. Claudius has staked six Barbary horses, a very expensive and desirable prize, on the outcome of a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. Laertes' part in the wager conveys, at the least, more than a hint or provocative tactlessness. Fresh from Paris with a proud estimation of his own swordsmanship, the stakes offered by him are all overtly Frenchified and alien. The stress on ornament rather than utility contrasts with the simple Danish offer of fine horseflesh. It is specified that his rapiers are French ones, "dear to fancy" with matching hilts and all of "very liberal conceit." The whole description promises the latest in useless ornament and suggests a prompt disregard by Laertes of his father's advice to assemble a wardrobe "not express'd in fancy." (1.3.71, TLN 536) So does the apparently new coinage "carriages" to describe the hangers. One senses that Laertes' stakes are abrasively alien to the

local sense of decorum even before Hamlet's remark emphasizes the same thing, "that's the French bet against the Danish." (5.2.159-60, TLN 3628-3629)

There are other troubling incongruities in the conventional interpretations of this scene. The wager is generally assumed to be a bet in the modern sense, a mutual engagement to risk an agreed stake on the outcome of an uncertain event. I suggest instead that it is more likely that Claudius, as king, simply offered a prize to the swordsman who could defeat his selected champion, Hamlet, at the agreed odds. The O.E.D. supports this assumption, with illustrations dating from 1450 and continuing for nearly two hundred years, showing that "wager" also meant simply the prize to be won in a contest.

It is this meaning which is especially likely to be the intended one here, where the prize wagered is offered by a king with the wealth of a nation at his disposal. Generosity being the essential virtue of the great warrior monarchs and the very cement of their subjects' loyalty, it would be unseemly in the highest degree for Claudius to post a rich prize for the victor and then ask the challenger to risk a like amount if he failed. His wager was far less likely to be intended as a bet between equals than an openhanded offer for the subject to accept or not as he chose, with nothing to lose but his "shame and the odd hits."

From the subject's standpoint, it would be worse than bad form to overmatch the king's own generosity by telling his sovereign "And if I **don't** win, I'll give **you** a prize." It would be unheard of audacity, an affront to every loyal member of the court, and an invitation of the severest royal displeasure. In fact, Osric can hardly credit the story and separates himself from vouching for its truth by disclaiming personal knowledge: "he has impon'd as I take it . . ."

Up to this point, Hamlet's attention is divided between the word play with Osric and the less interesting task of following his nearly unintelligible story. Horatio gibes at him gently when he has to admit defeat and ask Osric to explain "carriages," apparently a recent coinage that Hamlet cannot understand.^{xi} When Osric translates into everyday English and explains that the "carriages" are hangers, Hamlet finally comprehends the bet and the meaning of "impon'd" begins to dawn on him for the first time.

We see a change in Hamlet's manner. As his ears perk, he turns from the casual distraction of mocking Osric to get down to business: "why is this – impon'd as you call it?" The emphasis on "as you call it" highlights the importance of Osric's language. "Impone" my, like "carriages," be real English. If it is English, Osric has finally said something important, and Hamlet suddenly eager to know exactly what he means.

Although it never appears to on stage, this should be a moment of high dramatic tension; Osric's job is to have Hamlet hear "impon'd," but think impious, presumptuous rebel" and decide "punish the unmannerly upstart." There was a risk

here that Hamlet would recognize Osric's purpose and see Claudius' hand at work but, when he rose unsuspectingly to the bait by asking for more detail, "Why is this – imponed, as you call it?" the danger was passed. We see Osric deliver the rest of his message, perhaps thanking his lucky stars that he passed safely between the mighty opposites with his skin intact and then, ever the lapwing, take flight as quickly as he can. When another lord arrives a moment late to make sure that Hamlet is properly hooked, we might even infer that Osric was too rattled to report whether or not Hamlet had agreed.^{xii}

As described by Osric, there are two separate aspects to the "great wager," the stakes and the odds. The first part of Osric's description is full of obscure and flowery Latinisms, well chosen to obscure and draw attention away when he slips in the all-important "impon'd." That done, Osric goes on to report the rest of the wager by describing the odds in plain Anglo-Saxon English.

The standard English plaintext explains "impon'd" to both Hamlet and the audience because of its grammatically exact parallel relation to Osric's description of the stakes, by which "laid on" corresponds perfectly with "impon'd." It is not necessary to assume that the majority of the audience will have already recognized the significance of "impon'd,"^{xiii} which simply enriches for the knowledgeable the dramatic contrast between the French and Danish bets; the description of Laertes' stakes standing alone were enough to suggest the context of polarity and a sense of provocative forwardness by which "laid on" is properly to be understood.

Shakespeare consistently uses the expression "lay on" in the sense of overdoing and heavyhandedness, as in Celia's "laid on with a trowel" in *As You Like It*. (1.2.98) In *Hamlet*, it constitutes Osric's English translation of "impone." Claudius has proposed certain odds and Laertes, promising to do even better than required, has "laid on" even higher odds.

The Anglo-Saxon half of the "great wager" reveals that Laertes did more than simply increase the stakes posted for the duel. He committed the further impertinence of raising the odds against himself, "piling on" a second affront on top of the first. Claudius proposed a match of twelve passes, with Laertes to win the prize only if his margin over Hamlet exceeded three: if the final score was 8-4, Laertes would win; at 7-5, he would lose. Laertes responded by promising to defeat Hamlet even more severely, at least 9-3, before he would claim victory.

Kittredge missed the point by assuming that the second set of odds, "twelve for nine," was a rephrasing of the king's bet and, unable to reconcile them decided that the passage was unintelligible. Other editors, such as Jenkins in the Arden second edition, recognize that the odds were raised and then, having seen the point of the scene, go on to disregard it entirely by asserting that any such breach of manners on the part of Laertes was unthinkable.^{xiv} Ye that is exactly what Laertes does not once but twice, and what Osric describes in two languages. It is the very point of the whole scene.

Freed now from any preconception that the two statements mean the same thing, we can now see that according to Osric Laertes twice increased the difficulty of Claudius' proposal. The extravagance of the wager, the length of the odds, and Laertes' unheard of audacity towards his monarch are the dramatically significant facts. Just as Laertes had "impon'd" his own imported stakes against Claudius' wager, he also "laid on" greater odds. Osric's last and unambiguous report of another solecism by the impertinent and irritating Laertes finds a responsive listener in Hamlet and finally seals his fate. Intent on putting Laertes in his place, Hamlet overlooks any misgivings on his part and on the spot agrees to the match.

Hamlet's consent to the fatal duel has, in the end, little or nothing to do with reasoned judgment, submission to the workings of divine providence, or even with revenge, but only his feelings towards Laertes. For the moment, even the great vow of eternal remembrance that he made to his father has slipped from his mind. His answer to Osric, "It is the breathing time of day with me," is a message of defiance to the upstart challenger: "If he thinks he can take me, he knows where to find me." It is not said in a spirit of casual indifference or stoic acceptance, but in a spirit of defiance and barely controlled hostility.

Hamlet's anger leads him where reason would have kept him safe; as we see him cast aside his sovereignty of reason, the catastrophe prophesied by Horatio in the first act now unfolds as the unforeseen but inevitable result of his earlier rashness.

On this interpretation, the unifying vision that animates Hamlet is not at all beyond discovery, although it is a subject beyond the scope of this essay. For the present, it is enough to conclude that Hamlet's duel does not result from mere chance or the mysterious workings of divine providence. It is the carefully developed consequence of onstage dramatic action that the audience was expected to understand. Hamlet was, at the last, a victim of guileful and subtle manipulation by Claudius, who played his stops with virtuoso skill. Provoked into a passion that he could not either control or recognize, Hamlet agrees to the treacherous duel with his attention misdirected towards Laertes rather than Claudius. And so it was Laertes who, like his father before him fell victim to Hamlet's "mistook" purpose, which this time fell promptly upon its inventor's head with fatal effect.

ⁱ First appeared in *Shakespeare Bulletin*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (July/August 1984) 5-7, 22-25, and lightly revised since.

ⁱⁱ References here are to the Arden second edition, ed. Harold Jenkins, (London: Methuen, 1982, except that I substitute "impon'd" for "impawned" throughout Hamlet's dialogue with Osric for reasons which this essay makes clear. I have also supplemented the Arden line references with their TLN equivalents.

iii There are two principal schools of thought on this topic, each with many variations. One view is that Hamlet agreed to the duel with his eyes wide open, fortified by a new-found faith in providence said to mark his return to Denmark; it is shared by Harold Goddard, Harley Granville-Barker, Eleanor Prosser, Maynard Mack, and Theodore Spencer. The other view, that Hamlet acted on the spur of the moment, rashly and characteristically, is held by A.C. Bradley, Bernard Grebanier, Harry Levin, and Dover Wilson. Both groups assume that the duel was identifiably a danger to be avoided.

iv J. A. K. Thomson, *Shakespeare and the Classics*, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 19166), p. 118.

v *De Sapientia Veterum, IX* in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, James Spalding et al. eds., (

vi *The Civile Conversation of M. Steeven Guazzo*, tr. George Pettie, ed. Sir Edward Sullivan, Tudor Translations, 2d series (New York: Knopf, 1925) 1,2, 195.

vii (London: Methuen, 1966), p. 45.

viii Compare 1 *Henry IV*, 1.3, where Hotspur promises to provoke the king's anger by repeatedly causing him to hear the inflammatory name "Mortimer."

ix Sister Miriam Joseph, *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language*, (New York: Hafner, 1966), pp. 72-73.

x *The Parliament of Fowls*, 347.

xi Horatio's give is not in the Folio. The omission may be a later refinement rather than a printer's error, since its effect is to eliminate the only line in the entire dialogue which runs contrary to the pattern of Hamlet's repartee with Osric, an unbroken succession of confidence-building "hits" in Hamlet's favor, prior to the introduction of "impon'd."

xii The Lord is also omitted from the Folio, perhaps having become superfluous after experience showed that Hamlet's assent was obvious to the audience. If so, it would also constitute a refinement after the play was first published. The discrepancies between the Quarto and Folio readings in this and the prior note, and the possible pattern of continued editorial revision from the early texts to the later ones, was pointed out to me by Prof. Steven Urkowitz,

xiii It appears more likely than was formerly thought that most Elizabethan playgoers were educated and well off, contrary to the earlier view that the audience was an instant democracy of apprentices and courtiers. See Ann Jennalie Cook's *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London, 1576-1672*, (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981) esp. Chapters. IV and VI; also Cyrus Hoy's review of it in *Sewanee Review*, vol. 92, no. 2 (Spring 1984) 256.

xiv The Arden third edition (Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, eds.) (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006) refers to Jenkins' view that the discrepancy in the odds was an "insoluble problem" and confirms that as of the date of publication, scholarly opinion had not changed.