Lecture on: Hamlet I

I. The Problems of Hamlet

1. A. The Text:
   2.1. “Bad” quarto of 1603: only half as long as others
   3.2. Quarto of 1604: source of modern texts
   4.3. Folio of 1623

   A. The Ghost: father or feind?
   B. Hamlet’s madness: true or feigned
   C. Hamlet and Ophelia: did he love her? does he love her?
   D. Gertrude’s implication in the murder of her husband

II. The Myth of Hamlet

1. A. Reveries both Italian and Oceanic
   2. B. Linguistic imprints:
   3. For this relief much thanks
   4. There’s nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so
   5. To outHerod herod
   6. Leave her to heaven
   7. method in madness
   8. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark
   9. Frailty thy name is woman
   10. by indirection fin direction out
   11. an antic disposition
   12. caviar to the general
   13. The play’s the thing
   14. Get thee to a nunnery
   15. Goodnight, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest

   E. Ultimate recapitulation: Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

III. Hamlet as Revenge Play: ghosts and revenge

1. Thomas Kyd, The Spanish Tragedy
2. St. Paul, Romans 12:19: “Revenge not yourselves, my dearly beloved, but give place unto wrath, for it is written, Revenge is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord”

3. The anti-revenge play

**IV. Renaissance view of Ghosts:**

1. Roman Catholic: souls in Purgatory seeking expiation  
2. Protestant: devils tempting the living  
3. Sceptic: hallucinations or knavery

**V. The Ghost scenes: I.1 and I.4**

**VI. Another recapitulation: Cavafy. King “Claudius”**

1. C.P. Cavafy, King Claudius, tr. Edmund Keeley

King Claudius

My mind moves to distant places.  
I’m walking the streets of Elsinore,  
through its squares, and I recall  
the very sad story-  
that unfortunate king  
killed by his nephew  
because of some fanciful suspicions.

In all the homes of the poor people  
secretly (because they were afraid of Fortinbras)  
he was mourned. A quiet, gentle man;  
a man who loved peace  
(his country had suffered much  
from the wars of his predecessor).  
He behaved graciously toward everyone,  
the humble and the great alike.  
Never high-handed, he always sought advice  
in the kingdom’s affairs  
from serious and experienced persons.
Just why his nephew killed him
was never satisfactorily explained.
The prince suspected him of murder;
and the basis of his suspicion was this:

walking one night along an ancient battlement
he thought he saw a ghost
and with this ghost had a talk;
what he heard from the ghost supposedly
were certain accusations made against the king.

It must have been a fit of fancy
and an optical illusion
(the prince was nervous in the extreme;
while studying at Wittenberg
many of his fellow students thought him a maniac).

A few days later he went
to his mother’s chamber to discuss
some family affairs. And suddenly
while he was talking, he lost his self-control
and started shouting, screaming,
that the ghost was there in front of him.
But his mother saw nothing at all.

And that same day, for no apparent reason,
he killed an old gentleman in the court.
Since the prince was due to sail for England
in a day or two,
the king hustled him off posthaste
in order to save him.
But the people were so outraged
by the monstrous murder
that rebels rose up
and tried to storm the palace gates,
led by the dead man’s son,
the noble lord Laertes
(a brave young man, and also ambitious;
in the confusion, some of his friends called out:
“Long live King Laertes!”)

Some time later, once the kingdom had calmed down
and the king lay resting in his grave,
killed by his nephew
(the prince never went to England;
he escaped from the ship on his way there),
a certain Horatio came forward
and tried to exonerate the prince
by telling some stories of his own.
He said that the voyage to England
had been a secret plot, and orders
had been given to kill the prince there
(but this was never clearly ascertained).
He also spoke of the poisoned wine-
wine poisoned by the king.
It’s true that Laertes spoke of this too.
But couldn’t he have been lying?
Couldn’t he have been mistaken?

And when did he speak of this?
While dying of his wounds, his mind reeling,
and seeming to talk deliriously.
As for the poisoned weapons,
it was shown later that the poisoning
had not been done by the king at all:
Laertes had done it himself.
But Horatio, whenever pressed,
would produce even the ghost as a witness:
the ghost said this and that,
the ghost did this and that!

Because of all this, though hearing him out,
most people in their hearts
pitted the poor king,
who, with all these ghosts and fairy tales,
was unjustly killed and disposed of.

Yet Fortinbras, who profitted from it all
and so easily won the throne,
gave full attention and weight
to every word Horatio said.