

Rani Drew

## ***The III-Act Hamlet* – Feminist Reconstruction of Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

*The III-Act Hamlet* as a feminist version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was premiered in Budapest in May, 1992. In an environment where feminism until very recently had no place in the popular or academic belief-system, the production did not go unnoticed or without response. A Hungarian newspaper ran a piece with the title 'Feminista Hamlet?', questioning even a possible connection between the two words. Yet surprisingly, the response to the feminist text in the play was groundbreaking with comments such as, 'you have put a new spirit into Shakespeare's 'ghost story' or 'a feminist perspective might at last crack the riddle of the Hamlet Question.' In staging a feminist *Hamlet* I attempted to do more than give Shakespeare's play a different directional stance. In this article I will trace the trajectory of the feminist theatre in relation to a reconstruction of *Hamlet*.

### **The III-Act Hamlet: Stylistic Parallels and Intervention**

For my play I created two frameworks to surround Shakespeare's text: one, a frame of three Prologues that match each of the first three Acts of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and an Epilogue that sums up the gist of Acts IV and V. This framework necessitated a complex technique of transition and link between the two texts, giving rise to forward and backward dramatic movements. The second framework encompasses both the texts, making a box within box structure. It begins and ends the play with an address by a 'female' stage manager, in keeping with the feminist mode of the play. The function of this frame is to locate the feminist production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the history of the English theatre; and in a direct discourse draw the audience into the contemporary issues of gender relations.

### **TEXT AND STAGE: Empowerment of Ophelia**

The empowerment of Ophelia became the *raison d'être* for the writing and staging of *The III-Act Hamlet*. Ophelia, the feminist protagonist, emerges as the prohibition taboos are lifted from her mind, allowing her emotions to breathe freely. This fits well with her original character in Shakespeare's text as her second self in the feminist text is a more liberated form of the first. In the process of the transformation, her new character attains the Lacanian linguistic subjectivity without alienation from her former self. In Lacanian terms, Ophelia gains humanity, denied to her in real life. In the feminist text she is positioned as a speaker whose subjectivity, though not as endangered as Hamlet's since she is not a living being, moves freely between subject and object positions.

### **OPHELIA and HAMLET: parallels**

In deconstructing the gendered identity of Hamlet, I reconstruct a feminist identity for Ophelia. In parallel with Hamlet, I endow Ophelia with those qualities which alone can give humanity to her outlawed self.

- 1) Subjectivity, Speech and Soliloquies: by becoming a subject, Ophelia attains

speech through which she questions and challenges the notions of love and loyalty, so much part of her dictated self in real life, and the very instruments of her oppression: The Prologues, despite their contingent elements, make her meditate, like Hamlet in long soliloquies, on the destabilized condition of the individual in a manipulative society. With the use of shifting nouns and pronouns, she distances herself from personal grief, and achieves a controlled emotional state. Neither revenge nor forgiveness govern her intelligence. Once she is empowered by these qualities, her other faculties bloom. She observes, she deliberates, she doubts, she historicises and in the end pronounces the patriarchal power as bogus with empty meanings.

2) Art and Creativity: by her perception of how the signs of gender alliance operate, Ophelia is able to reveal their emptiness, their bogus trait more clearly than Hamlet. Her use of the artistic form to enact the drama of social oppression is more creative than Hamlet's reliance on art as a mere trap for the adversary. The creativity of the two takes different forms: Hamlet's ends on a note of smug self-satisfaction, Ophelia's goes further into the very depths of how a self is split in its own humanity. Hamlet's 'Mousetrap' remains a clever espionage trick; Ophelia's dumb show mirrors the emotional trauma of a child socialised to identify with its gender group.

3) Consciousness of the Other: by attaining a perception of the male world as the Other, Ophelia comes into a growing consciousness of male-female relationship perverted by gender orientation of both sexes. She also comes to see the plight of the younger males who face the castration threat from the elderly. By distancing her relationship with Hamlet and making him as the Other, she attains an insight into 1) why Hamlet resisted reading the signs made by the patriarchy - the revenge command by the father, the love trap by Polonius and the surrogate protection of Claudius; 2) more importantly, how at the same time Hamlet shares many characteristics with Polonius; and 3) how by failing to see through the patriarchal signs, he tacitly accepts the gender alliance. Ophelia indicts Hamlet for the misreading of the signs - taking his father seriously about his mother - but defends him at the same time against the powers of a hegemonous patriarchy. With each prologue she progresses towards a more comprehensive vision of the social system which effects female oppression.

## Performing the Textual Frameworks

### THE STAGE MANAGER

The performance begins with the entry of the Stage Manager who informs the audience of the evening's stance on Shakespeare's Hamlet. In a parodying tone, she gives a short history of the types of *Hamlet* done before, but soon switches to a more serious note on the feminist mode of the evening:

Tonight, the management  
Makes yet one more attempt at the riddle.  
We bring you a feminist Hamlet...  
    Hamlet is ordered to  
Line up on the father's side. In fewer  
Acts, extended and enlarged by our own  
Text, we claim it was this imperative  
That made a tragedy of his life.

With these lines *The III-Act Hamlet* begins.

### PROLOGUE I: Consciousness & Enlightenment

By starting the play with Ophelia's drowning sounds through a dark stage, the feminist text links up her rebirth with her death in the play (Shakespeare's Act IV). Distanced from her self in the third person singular and still smarting under the Christian condemnation of the mode of her death, she catalogues her oppressive condition in life at the hands of her father, brother and lover. Ophelia's empathy with Gertrude emerges

as she sees her no less a victim of taboos than herself:

And the Queen, whose despair at my drowning  
Spoke more of the terror hanging over  
Her own womanly condition than  
Compassion for my unrequited heart.

At this moment the queen enters. This diachronic tension produces an intense visual effect as the two female characters span the stage, representing their deprivation and oppression in Shakespeare's text. Without effecting a female homogenized solidarity, they choreograph the different ways in which women are used as chattels in male rivalry. Lacan's phrases, 'woman as masquerade for the man' and 'the woman does not exist' underpin the visual of this choreography with Gertrude and Ophelia moving in unison as 'pawns on men's chequerboards' and 'trophies of male rivalry'. By association their movements bring to the audience's mind the constant shift of war centres in our own times.

Once her consciousness is at work, Ophelia sees the male hegemony divided into two groups: one, the elderly patriarchy represented by the ghost of Hamlet's father as the signifying male ancestry, by Claudius as the ruler and the surrogate father, and Polonius as the spying legislator; two, the younger generation as the signified represented by Hamlet, by Laertes, by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Young Fortinbras. The perspective on the generation gap leads Ophelia to speculate on the method by which gender alliances are achieved in the younger group by the elderly.

Follow or have your  
Tender genitals sliced off...  
The figure of the father appears in full  
Armour. It's enough to convey the threat.

.....

Why and wherefore such bullying started?

The search for an answer develops the potential of Ophelia's creative powers. To illustrate the finding she produces a dumb show. Her consciousness of gender orientation points to three traumatic moments in a young child: 1) the disruption in the undivided happiness with the mother, 2) the threat from the father - a castration sign for the male child, and the beginning of prohibition sign for the female child and 3) their separation from each other and from the mother.

Like you Hamlet, I too have  
Directed a dumb show to trace the guilt  
Of a different sort of crime.

Ophelia directs the show like Hamlet, using children as actors. She presents two oppositions: one, a dyad of mother-child nonlinguistic symbiotic relationship. As flute music plays, two young children run on stage and hug and kiss the mother. They communicate a sense of laughter, trust and physical comfort. Two, an interruption is caused by a loud, threatening sound of drum beat; and the father enters in modern day military uniform. Accompanied by a drummer and carrying a sword, he motions to the children to come to him. The children first hesitate, but the mother encourages them to obey the father. Amid the sound of drum beat they both walk over to him. He takes the boy's hand but asks the girl to return to the mother. The girl is puzzled but obeys him. As she turns back to go to the mother, the boy frees himself of the father's grip and runs to her. The drummer gives a louder beat, the father draws his sword, and swishing it noisily, threatens the boy. The boy is terror-stricken and his hand immediately goes to his genitals in an attempt to protect them against the advancing sword. He appeals to the mother. The mother shows helplessness and urges him to return to the father. As he

obeys her and turns to the father, the girl takes his hand in the desire to accompany him. The father takes a step forward, grabs hold of the son, and prohibiting the daughter to advance, motions her to return to the mother. To the accompaniment of the still beating drum, he turns on his heels, and takes with him the boy, who continues to look longingly back at the mother and the sister.

The mother consoles the sad daughter. Ophelia witnesses how little girls are coached into an acceptance of the taboos. It is in the moment of separation on a gender basis that Ophelia gains the consciousness of how so early in life prohibition and fear are put on the girl, and how the boy is led away to serve the patriarchy with promises of power and privileges. As the mother and the little girl move upstage, and stand there disconsolately, waiting for Hamlet to return, the three females of varying ages represent a complete state of oppression. They stand there in silence, waiting for Hamlet's return, but instead in a state of emergency Francisco marches past them, soon followed by Bernardo, soldiers and watchguards of a warring male world.

Lights fade and Act I of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* begins.

Thus the transition from Prologue I to Shakespeare's text is achieved by the above conflicting male-female representation on stage. The audience is invested with Ophelia's perspective on the events in Act I.

#### PROLOGUE II: From Male Revenge to Male Espionage

Ophelia tells how the elderly weave a web of intricate espionage against the young, whose desire to be free of paternal authority takes them into different directions. Looking back on her life she sees how Laertes' desire to escape his father's grip to fun-seeking Paris motivates Polonius to spy on him through a young servant (a short dumb show is enacted here with Polonius and Reynaldo appearing as backdrop to Ophelia's lines), and all in the name of fatherly love. Hamlet's engagement with philosophy and thought in Wittenberg makes him a dangerous suspect to the Danish court, with Claudius setting up a spy system on him manned by Hamlet's own fellow-scholars; and Fortinbras whose political involvement in Norway is *seen as* a threat to the general feudal structure is brought to heel by the two countries, though historically at war with each other, yet uniting against his revolutionary activities. But though Hamlet is the only one who manages to elude the long arm of patriarchy by an innate knowledge of their destructive powers, he gets sucked into their game by setting up a counter-system of espionage. He thinks he is winning but he loses in that he turns on those very people who the patriarchy is using to trap him. With this clear view of Hamlet's counter-espionage, Ophelia's begins her indictment of Hamlet. She finds him guilty of being willingly drawn into the male game despite a continuing belief in the bogus make-up of the ghost-father.

The first mistake Hamlet makes is to feign madness, a speech game with which he thinks he can elude the stalking elderly. But soon it develops into counter-espionage in which like them, he uses women and children as traps for the enemy. In this, unconsciously, Hamlet submits to gender alignment in that he gets the taste for male rivalry, and sacrifices his love for both Ophelia and Gertrude to win the game against them.

Gone now is  
The vision of beauty and harmony.  
.....  
The mother is tarnished with the sin of  
Whoredom, the sweetheart the stuff of brothels  
Madc.

Once entangled in the patriarchal revenge game, Hamlet gets sucked into the parallel espionage with his opponents -- Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but most with Polonius. He matches their hegemonous strategies with his lone ones --

inventing a state of mind for himself which apes madness. But if Polonius used the child-like Ophelia as a spy against him, Hamlet uses the child-actors against Claudius and the whole lot, including his father-ghost who he still suspects of being genuine. For the new man art, a system of words and aesthetics, becomes more reliable than men, old and new, aligned in gender structures. Ophelia with her retrospective knowledge of the spy games ends Prologue II with the lines:

Mark, then, the players and the played,  
The powerful and the weak, the old and  
Young, and men against women and children--  
The stuff of games, war and art.

With the sound of Ophelia's verdict on Hamlet, the audience witnesses him in Shakespeare's Act II, setting up counter-espionage in every direction, and taking on the patriarchal colouring of cunning and craft.

### PROLOGUE III: In the Dye of Patriarchy

Ophelia's knowledge of Hamlet's failure gets clearer as she speaks of his pursuit of the sign from his father's ghost. His obsession with finding the truth takes him deeper and deeper into the strongholds of patriarchy. But Ophelia allows Hamlet none of his tactics - madness or art as means of knowledge. She holds him guilty of exploiting the innocent and the unsuspecting through art as ruthlessly as Polonius does through love. She brings out parallels between Hamlet and Polonius, the many traits the two share, almost leaving us with a feeling that in time Hamlet will become like Polonius - rhetorical, pompous, long-winded, pretentious, and terribly blinkered. Like Polonius we see Hamlet destroy the love by which alone animal reality is humanised. Like Polonius we see him sexualise love, whether it is his love for Ophelia or Gertrude's love for Claudius. And in doing that he attempts to desexualise both women - sending Ophelia to the nunnery, and browbeating Gertrude into a life of widowhood.

In Prologue III, Ophelia distances herself from the man she loved. She sees him ruthlessly exploitative of the child actors he admired as artists, brutally oppressive to the woman he loved, and inhumanly bullying the mother he honoured. All this, Ophelia tells us, because he failed in the end to throw off the weight of all the father figures.

You found your father  
His peace, reinstated him in the bedroom  
Of his reformed widow, relaxed in pajamas  
And nightcap. But his killer still remained  
At large. You failed to strike him dead, and  
Your father forgot to chide you for it.  
And so the revenge drama turned out to  
Be a reform act exercised on the weaker sex.

With this final verdict on Hamlet, Act III of Shakespeare's play cuts in.

### EPILOGUE: From Verdict to Empathy

Through the dark, the sound of Ophelia's dirge at her father's death rises (Hamlet Act IV scene v), coming full circle to the beginning of Prologue I of the feminist framework. As lights come on, Ophelia walks onto the stage, picks up the dagger that killed Polonius, still fresh with the stains of his blood. In a dramatic action of freeing herself from familial obedience, Ophelia wipes the blood off the blade with her hand. Theatrically, this gesture of liberation juxtaposes with the very puzzling question of Ophelia's grief over her father's death in Shakespeare's play. After giving a short account of the deaths, exiles, funerals, killings and arriving armies in Acts IV and V, Ophelia eulogises Hamlet's attempt to defy the patriarchal father figures. By comparing him with Fortinbras' easy collapse at the hands of the elderly, she defends Hamlet in his tragic

failure to pioneer a new outlook on gender relationships.

### THE OUTER FRAMEWORK - THE STAGE MANAGER

As the lights dim on Ophelia the stage manager enters and walks downstage in a direct movement towards the audience. Ophelia remains on stage, seated on the bench mid-stage right, she looks straight at the audience. The presence of the two women figures across time closes the gap between fiction and reality, past and present.

In a very formal tone on behalf of the whole company, the stage manager declares the performance over.

We admit it  
Is daring to reduce the Bard's five-act  
Tragedy to three, but the reason should  
Be clear by now...  
The question we felt inclined to  
Explore - what was Hamlet's problem - turned  
Out to be related to our own lives.

As lights fade on the two women, *The III-Act Hamlet* puts Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at the very heart of our own times.

**THE III-ACT HAMLET**

by Rani Drew

**PROLOGUE**

Stage Manager:

Fifty times five thousand, perhaps, 'Hamlet',  
 Has been put on stage and proclaimed as  
 The tragedy - six deaths, to be precise  
 (not counting the two off stage) -  
 Of a son's obsession with his father's  
 Murder. But there is more to Hamlet  
 Than mere rage over a murderous crime.  
 This dithering Prince of Denmark has  
 Successfully confused the best scholars  
 Of each Age. Speculations have run wild;  
 Questions have remained unanswered. Hamlet  
 Was no Heironimo. Elizabethan savagery  
 Sat heavily on his enlightened mind. His  
 Promise to his father's ghost - you will  
 See presently how it's forced out of  
 Him - is given a long rope in the play  
 (five acts, at a count). In the scheme  
 Of familial revenge, what was it that  
 Failed to convince Hamlet? 'There's the puzzle',  
 As Hamlet would have said. Like the proverbial  
 Princes, many have courted theatrical deaths  
 To answer the same riddle. The range is wide.  
 Hamlet the moralist, Hamlet the puritan,  
 Hamlet the misogynist, Hamlet the existentialist,  
 And of course, the oedipal Hamlet though he  
 Escapes the original tragedy of Oedipus  
 Marrying his mother. Tonight, this management  
 Makes yet one more attempt at the riddle.  
 We bring you a feminist Hamlet. Don't get me  
 Wrong. There is no drama of sex change here.  
 The crisis of gender identity is the name of  
 The show this evening. Hamlet is ordered  
 To line up on the father's side. In fewer  
 Acts, extended and enlarged by our own  
 Text, we claim it was this imperative  
 That made a tragedy of his life. Lights down, please.

Lights go down. Flute music followed by Ophelia's song, which gradually fades away.  
 Lights come up. Chorus enters. She is dressed as Ophelia as she had looked at the time  
 of her death.

Chorus:

Ophelia, they named her, who barely managed  
 To claim a patch of ground inside the sacred  
 Precincts. Yet for the sin of self-slaughter  
 She is doomed to wander the earth and atone  
 The loss of her Christian will. The silence  
 Of after-death is peaceful, though. No songs

Of unrequited love tremble on her lips; or  
 Madness born of muted speech drive her to  
 An orgy of death. It was the deprivation  
 Of a protective father, and the absence  
 Of her betrothed to take custody of  
 Her orphaned self that threw her off  
 Balance. Like a blocked drain, long repression  
 Overspilled the bounds of modesty. Her coarse  
 Speech embarrassed the fineries of the Danish  
 Court. It had to come out somehow. Madness  
 Is the gateway to freedom. Hamlet knew that,  
 And she found it out, but a little too late  
 It was. I'm no vengeful spirit. Besides,  
 It's thrones and crowns that make revenge  
 Tragedies. Only ghosts of Kings, deposed  
 And murdered, haunt the sons to revolt and  
 Claim lost kingdoms. History is full of  
 Righteous Fortinbras. Beheaded queens and  
 Heir-princesses have failed to make heroes  
 Of their sons. Why have I, then, returned  
 This night like the ghost of the Danish King?  
 Who could I besiege to avenge my death? Who  
 Bears the guilt of my self-slaughter? At  
 Whom should I point my dead finger? The  
 Father, who would not let my passion  
 Alone? He spied o' it, regulated it  
 With caution, prohibition and control.

Pol. (Voice over) This is for all: 1.3.131  
 I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth  
 Have you so slander any moment leisure  
 As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.  
 Look to't, I charge you. Come your ways. 135

And Laertes, brother and playmate,  
 Blindfolded and bound by courtly heritage,  
 Was put upon to strike fear in me. Caution  
 And prescripts like vultures sat pecking  
 At my desiring heart.

Laer.(voice over). Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear 35  
 Sister, and keep you in the rear of your  
 Affection, out of the shot and danger of desire.  
 Be wary then; best safety lies in fear. 44

Such was the brotherly love that raised in  
 My mind visions of cold virtue,  
 Circumscribed and imprisoned, while  
 Himself remaining free and unblemished  
 By his own excesses. Yet, in poor  
 Laertes, my playmate, sorrow over my  
 Waterlogged body struck the human springs  
 So dry that no tears would flow. . .  
 And Hamlet - his neurosis o'er his mother's  
 Independence found me to hand - an easy  
 Reflection of female inconstancy.



Ham. (Voice over) Frailty thy name is woman!- I.II.146  
 Within a month 153

Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears  
 Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,  
 She married. O most wicked speed, to post  
 With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

Misogyny, thy name is man.

Ham: (voice over) Get thee to a nunnery.  
 Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?  
 ...Get thee to a nunnery. Go, farewell.  
 Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool;  
 For wise men know well enough what monsters  
 You make of them. To a nunnery, go; and  
 Quickly too. Farewell.

III.I.122  
 141

Such violence did my lord strike at me.

And the Queen, whose despair at my drowning  
 Spoke more of the terror hanging over  
 Her own womanly condition than  
 Compassion for my unrequited heart.

The Queen enters.

Queen: There with fantastic garlands did she come IV.VII.170  
 Of Crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,  
 That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,  
 But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.  
 There on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds  
 Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke,  
 When down her weedy trophies and herself  
 Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide  
 And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;  
 Which time she chaunted snatches of old tunes,  
 As one incapable of her own distress,  
 Or like a creature native and indued  
 Unto that element; but long it could not be  
 Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
 Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
 To muddy death. Drown'd, drown'd. (remains on stage)

Chorus:  
 Drown'd, drown'd. It's no worse than when  
 I lived. Perhaps even better. As women,  
 The Queen and I were truly superfluous to the  
 Imperial tragedy. Moved like pawns on men's  
 Chequerboards - stake as high as crowns  
 And thrones we were, for the throw of the dice,  
 Polonius's two to Hamlet's two.  
 Codes and signs of rival systems regulated  
 Political rebellions and filial submissions.  
 For smoother operation, the terror  
 Must be staged early. For young saplings,  
 A brute show of naked power spells out the

Message clear and loud. Follow or have your  
 Tender genitals sliced off. Like sharp-edged  
 Shining sabres of treasury-guarding  
 Sentries, threats are flashed at the rebels.  
 The figure of the father appears in full  
 Armour. It's enough to convey the threat.  
 Take your place beside me, be in control of  
 The gender power or choose to be  
 Less than a man. Later, no sword needs  
 To flash for the grown boy. Reluctance or  
 Doubt to fall in step with the legion is  
 Met with fear-striking choppers and  
 castrated manhood.  
 Why and wherefore such bullying started?

Within human life there exists a state  
 Of equality, a gender harmony. Hamlet,  
 In the distant past beyond memories,  
 You and I were taken prisoners, pulled  
 Apart and enclosed in separate  
 Dungeons. Later, when nature's rules  
 Brought our grown selves together, we  
 Hardly knew how firmly our worlds were  
 Differentiated, and set apart by  
 The orders of our fathers, forefathers  
 And a whole line of them before. It wasn't  
 Love that drew you to me in that first flush  
 Of desire. Love was lost to us a long  
 Time ago. So clever it's now where it  
 All began. Like you, Hamlet, I too have  
 Directed a dumb show to trace the guilt  
 Of a different sort of crime.

Flute music. Two children, a young boy and girl enter and run to the queen, clinging to her and kissing her. They mouth a song and rollick round her, who looks at them adoringly. Soft music is heard as they sit down as if amongst flowers, looking at each other. Suddenly, they are startled by thunderous music and the entry of the father in soldier's armour. He looks quite fierce and walks up to the mother and children, who are now huddled together in terror of his approaching figure. He takes hold of the boy, who clings to his mother's skirts, and orders him to come with him. When the boy refuses, he takes out his sword and flashes it at him. The boy covers his front in terror, shrieks and turns to the mother. The mother holds him tenderly but, looking into his eyes, implores him to follow the father. The girl takes his hand to go with him. But the father makes a prohibition sign at her. The girl looks to the mother, who also shakes her head at her. The girl and the boy are confused. The father comes closer with the sword glinting in his hand and towers over the boy threateningly. The boy appeals to the mother again, who looks helplessly at him. The boy acquiesces and lets go of the girl's hand. He follows the father, who is already leading him away, still swishing his sword noisily. Thunderous music continues as lights go down.

Chorus:

Oh, that first awakening to the mother's love  
 Without swords and armour, without battles of  
 Victory and defeat. Poor Hamlet! He was  
 Given no choice. Nor was I. I was asked  
 To stay behind, he was ordered to follow. It

Was different, later. In the second awakening  
 Of the sexual desire, of sweet love for  
 Another, alien to childhood memories, the  
 Pain of earlier separation was forgotten.  
 Barely was there a recognition of ourselves  
 As beings once equal and free. Our love had  
 No freedom. It was the watch word of court  
 Intrigues and parental matchmaking by fathers,  
 Brothers and uncles. Why has Ophelia,  
 Like the ghost of the Danish King, returned to  
 Haunt the play tonight? Because Hamlet and  
 I share the same tragedy. I am no twin of  
 Hamlet. But far deeper are the ties  
 Of intelligence, of emotion, and of  
 The longing for an integrated wholeness.  
 If our desires were the same, so were our  
 Frustrations with the commanding social  
 Strictures. In the end, we both sought  
 Speech through madness, and peace through  
 Death. Once I saw the writing on the wall,  
 There was nothing to stop me from using  
 My human will. My gains and losses were  
 Nil. But Hamlet, poor Hamlet, he was sucked  
 Into the male game of victories and defeats.  
 He was bound by stricter laws, unbreakable  
 Chains of social contracts between fathers  
 And sons. He wasn't keeping his side of  
 The deal. On that stormy night when the King's  
 Ghost rose on the midnight horizon, fitted  
 In full armour, signalling, signalling  
 Something, but Hamlet wasn't picking up the message.

The mother and the girl are still waiting down stage for the boy to return. When Ophelia finishes and Francisco marches in, they leave. Act I scene i of *Hamlet* begins. Ophelia watches Francisco as he rushes past her, followed soon after by Bernardo. She leaves.

## PROLOGUE II

CHORUS enters on lines: Hamlet. this do swear.

(Act I scene v. 179)

All freeze as they touch swords in the act of swearing.

Chorus:

Living or dead, fathers hold sons to  
 Filial vows sworn on swords like real  
 Men: In the dark of the night, a young  
 Mind is set afire with vengeance. (Rest  
 of scene v finishes. They leave.) A  
 Daring woman, a flaunting woman must be  
 Avenged. Traditions must be defended.  
 'Be kind to your mother, Hamlet,' is mere  
 Gloss on the vicious revenge invoked. The  
 Living alone can wage wars, the spirit knows.  
 Theft of women is not fair game among  
 Men. Troy was burnt to ashes by the Achaeans.

Helen, their queen defied a long tradition.  
 She left the mighty Menaleaus for Paris,  
 The prince of a pithy nation, Zeus's  
 Favoured city. Mere trophies of male  
 Warfare neither Helen nor Gertrude were  
 Fit enemies worth combating. For women,  
 Psychological terror is enough  
 To subjugate, to humiliate their defiant  
 Spirit. The ghost of the father descends  
 Into the son to bring back the sinning  
 Mother to the fold. Would Hamlet have  
 Done it without the after-life melodrama?  
 Would anything else had deployed him from  
 His philosophical pursuits to bring  
 Europe's Dark Ages to an end? He was  
 Not the only one though. Observe how  
 Youth is nipped in the bud by the  
 'wise reach' of the elderly.

Enter Polonius with Reynaldo downstage, instructing him. They leave.

Intrigues and conspiracies  
 Shadow the young like spies through the dark.  
 Every step towards freedom is mined with lies,  
 Slanders, deceit and cunning. The court is  
 Full of the ailing and diseased, of jealous  
 Fathers and suspicious uncles, of spying  
 Statesmen and contriving Kings. The royal  
 Court requires tittering sycophants and  
 Solemn courtiers. But the young have bounded  
 Away. Some are in Paris, swaggering,  
 Sporting, and drunk on unvintaged  
 Freedom; others remain more abstracted  
 In Wittenberg with sombre matters of  
 The mind. The spy net is thrown far and  
 Wide to scoop up the escaping. Youth is  
 Set upon youth - a caution the powerful  
 Take against union. Peers, pals and lovers  
 Are coached and trained in the art of  
 Surveillance. Polonius, the master politician,  
 Trains Reynaldo, a young lad, in the art  
 Of espionage - false identity, forgeries  
 And fake fellowship. Claudius, a superior  
 Statesman, more dignified and much  
 Sophisticated but no less prying and  
 Contriving, calls upon Rosencrantz  
 And Guildenstern to be the court  
 Agents and track Hamlet's stalking  
 Madness. No less the young Fortinbras,  
 Whose out-of-court rebellion is soon  
 Brought to heel by an 'impotent and bedrid'  
 Uncle-king. Such is the power of the  
 Elderly. Enemies or friends, battles or  
 Alliances, the strategy of divide and  
 Rule remains invariable. On which side  
 Are you? What's your allegiance? Which

Gender? Mother or father? Love or war?  
 These are not choices but threats. The  
 Real message is 'submit to fathers'  
 Rulings, or be made less manly'. The blades  
 Of swords glint and flash making soft flesh  
 Tingle with fear. Such is the dread of the  
 Patriarchs, the Jephthahs, the master  
 Hunters, the ambitious rulers and  
 Even the poets.

Hunters require scapegoats, chess players  
 Pawns and poet-dramatists actors. In this game  
 Of competition and combat, women and children  
 Become the masquerade, the prize or shame  
 For winners or losers. Gertrude is the  
 Bone of contention between the rivalling  
 Brothers; Ophelia, the dumb scapegoat  
 Strung to the tree, served as food to flush  
 Out the hunted beast; and the child-actors  
 The stage weapons of seasoned rivals to  
 Scale theatrical heights in the illusory  
 World of art. Was Hamlet's compassion for the  
 Exploited child actors a memory of the times  
 When no hunters trod woods and forests? and  
 All was living and bounding? Gone now is  
 The vision of beauty and harmony.  
 Bloodthirsty hounds are set to hunt out the  
 Deep-burrowed secrets of the resisting,  
 Tearing them to shreds. Listen to  
 Hamlet's cry of kinship with the child  
 Actor, voice not yet cracked, imagination  
 So untouched that art comes to mirror life.  
 The dirge of the weeping Hecuba empowers  
 The young actor with a vision of love.  
 But Hamlet knows he's lost it. 'Who  
 Does me this, ha?' He asks in vain. Now  
 The mother is tarnished with the sin of  
 Whoredom, the sweetheart the stuff of brothels  
 Made. Is art less militant than war? It  
 Served the same purpose for Hamlet.  
 'The play's the thing', speech that breaks  
 The secret silence of guilty minds.

Mark, then, the players and the played,  
 The powerful and the weak, the old and  
 Young, and men against women and children  
 The stuff of games, wars and art.

Enter Polonius with Reynaldo. Act II scene i of *Hamlet* begins.

### PROLOGUE III

Enter Ophelia as Hamlet is leaving (end of Act II scene ii)

Chorus:

The game of spying picks up speed. Hamlet's

Own counter-espionage is mild compared  
 With Polinius's human shields and Claudius's  
 Political conspiracy. A triangle of wits is  
 At work. For the renaissance man, art and  
 Not sword becomes the weapon - 'the play's  
 The thing'. It acts as it doubts. Doubt is  
 The first step to enlightenment. To know is  
 To doubt, doubt even the doubting mind. But  
 Such thinking spelled danger in feudal Denmark.  
 It needed a cover, a concealment,  
 A mediation - which Hamlet first found in  
 Feigned madness. But the King knew that  
 'Unwatched madness in great men' was a risk  
 Ill-afforded by politicians. Yet his own  
 Hard-driven espionage through Rosencrantz  
 And Guildenstern, gets undermined by  
 Polonius's medieval trust in cause  
 And effect motion. Did Polonius  
 Really believe in the power of love?  
 Or was it a belief in his own control?  
 He regulated the love between the  
 Young couple. Prohibitions and prescripts  
 Were tutors to Ophelia's desire for Hamlet.  
 She is told now to spurn his advances, now  
 To encourage his love tokens; now to  
 Be bold, now to be submissive. In the end,  
 Polonius announced that the fault lay in  
 His ill-timed strategy itself, which led to  
 Hamlet's madness. It was no honest  
 Admission from a statesman, a mere change  
 Of strategy: His faith in the sexual  
 Game was unshakable. So began another  
 Re-play of it, and I, the baby, was made  
 The prime spy. Like the child-actors  
 In theatre rivalries between poets and  
 'Common actors' I became the stage on  
 Which Hamlet and my father played out  
 Their stalking game. Two throws of Polonius  
 To two by Hamlet. Hamlet's cry against  
 The misuse of innocence went no further  
 Than reforming it to his own purposes  
 Of espionage. My father too coached me  
 In the art of speech. Hamlet's own scheme  
 More artistic and moral, was no less  
 Exploitative. But it was he who was the  
 Hunted animal, much starved and on the  
 Run, and I the bleating goat tied in the  
 Clearing to flush him out for the concealed  
 Hunters awaiting in the bush. Sacrificial  
 Beast that I was in the game of the male  
 Hunt, it was the only time I had insight  
 Into Hamlet's mind. He knew what was going  
 On, and it terrified him. He came to see  
 How Love itself was used as a device to  
 Trap the young. Male power, male corruption,  
 Male distortion he saw reflected in the

Prescribed life of women. 'Get thee to a  
 Nunnery', the five-times repeated cry was  
 Not so much misogyny as a warning to women  
 To escape the tyranny of men. Tyrannical  
 Men produce weak women, who find safety  
 In servitude. That's how he saw his mother  
 Debased by the power of men. He could see  
 Me going the same way. O Hamlet, why did  
 You lift the veil of love and see the crude  
 Reality? You denied me even the illusion  
 Of love. So be it. Something changed for  
 Both of us in that confrontation. All  
 Turned vulgar and cheap afterwards. I became  
 The object of sexualised violence, a mere  
 Masquerade for your excitable maleness. But  
 My failure at turning your mind inside out  
 Would not discourage Polonius from one  
 More attempt to cure your madness. He threw the  
 Dice again to your second throw, and claimed  
 Your madness was caused by a lack of  
 Emotional contact with your mother, a  
 Psychic separation from the source of  
 Life. Was he much wrong in that? Victimised  
 Find victims. You found yours in your  
 Mother. Watch Hamlet how he overpowers  
 Her, browbeats her, makes her repentent of  
 Her self-willed choice, attracts promises of  
 Sexless life, a dreary future. There was  
 One thing your enlightened mind failed to  
 Examine: what was a widow's social worth?  
 The ghost of your father remained over  
 You until you overcame your baffled mother  
 By your savage rage. You found your father  
 His peace, reinstated him in the bedroom  
 Of his reformed widow, relaxed in pajamas  
 And nightcap. But his killer still remained  
 At large. You failed to strike him dead, and  
 Your father forgot to chide you for it.  
 And so the revenge drama turned out to  
 Be a reform act exercised on the weaker sex.

Enter King, Queen and others. Act III scene i of *Hamlet* begins. Chorus joins the group  
 as Ophelia.

## EPILOGUE

Chorus:

The rest was not all silence. The unwitting  
 Murder of Polonius set Denmark  
 Ablaze with uncontrolled passions. There was  
 Ophelia's madness. Decked with flowers and  
 Songs, she lay down on the waters as if  
 On her bridal bed. Laertes, maddened by  
 The twin-loss, searched for the killer  
 And found himself leading a rising against  
 The King. Yet impassioned youth rarely

Fathoms the subterranean reach of statecraft.  
 Machiavellian Claudius knew how to make  
 Enemy fight enemy. But Hamlet was past  
 The revenge cause. He wasn't interested  
 In Claudius's power game. He arrived to  
 Make his peace with the king, and slip away to  
 Quieter speculations at Wittenburg. Not  
 Even the Queen, reformed and wilting,  
 Drew him out of his distanced self. There  
 Was a short moment when my dead body forced  
 A burst of lamentation from him. He knew  
 He had traded love for obedience. Claudius  
 Was mistaken. The crown was never the issue  
 With Hamlet. It would have sat too heavily  
 On his head. Cornered and unadvised, Claudius  
 Resorted to plotting duels. Sabres poisoned  
 And arsenic steeped in victory toasts  
 Completed the scene at the Danish Court.  
 Four died in the end, piled on one another  
 Like in a collective grave. Rosencrantz and  
 Guildenstern suffered the worst. Their  
 Execution abroad must have baffled them to  
 The end. It was all so senseless. But for  
 Fortinbras it had meaning. It was his  
 Acquiescence to the elderly that brought  
 Him full reward. For the obedience to  
 His ailing uncle, he gave up the cause  
 Of the agrarian revolt; for the obedience to  
 Claudius, he followed correct political  
 Procedures; for the obedience to the State  
 Of Norway, he waged Polack war over a  
 Sterile piece of land. He obeyed all the  
 Powerful figures, and inherited a dual  
 Kingdom, much expanded and enlarged. He  
 And Hamlet were different men. Fortinbras,  
 Whose fear of the flashing sword at his  
 Genitals made him follow the long line of  
 The threatening fathers; Hamlet, whose  
 Doubt of the multiple image told him  
 It was a bogus solidarity, an empty threat.  
 But he was alone in that. His failure lay  
 In that he died for it, not lived to fight it.

She remains on stage. Enter the Stage Manager:

The evening now comes to an end, and  
 The performance over. We give our thanks for  
 Your patronage, and trust you'll recommend  
 Our efforts to your friends. We admit it  
 Is daring to reduce the Bard's five-act  
 Tragedy to three, but the reason should  
 Be clear by now. We have been faithful  
 To the tragic mode, while avoiding  
 Jacobean melodrama. Our perspective  
 Is modern. The question we felt inclined to  
 Explore - what was Hamlet's problem? - turned



Out to be related to our own lives.  
Marching armies, pirates at sea, pools of  
Blood and piles of bodies, all fell outside  
The framework of our theme. We hope the  
Play has yielded some thoughts to you. Born  
Of living material, art must make its way  
Back to reality. In this we have been  
Adamant. And now on behalf of the actors,  
The writer and the theatre company, we  
Wish you a thoughtful journey home.

Freeze, lights go down.