Shakespeare’s “Deceptive Cadence”: A Study in the Structure of Hamlet

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ATE in Act III, Hamlet, his anger mounting with the cascade of suspicion, spying, incest, and treachery, discovers he has been betrayed even in the privacy of his mother’s chamber. He strikes at the figure of the betrayer, whom, at least momentarily, he takes to be his uncle, but with the arras pulled aside he finds, instead of Claudius, poor bumbling Polonius. At this point, the possible resolution of revenge dissolves in repentance for the “wretched, rash, intruding, fool” for whose accidental slaughter Hamlet realizes he must “answer well.” The effect on an audience of this sudden aborted resolution is similar to the effect of what in classical music is called a “deceptive cadence,” in which the usual impression of conclusion given by the chords of the “perfect” cadence is broken when the concluding tonic chord of the sequence “is—deceptively—replaced by some other chord,” just as the King, on whom Hamlet’s revenge must be concluded, is—deceptively—replaced by Polonius.

In the design of the tragic rhythm of Hamlet, this “deceptive cadence” modifies the last segment of the tragic curve to effect a more subtle and varied emotional sweep. It becomes one of the factors which raise the raw materials of the dramatic revenge formula and the narrative tales of Amleth to a profoundly reverberating play.

The examination of the structural place and effect of the stabbing of Polonius undertaken here will, hopefully, cast some light on the important subject of Shakespeare’s tragic design: the relatively little-studied skill which builds into a potential dramatic performance a relevant pattern of events reflecting, and exciting the feel of, some of our deepest life experiences, such as the violent passage from willfulness to compassion we travel with King Lear. This is not to offer any fresh interpretation of Hamlet in the usual sense of a psychlogy of the characters and their behavior. It is, instead, a description of the effect of one of the structural patterns manifest in the play.2

The analogy to music, specifically to the deceptive cadence, is purely suggestive and not meant to imply that the stabbing of Polonius is a deceptive cadence in Hamlet or that Shakespeare was consciously trying to imitate a form which is most frequently employed in music composed after

2 A brief summary of the most important structural patterns found in Hamlet appears as an appendix to the author’s Dramatic Structure: The Shaping of Experience (Berkeley, 1970).
his death. However, since formal patterns in music are perforce more obvious and better understood than in the representational arts, the musical analogy is intended to suggest the subtle formal possibilities and meanings available to the creator of dramatic works.3

To see more clearly the accomplishment of Hamlet and particularly the special effect of the stabbing of Polonius, it will be helpful to look at the general pattern of the revenge formula which, as Percy Simpson said, had as its greatest glory that it contributed Hamlet to the English drama.4 The natural arrangement of this popular Elizabethan plot gives us: (1) the discovery or receiving of the wrong which must be revenged; (2) the struggle to consummate this revenge—usually, for obvious dramatic purposes, not a simple task and a task that involves the danger that the hero himself may be killed before his intended victim; (3) the final satisfaction of hero—and audience—in a successful revenge.5

The basic pattern may be considerably varied from play to play. In The Spanish Tragedy Kyd passed the torch of revenge from the ghost, Don Andrea, who watches and rages but, of course, cannot act directly, to Horatio; then, when the young man is hanged in the arbor, to his father, Hieronimo, who thus discovers his wrong and becomes the true revenger after about one-third of the play has passed. In the later The Revenger's Tragedy, Vindici, smarting from the wrong done his mistress by the old and lecherous Duke, swears his revenge in the very first lines of the play while the decadent royal family passes across the stage. Revenge upon the Duke is completed in the third act, but Tourneur extended the total expiation of evil for two more acts until the whole debauched family is wiped out and honest Antonio takes the throne.

The characteristics of the revenge pattern are quite propitious for drama. The first action of sensing the trouble and discovering its cause makes for an excellent first unit—conventionally “Act I” although no absolute law says that the dramatic structure must be so divided. This allows an author to introduce suspense from the very beginning: there is something unnatural; what is it? The resolution of the first generalized suspicion in the discovery of the cause allows a minor first climax which leads to the more concentrated struggle with that evil which will take up the central section of the play. This discovery of wrong represents the essence of the dramatic stroke, for the revenger, once assaulted by the knowledge of the injury done him, moves into a period of intense temporality. Time cannot be turned back—the hero cannot unlearn what he now knows and his only course is to set things right. ("The time is out of joint, O cursed spite;/That ever I was born to set it right!” [I. v. 188-89].)6 Considerable emotional imbalance

3 Another example of the use of musical analogies in Shakespeare criticism occurs in A. P. Rossiter's division of Richard III into five symphonic movements. See the titular essay in Angel with Horns and Other Shakespeare Lectures (New York, 1961), pp. 7-9.


5 Compare the brief summary of events presumed for Kyd’s Hamlet in Fredson T. Bowers, Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy (Gloucester, Mass., 1959), p. 269.

is introduced here, the wound smarts, and each view of the guilty unpunished knowledge may be sudden as it is essentially with Hieronimo, or it may but focus what was already felt as a general malaise. In any case, a goal is introduced and, as it were, a clock is thrust in the hero's face.

The second period is one of struggle which, in the ideal revenge, should be single minded and swift but usually, like the actual experiences it reflects, shows a pattern of frustrations, delays, and regrets. The force which can so deeply and morally injure cannot be easy to defeat. A shot or stab in the back is entirely inappropriate. The opponents must go the full course in this contest, the length and heat of which will at least partially be determined by the proportioning demands of a balanced over-all structure. Sometimes the antagonists must spar in the knowledge of their enmity, sometimes the revenger must work by stealth—as, in The Revenger's Tragedy, Vindice employs the disguise of the pander, Piatto. This central section of suspense and surprise is often the most rewarding part of the pattern to the writer of melodrama, for here is the opportunity for proliferation of suspenseful incidents. It was in this section also that the early writer was tempted to ladle in Italianate villainies.

But the aggravation must not continue too long. The audience's need for a tidy pattern and the increasing desperation with which the protagonists might be expected to press their struggle move us toward the ultimate end of revenge, the killing of the guilty party.7 Again the revenge formula is a good provider. The achievement of revenge, almost always in the agreeably final form of death, offers an excellent dramatic resolution, satisfying both our curiosity as to whether and how the goal will be achieved and our sense of "poetic justice" in which a desire for balanced form seems inextricably mixed with our moral demands. So the poison is swallowed, the blade slid home; he who killed is killed in return.

The revenge pattern does not require the death of its agent. Once the guilty party has received his fatal due the pattern is complete, balance is restored, expectation and whatever suspense was introduced are laid to rest. Thus the revenge pattern is not in itself a tragic pattern. What makes the great Elizabethan revenge play, like Hamlet, a tragedy is the combination of the two patterns of revenge and tragedy whereby the necessity for taking vengeance condemns the hero in taking another's life to lose his own.8 The tension of the central section of such a tragedy is considerably heightened through the revenger's realization that that period, now hurrying, now dragging, which separates him from his goal may well be the only remaining

1 In reality, circumstances might prevent an ultimate collision and allow hot anger to cool as in the pattern of contemporary cold war. What combination of cultural expectation and lack of "good gestalt" makes this now familiar pattern seem so artistically inferior to the Aristotelian structure is outside the limits of the present essay. However, it is interesting that classical music, to which we have already drawn analogies, demands full closure while modern music avoids it.

2 Eleanor Proser, in Hamlet and Revenge (Stanford, Calif., 1967), has suggested the Elizabethans and moderns must take personal revenge as a morally repugnant act, not a sacred duty. Her conclusions do not affect the nature of our basic pattern of revenge, but they do add some weight to the suggestion that where the tragic pattern is added to the revenge pattern the moral distaste and guilt involved in the required murder give a typically tragic feeling.
period of his own life. At least part of the delay of Hamlet’s revenge must be credited to the progress he must make to a full realization and acceptance of the cost of revenge: to the point where “the readiness is all” (V.ii.220). It is a measure of the depth of Shakespeare’s play as opposed to modern revenge melodramas that the murder of even as stained a regicide as Claudius cannot be achieved without incurring fatal guilt for the hero.\footnote{In some sense the convergence of these two Renaissance patterns of revenge and Christian death recall the force Aristotle remarked in the convergence of the typically Greek patterns of discovery and reversal where Oedipus’ discovery of his origin tumbled him from king to the most despised of subjects (Poetics, XI).}

With the double death—of the wrongdoer and his scourge—the play is effectively and doubly ended; full closure is effected. The audience will see now, complete in retrospect, the events in which the state of wrong is discovered, guilt is assigned and revenge declared, obstacles and counterplots are overcome, and, finally, revenge is brought about. Many writers, good and not so good, have recognized the potential of this basic story form which it is possible to transform to something superb or merely to fill with the hollow mechanics of melodrama: poison, daggers, dark corridors, and villainous plots. In a few cases, of which Hamlet is certainly one, the deep human meaning of the pattern of events has been realized and manifested in an individual plot and language which can show forth human experience in its profoundest aspects.

One of the many ways in which Shakespeare achieved this was through the sophisticated emotional design of the action, an aspect viewed here primarily through one section of that dramatic design which seems to function in the whole the way a deceptive cadence does in a musical composition. By sketching in very brief and broad strokes the significant variations Shakespeare worked upon the old formula, it should be possible to throw the place of this “deceptive cadence” into sharper relief.

The play begins on a troubled night in a troubled realm as Shakespeare took most of the first act to move from the general ill to the specific wrong, accumulating an almost Greek feeling for the polluted topocosm which Hamlet must purify. The heinous wrong done him through the murder of his father and seduction of his mother is revealed to Hamlet, according to pattern, in Act I. However, Shakespeare so contrived it that the truth of this revelation must remain in doubt until the playing out of the murder in the “Gonzago” play. This allowed him to commence the central conflict in Act II with a specific and weighty wrong on Hamlet’s mind but to delay and build the suspense of the head-on conflict between Hamlet and Claudius by keeping the nature of Hamlet’s evidence of the crime still in question (“The spirit that I have seen/May be a devil” [II.ii.602-3]). This in turn allows the very effective variety in the relation of the two protagonists which so intensifies after the Mousetrap Scene, saving the play from becoming merely a series of melodramatic strategies and counterstrategies on more or less the same level of involvement with perhaps only mounting desperation to lead toward the end.

Shakespeare’s famous play-within-a-play has, of course, a double-edged effect for it confirms not only Hamlet’s suspicions but those of Claudius as
well. As befits a good antagonist, Claudius is no fool and has doubted all along that the young man is merely lovesick. From now on each is forewarned of the danger to expect from the other, yet neither has as yet the perfect instrument for destroying his adversary. Hamlet has his passion aroused but is full of stops—when he comes upon the King at prayer—and starts—when he stabs the figure behind the arras—and has no specific plan. Claudius has a devilish plan but still fears to harm the Prince in Denmark. Instead he sends Hamlet away where, outside the royal control, the King’s plans miscarry—undoubtedly inspiring the elaborate reinforcements of his final treachery.

Thus, in the revenge formula, the wrong has been discovered, the guilt has been assigned and revenge sworn, plots and counterplots have been tried. The momentum which has accumulated through the Mousetrap Scene could be sustained in increasingly serious conflicts until its resolution in successful revenge. Instead Shakespeare chose to write a “deceptive cadence” or false resolution by briefly sustaining the tension from “now could I drink hot blood” (III. ii. 393) to III. iv where it is discharged in the rage which spurs out as though the hoped for revenge were being consummated.

In terms merely of plot the stabbing of Polonius constitutes no vastly unusual device. It is an incident in which the revenger makes a mistake which thwarts his purpose—in this case by getting him hustled off to England under guard—and thus extends the play and heightens the suspense. In the tightly constructed Hamlet this mistake also is the cause of the revenger’s death—through a son who also revenges his father—and constitutes as well a mortal sin which Hamlet must expiate. However, something more than plot, as the logical progress of events, is at issue here for the emotional shape of these events is important as well. Some clarification of Shakespeare’s design may come from a look at the very different structural use of the Closet Scene in the narrative versions that preceded the play.

The two most likely sources for the tale, the version in the Historica Danica, Books III and IV, by Saxo Grammaticus and Belleforest’s Histoires tragiques (in turn based on an Italian version by Matteo Bandello), both consist of a wandering story which begins before Hamlet’s birth with the award of Gertrude (Gerutha) to Hamlet’s father and continues for some time after Hamlet slays his uncle without being killed himself. Both versions are roughly similar in essentials and are certainly so in the structural place they give to the incident we are concerned with. That is, the uncle (Fengon-Claudius), suspecting the madness with which the young Prince was attempting to shield himself in the obviously hostile Court, made two attempts to discover the truth of Hamlet’s condition: first using the charms of a young gentlewoman who, it turned out, loved Hamlet and did not betray his disguise, and second by placing a spy in a conference between Hamlet and his mother. The “argument” to chapter 3 of the Belleforest ver-

sion makes this very clear: "How Fengon, uncle to Hamlet, a second time to intrap him in his politick madness, caused one of his counsellors to be secretly hidden in the Queens chamber." After the second failure, fearing the impulsive Prince even more, the uncle hurried Hamlet off to England, presumably to his death. This pair of incidents, the two traps for Hamlet, has the string-of-beads feeling of crude narrative technique. The hero moves from one adventure to another without much cumulative—dramatic—change.

In the narrative there is no Mousetrap Scene; Hamlet's suspicion of Claudius needs no confirmation—and consequent intensification. The killing of the spy appears in the early-middle part of the pattern of events and is definitely overbalanced by the Prince's extended adventures in England, to which place he will return for further important actions after he finishes off his uncle. In Shakespeare the stabbing of the spy—now no longer a nameless courtier but a particular man intimately connected with Hamlet's court life and, as it develops through Laertes, with his death—is the beginning of the end. Thus in the narrative this stabbing and even the brutal dismemberment which Hamlet wreaks on the body count merely as the defeat of one more trick. There is no indication that the Hamlet of the story is especially keyed up to taking revenge on the King at this particular time or that in striking at a hidden figure he thinks, even for a moment, that he has achieved that goal. Indeed, in both narratives Fengon-Claudius is very careful to be away at the time.

Thus Shakespeare transmuted his material, using a more-or-less indifferent narrative incident as a dramatic crux—important in the plot as the cause of Laertes' fatal passion for revenge; important morally as part of the burden of guilt Hamlet carries as minister and scourge; and important in the emotional sweep as a brief, short-circuited, false ending siphoning off some of the too high tension in anticipation of the true ending. It is this latter effect as "deceptive cadence" in the emotional pattern of the play which is the central issue here and, just as in the musical form to which we have drawn an analogy, the effect will be most apparent in the "feel" of a performance.

The effect of III.iv of course depends upon its relation to the previous scenes, especially III.ii—to which it is a sort of resolution. By Act II the ominous mystery of the battlements has become a specific threat in the person of Claudius, and the ghostly chill surrounding the gruff soldiers descends to the halls of the castle with the deceit of spying courtiers, fools, and women. After a series of confrontations involving only small groups of people, the whole Court is assembled at III.ii.90 for the first time since the second scene of the play. The King's first line here ("How fares our cousin Hamlet?"") seems an ingenuous attempt to pick up their relationship again from the time when Claudius had found the Prince too long melancholy on their last direct confrontation seven scenes ago (I.ii).

At the entrance of the royal spectators the stage probably holds a greater

11 The Variorum Hamlet, II, 97.
12 See Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge," PMLA, LXX (1955), 740-49.
number of people in more elaborate costumes and in a more elaborate setting than it has before or will again until the final Fencing Scene. Using his long open stage, Shakespeare arranged the maximum of movement and sound by bringing on the royal party with trumpets and kettledrums (Q2) or (as more elaborately described in F1) with lords attendant, the Guard carrying torches, the playing of the Danish March and a flourish. With this pageantry they enter the scene—as they symbolically enter the trap—already set by Hamlet, Horatio, and the Players.

As the stage “audience” settles down, tension is ominously increased by transferring the main action to the strange, slightly archaic performance of the “Gonzago” play counterpointed by Hamlet’s ironic comments. The unnatural restraint is too much. As Lucianus pours the poison in Gonzago’s ear and Hamlet adds his pointed footnote that the murderer will soon get the love of Gonzago’s wife, the King rises, calls for light, and rushes from the hall, involving an amount of time and stage movement which the brief lines and stage directions only vaguely suggest.

Some sense of this climactic moment in performance is conveyed by Rosamond Gilder’s description of John Gielgud’s 1936 production:

As the King loses his self-control, Hamlet snatches the words from the Player: “He poisons him in the garden. . . . You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago’s wife.” The words are a bomb that blows the King to his feet. Like a coiled spring released, Hamlet is up the stairs, shouting above the hubbub, “What! frightened with false fire?” He stands in the King’s path, a threatening black flame. The court rushes out left and right, melting before the impact of a battle it cannot understand. Hamlet leaps onto the throne waving the pages of the script above his head and shouting his triumphant jingle. The Ghost’s words have been confirmed a hundredfold! The guilty creature has indeed been unkenneled and the strain of months and days has suddenly snapped. In an explosion of released tension, Hamlet tears the “dozen or sixteen lines” into a thousand pieces and scatters them abroad. Horatio is sent off to fetch music, and Hamlet throws himself back on the throne, shaken, his breath coming in gasps, his whole body quivering.

Hamlet exults with Horatio, scorns the errand boys from the disturbed King and Queen, and finally in a soliloquy reminiscent of Macbeth II. i. 49-61, declares his readiness to take blood (though resolving not to physically harm his mother).

Scene three stretches the suspense in this witching time of night, which the torches, poetic imagery, and lighting impress upon us. Fear and guilt suddenly crystallized by Hamlet’s play impel the King to hasty plans in his secret conferences with his spies, then to the solitary agony of soul search-

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13 Numbers of people on stage will vary, of course, with the plan and resources of each producer, but here the festive occasion, the presence of a troop of actors, and the central place in the play itself seem to demand the most in the way of “production.”

14 The New Shakespeare Hamlet, III. ii. 89n.


16 Eleanor Proser comments on the tradition of calling upon night to aid revenge (pp. 40, 181-82).
ing and his attempt at prayer.\textsuperscript{17} Hamlet chances upon the undefended King, draws his sword, but abstains from what he feels would be an insufficient revenge and what we know would be a dramatically inadequate resolution. Thus the emotion remains high, the suspense stretched, as the scene shifts to the long-awaited confrontation in Gertrude's closet.

The stored tension must be quickly let out to effect the kind of "deceptive cadence" we have been concerned with. Even Polonius is pithy as he directs Gertrude to take a hard line with her son. Hamlet calls, Polonius rushes behind the arras, and Hamlet enters. Mother and son come right to the point. Gertrude's two, weak one-line accusations are flung back in sarcastic parody by Hamlet, and this four-line exchange is followed by four half lines, finished out by Hamlet's summary complaint:

You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife,
And would it were not so, you are my mother.

(III. iv. 15-16)

The rage is too great, the replies flung in her face too rapid, and the Queen offers to leave. Hamlet, pressing on, would force her down. Her cry for help is taken up by Polonius behind the arras, and Hamlet, now aware of the spy, draws his sword. "How now! a rat? dead, for a ducat, dead" (III. iv. 23). The sword thrust on this resounding line (drumming the repeated \textit{t}, \textit{d}, and \textit{at} sounds) discharges the energy like a lightning flash. The thunder rumbles briefly as the true nature of the deed is discovered, and the terrified Gertrude is stunned to silence. All is accomplished in only thirty-three lines, and the scene, with almost two hundred more lines to run, is prepared now for an impassioned but no longer hysterical confrontation between mother and son, \textit{both} of whom, at this point, have a stain of serious guilt.

The anticlimax on the discovery of the true victim of Hamlet's rage, far from merely providing a trick to keep the play going, deepens the pattern of human experience with the sudden short circuiting of energies and the concomitant realization that a goal which had seemed within sight is now indefinitely postponed. Tensions must be built up again, requiring new beginnings and a new route to reach the cadence which will finally correctly resolve itself.

This new route from the false resolution to the true ending of the play begins as the Prince recovers from his abortive and misdirected "revenge" with the guilt for the murder of Polonius on his shoulders, "I will be stow him and will answer well/The death I gave him" (III. iv. 176-77),\textsuperscript{18} and the realization that the King who has previously only barely tolerated him must now surely act to be rid of the dangerous young madman. We know there will never be another opportunity like the one in III.iii for Hamlet to take Claudius unguarded. This is so not just because a real person named "Claudius" would not take such a chance (a risky speculation

\textsuperscript{17} Again \textit{Macbeth} echoes the imagery of the bloody hand and newborn babe, suggesting the similarity of the guilt patterns touched on; see \textit{Macbeth} II. ii. 58-62 and I. vii. 21. \textit{The Complete Pelican Shakespeare}, ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore, 1960).

\textsuperscript{18} See Bowers, "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge," for the moral implications here.
since he really wasn’t aware of how close to death he had been at his prayers) but also because the structure of the play now demands a new and fully conscious confrontation between these two forces. Neither in terms of the structure nor of the implied needs of the characters is the time yet ripe for this next major confrontation.

In the meantime, before he is hurried off to England, Hamlet does achieve one major goal by reaching an understanding with his mother, a kind of pacification in which, although she is not turned actively against Claudius, she acknowledges her degradation and her sin against her son and her first husband. This clears the decks of a particularly bothersome psychological problem in anticipation of the final physical confrontations of the last act.

Four short scenes at the beginning of Act IV serve as a kind of denouement to the stabbing. They contain the brief hide-and-go-seek with the body of Polonius; the ordering of Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern to England; and, finally, Hamlet’s view of the passage of Fortinbras and his army (extremely well placed here in this false denouement in anticipation of the victorious return of Fortinbras to cap the real denouement). In the absence of Hamlet, we experience a kind of dead time when the forces of evil and confusion seem to work unrestrainedly. Ophelia loses her wits and finally drowns; Laertes storms the palace enraged at the death of his father and falls in with the treacherous King’s plot against Hamlet. These evils can be laid directly or indirectly to the actions of the absent Prince, whose abortive act of revenge has drawn more—and more sinister—consequences than he could have imagined.

This low point on the tragic curve, the moment of absence and despair, the “winter of our discontent,” is reached in Macbeth at just about the same point. In the absence of Malcolm and Macduff, the evil which has seized Scotland seems supreme and even crushes the innocent wife and child Macduff left behind. Our analogy to music suggests a similar effect where, after a partial conclusion roughly three-quarters of the way through a piece, the composer will abandon the tonic and its most closely related tones to explore more distant keys before returning to the familiar material with which he will make the true ending.

With Act V, Hamlet, who has sent two more meddling fools to their deaths, returns to Denmark re-entering the main action literally and figuratively from the grave (V.i.252), a fact which gives perhaps even more significance to the “dead time” of his absence.19 Here he takes upon himself the results of his fated situation and his own previous actions, resolving with his own death and the deaths of those who fall by or with him his involvement in the murder, treachery, spying, and deceit which has plagued his Court. This actual resolution highlights the abortive nature of the false ending. Hamlet at III.i had never directly experienced the King’s enmity toward him, though he could certainly assume his uncle’s hostility and could easily detect the ruler’s hand behind the wiles of Polonius, Rosen-

19 In the narrative versions Hamlet appears in Denmark on the day of his own, not Ophelia’s funeral.
crantz, and Guildenstern. Such a direct confrontation between Hamlet and Claudius without the mask of civility, therefore, becomes an object of special interest for the audience, what Francisque Sarcey has called the “obligatory scene.”

When this final confrontation does take place, it begins by indirect means in that Hamlet faces not Claudius but Laertes in what is supposed to be a sporting match with bated foils. Shakespeare, however, superbly arranges it so that the wounded Laertes passes off the guilt onto its true instigator (“the king, the king’s to blame” [V.ii.318]), at which point Hamlet, knowing himself mortally struck by Claudius’ treachery, can face him directly, wound him with the same envenomed foil, and force down his throat the wine which Claudius himself poisoned for Hamlet and which has already killed Hamlet’s mother. Sarcey’s admired Scribe could hardly have done better, yet, of course, Shakespeare managed his design upon the materials and depths of high tragedy.

This should clarify as far as description can the structural place of what I have been calling a “deceptive cadence” in the stabbing of Polonius. The effect of form is, of course, “formal” and has traditionally defied an easy translation into content or meaning. Yet the experience of this century of “pure form” has been that the merely formal is merely boring and that in the greatest works of formal art there is meaning or at least suggestion. Some of the meaning which inheres in the pattern of revenge and the structure of Hamlet, which is a refinement of it, must now be considered.

The revenge pattern places an emotional shape onto time with the irreversible discovery of wrong. This plunge into a period of heightened tension, hastened toward a difficult and often distasteful goal, is surely a familiar experience from many significant situations whether they literally involve a wrong that we must set right or simply any important assigned task. The tragic resonance of the pattern comes through the necessary goal which is necessarily destructive. Hamlet is, of course, an unusually long play which requires a structure of some complexity to give variety to the experience it provokes. One important element of this structure, I have suggested, is the “deceptive cadence” in which Shakespeare summons up our excitement then dashes it down in the false resolution of III. iv. The effect offers both the refreshment of the variety of approach introduced and through this felt response a connection with the meaningful experience of beginnings and resolutions, accomplishments and failures in our lives.

The pattern of experience beneath Hamlet has a kind of emotional shape which may fit certain experiences not directly involved with the play, allowing these analogous experiences to add their connotations to the spreading significance of the work. Consider, for example, the pattern of fatal illness: the suspicion, from vague symptoms to the positive identification and confirmation of the disease; the battle with the illness which now seems to focus and direct one’s life; and finally the resolution of victory or defeat for the

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21 For an instructive comparison with a modern long play consider Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night which gains its considerable effect by an unvaried and unrelenting drive.
organism over its attacker. The parallel may be strengthened in the particular instance of the “deceptive cadence” by noting that between the diagnosis and the death or cure there is very often a lull of false hopes and partial cures before the contagion and the organism meet in their direct and final clash.22

All this has made of Hamlet a play whose tragic rhythm differs markedly from the narrative sources on which it was based and from other revenge plays. Of course, it is not a matter of indifference what kind of material such a pattern is imposed upon, and here the nature of Hamlet as the sentient revenger offers the meaningful use of a pattern of events which sees the hero act precipitously and out of time only to bear to his final more weighty reckoning the guilt and consequences of his mistake. Finally, this tragic rhythm which may be imagined from the text and fully and immediately sensed in the sweep of performance, makes the experience of the play both satisfying in itself and suggestive of a significant contour which our own experience often assumes.

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22 It is interesting to speculate that the multiple images of disease which Caroline Spurgeon detected in this play suggest that Shakespeare himself felt the same analogy of basic pattern; see Shakespeare’s Imagery and What It Tells Us (Boston, 1958; originally published Cambridge, Eng., 1935), p. 316.