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## Delacroix's "Hamlet" Studies

It is well-known that in his *Journals* the "romantic" Eugène Delacroix expresses a marked preference for "classical" and "neo-classical" poets, painters, and composers. As early as the painter's own lifetime, Baudelaire, in his essay on Delacroix, commented on and tried to explain this apparent contradiction by positing a "dual character" for great artists, who will not, perhaps cannot, glorify those characteristics which they themselves have to excess. The artists who appear in the *Journals*, then, as the truly great are Racine, La Fontaine, Boileau, Mozart, and Cimarosa rather than Corneille, Michelangelo, Beethoven, and Shakespeare. It is my intention to examine Delacroix's studies of *Hamlet*, perhaps Shakespeare's least "classical," most "eccentric" play, to see what effect the painter's attitudes had on his interpretations.

Typical of 18th century French opinion of Shakespeare is Voltaire's in his famous letter to Horace Walpole dated 15 July 1768:

J'avais dit, il y a très longtemps, qui si Shakspeare était dans le siècle d'Addison, il aurait à son génie l'élégance et le pureté qui rendent Addison recommandable. J'avais dit que son génie était à lui, et que ses fautes étaient à son siècle. Il est précisément, à mon avis, comme le Lope de Vega des Espagnols, et comme le Calderon. C'est une belle nature, mais bien sauvage; nulle régularité, nulle bienséance, nul art, de la bassesse avec de la grandeur, de la bouffonnerie avec du terrible: c'est le chaos de la tragédie, dans lequel il y a cent traits de lumière.<sup>1</sup> (original emphasis)

In the same letter Voltaire laid claim to introducing Shakespeare to the French, though later, when Shakespeare had gained popularity on the continent, Voltaire was to express regret for having exposed France to the English savage. Be that as it may, his conception of Shakespeare as "all nature, no art" was widespread enough to result, soon after, in the castrated versions of *Hamlet* and other plays which were the only Shakespearian productions to reach the French stage until the second quarter of the 19th century. We shall see how Delacroix, too, was disturbed by Shakespeare's lack of regularity and propriety, by the mingling of the base and the sublime and of buffoonery with the terrible. That Delacroix and his contemporaries did not give over Voltaire completely is some indication of Voltaire's personal prestige and of the tenacity of his ideas and ideals,

and also, perhaps, of some deeper need on Delacroix's part.

The *Journals* themselves display a remarkably inconsistent aesthetic both in Delacroix's considerations of his own work and in his critical comments on music, literature, and the visual arts in general. Early in the *Journals* he insists on the importance of the "ideal" and of "eternal principles." He mentions being in substantial agreement with the comment of a friend on the singer La Pasta: "he classed her among the cold and controlled talents, PLASTIC, as he said. As to that word "plastic," what he should have said was "ideal."<sup>2</sup> Though that is a verbal leap that is not easy to follow, in English, at least, Delacroix does expand the idea later in the *Journals*. The important thing is that though a man's faculties be completely engaged in his work, his "soul is not, on that account, overcome, by an emotion."<sup>3</sup> The sense of the ideal, the sub-strata of convention must not be only present but predominating; it must *control*. Delacroix's attitude toward Beethoven is particularly interesting; though he continually finds himself preferring Mozart to Beethoven, he nevertheless finds the latter "the man of our time . . . romantic to the supreme degree."<sup>4</sup> More particularly, "Where [Beethoven] is obscure and seems lacking in unity, the cause is not to be sought in what people look upon as a rather wild originality, the thing that they honor him for; the reason is that he turns his back on eternal principles; Mozart never."<sup>5</sup> Where Mozart, by virtue of the slender and delicate structure of his music could not afford to sham, Beethoven could; where Mozart was transparent, Beethoven could hide behind opacity.

Delacroix's dislikes did not stop at the uncontrolled, wild originality that he saw in some of his romantic contemporaries. (He later discovered some virtue in Beethoven but, to the end of his days, according to his *Journals*, he abhorred Berlioz.) He despised the new realists no less. The interest for us is not in his dislikes but in the fact that his attacks are based on such surprising grounds: "They [Alexandre Dumas and his coterie] demand an art without prearranged conventions. But those so-called improbabilities shock nobody. What shocks horribly is the mingling in *their* works, of an exaggerated

<sup>2</sup> E. Delacroix, *The Journals*, ed. and trans. W. Pach (New York, 1948), p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> Delacroix, p. 135.

<sup>4</sup> Delacroix, p. 150.

<sup>5</sup> Delacroix, p. 195.

<sup>1</sup> Voltaire, *Lettres Choiesies* (Paris, 1891), p. 325.

fidelity—which the arts reject.”<sup>6</sup> And again, “there is something else in painting besides exactitude and precise rendering from the model.”<sup>7</sup> It is that “something else,” of course, which is at the heart of romantic theory in general as well as of Delacroix’s personal one—the element of transformation. But once again there is something alien about the language Delacroix uses in his insistence on the need for prearranged conventions: “. . . Art is no longer what the vulgar think it to be, that is, some sort of inspiration which comes from nowhere, which proceeds from chance, and presents no more than the picturesque externals of things. It is reason itself, adorned by genius, but following a necessary course and encompassed by higher laws. . . .”<sup>8</sup>

This certainly would be more appropriate to Voltaire or Pope than to a romantic. There is an element of extreme conservatism in Delacroix that, at times, becomes almost puritanical; whether it stems from an upper-class fastidiousness or from the religious hesitations which make their appearance from time to time in his writings, it comes out with peculiar force in his comments on the theater and sheds some light on his response to *Hamlet*:

[In the theater] you obtain interest only by exhibiting the passions and the agitation they cause; that is scarcely the means of inspiring resignation and virtue. Our arts are constantly making passion attractive. . . . In the past with few exceptions in one art or the other, the triumph or defeat of the passions turned to the profit of morality at least to a certain degree . . . People were a hundred leagues from those romantic eccentricities which afford the usual theme of modern dramas and the food for idle minds. . . .<sup>9</sup>

Again and again Delacroix refers to “romantic eccentricity”: “Sublime men filled with eccentricity are like those rakes that women are mad about: they are just so many prodigals with whom people are thankful for certain generous exceptions to their licentious conduct.”<sup>10</sup> He uses the same tone with the very subject with which we are concerned: “What would he [Ingres] say of poor Préault, who does things like Ophelia and other eccentricities, English and Romantic?”<sup>11</sup> Delacroix is remarkably capricious on this subject; it is not a development in time that carries him from a dislike of the irregularities in Shakespeare and other “belles natures . . . bien sauvage” to the opposite view. On the contrary, Delacroix’s opinion changed, at times, from page to page in his *Journals*. After long condemnations of disproportion, he again questions, “Can it be that disproportion is one of

the conditions which *compel* admiration? In my own opinion, that is the fact.”<sup>12</sup> Then he again reverses the question and asks himself how much we can excuse in Shakespeare when there is still, after all, the regularity of Racine. He makes specific charges against Shakespeare; we shall see just what the relation is between what he says about the plays and the way in which he handles one of them—*Hamlet*—in paintings and graphics<sup>13</sup> produced over the greater part of his life.

What, specifically, did French critics of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries find distasteful in Shakespeare’s plays and in *Hamlet* in particular? Among other things, it was the mingling of comic elements with tragic; the failure to observe the “Aristotelian” unities of time, place, and action so carefully followed in the French classical drama; the rambling, baroque character of speech and structure; the unlimited use of elements of the supernatural; the portrayal of violence on the stage; the strange, certainly unclassical *affaires d’amour*; the ignoble relationships between characters of high and low birth. And what, specifically, are the scenes Delacroix chose to illustrate, some of which, moreover, seemed to obsess him throughout his life? Hamlet thrusting away the sentries in his eagerness to pursue the Ghost offstage, and confronting it on the ramparts of Elsinore; Hamlet about to plunge his sword into Polonius, and about to haul the corpse offstage; Ophelia mad, and Ophelia drowned; Hamlet jesting with the Gravediggers (in three paintings as well as a lithograph; this scene was particularly distasteful to Voltaire and his contemporaries and successors); Hamlet and Laertes fighting in Ophelia’s open grave—every one of these works, and others beside, depicts a scene that violates the rules of the French classical drama.<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note, too, that many of these same scenes are the ones eliminated in the “Gallic” version of the play by the eighteenth century French dramatist Ducis. It is this version with Talma playing the Prince that Delacroix saw in Paris; several of the paintings and lithographs offer a Hamlet who resembles Talma to a striking degree.<sup>15</sup> But Delacroix used, not the staged version of Ducis and Talma, but the play as Shakespeare wrote it. And, since George Heard Hamilton points out that it is unlikely that Delacroix saw *Hamlet* during his trip to England or the English compa-

<sup>12</sup> Delacroix, p. 276.

<sup>13</sup> *The complete set of lithographs is reproduced full-size, if poorly in Loys Delteil, Le Peintre-Graveur Illustré, v. 3: Ingres and Delacroix (Paris, 1906).*

<sup>14</sup> *For an interesting account of French reaction to Hamlet, see Paul S. Conklin, A History of Hamlet Criticism, 1601-1821, New York, 1947.*

<sup>15</sup> *For portraits of Talma by Delacroix and contemporaries see G. H. Hamilton, “Hamlet” or “Childe Harold”: Delacroix or Byron,” Gazette des Beaux-Arts, XXVI (July-Dec., 1944), pp. 365-386.*

<sup>6</sup> Delacroix, p. 162.

<sup>7</sup> Delacroix, p. 187.

<sup>8</sup> Delacroix, p. 194.

<sup>9</sup> Delacroix, p. 408.

<sup>10</sup> Delacroix, p. 426.

<sup>11</sup> Delacroix, p. 389.

ny of Edmund Kean when it appeared in Paris, it is entirely possible that Delacroix made use of an English text.<sup>16</sup> Be that as it may, he must have been dissatisfied with the rather appalling omissions and changes in the Ducis text. It is clear from the lithographs that he was fascinated by the enigma of Hamlet and by the violence and turbulence of the play itself and that, if he was repelled at all—as the *Journals* seem to indicate—it was an intellectual repulsion, the result of the influence of the French classical tradition and the intellectual hold of Voltairean criticism.

The accounts of the Ducis version given by both Hamilton and Conklin indicate that the Prince was altered to appeal to the “Gallic” taste for the sentimental and sombre. He weeps easily under the stress of emotion, swears vengeance but has little of the *sauvage* so repellent to Voltaire—and to French audiences, apparently; he is rather weak, extremely sensitive, spends a good deal more time contemplating suicide than vengeance, and is more than a little effeminate.<sup>17</sup> This image may have appealed to Voltaire—though it is difficult to understand how it could—but certainly did not appeal to Delacroix.

The first of the lithographs (Fig. 1) in the Hamlet series is from Act I, Scene II, in a room of state at Elsinore:

Queen: Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off,  
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.  
Do not for ever with thy vailed lids  
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.  
Thou know’st ’tis common. All that lives must die.  
Passing through nature to eternity.  
Hamlet: Ay, madam, it is common.<sup>18</sup>

The Queen stands to the left of Hamlet, her right hand on his; the King is to the right, watching both his wife and stepson. The Prince eyes the King with more disdain than hatred, his mouth twisted as though in the midst of his aside (he has just muttered, “A little more than kin, and less than kind” in covert answer to Claudius’ overture, “. . . My cousin Hamlet and my son.”) Though the contrast is not exceptionally sharp, Gertrude’s garment and Claudius’ royal ermine accentuate the black of Hamlet’s simple cloak and doublet. The hands of the antagonists are in a near-perfect horizontal and are the most striking single element in the plate; it is no accident, I think, that these are the only hands visible though there are seven other figures in the background. (Ulrich Christoffel quotes Delacroix as saying in conversation that hands are as important as faces in conveying the emotional content of a work. And, interestingly enough, he adds that Delacroix used a girl as model for Hamlet’s

hands in the series of lithographs.) Hamlet is far from the delicate, effeminate soul of, for example, the *Hamlet au Cimetière* exhibited at the Salon of 1839, though his hands are considerably more delicate than those of Gertrude or Claudius; Hamlet is certainly virile enough, though there is a suggestion of a keener sensibility in his slender, graceful hands in contrast to something of the grossness of the flesh about the King and Queen.

The second lithograph of the series (Fig. 2), from Act I, Scene IV, concerns Hamlet’s first encounter with the ghost of his father; Horatio and Marcellus try to keep him from following the apparition but Hamlet says, “Still am I call’d. Unhand me, gentlemen. By heaven, I’ll make a ghost of him that lets me! I say, away! Go on. I’ll follow thee.” (I, iv, 84-86) Hamlet is here a handsome young man, his hands again delicate and expressive, his features regular, his forehead high, and his hair long and “Byronic.” The scene, in terms of both internal and external action, is highly dramatic and active. Once again hands play an important part as they form a diagonal which centers, as always, on Hamlet; one hand is thrown back to throw off the restraining arms of Horatio and Marcellus, the other forward in a gesture to the beckoning ghost. The raised hands of the spirit as it moves off-stage towards the misty ramparts in the distance, Horatio’s right hand raised in a futile attempt to stop Hamlet, and Marcellus’ left hand grasping Hamlet’s cloak—more in fear than hindrance, to judge by the expression on his face—are all more expressive of the turmoil than is the action of the figures themselves. Whether Delacroix used a printed text or his recollections of a stage production, he stays within the limits of an imaginary stage in the lithographs; when there is a background, as in this case, it is as vague and artificial as a stage setting.

In the next lithograph (Fig. 3), Hamlet has followed the ghost to a terrace above Elsinore. The ghost turns and says,

I am thy father’s spirit  
Doom’d for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confin’d to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purg’d away.  
(I, v, 9-13)

The Prince has his sword drawn, resting against his shoulder, as though still unsure of the ghost’s intentions. The ghost itself, more substantial in his armor than seems entirely fitting for a spirit, is less suggestive of the supernatural than is the shadowed eeriness of the background fortifications. The moment is one of internal action, externally static. Hamlet’s left hand, raised and pointing at the figure before him, is a strangely gnarled referent to the rage within. His cloak flies out over his shoulder though Delacroix attempts no other indication of wind and thus heightens the aura of the unnatural.

“Polonius and Hamlet,” from Act II, Scene II, (Fig. 4) discloses Polonius trying to discover the cause of Ham-

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Conklin, pp. 91-92, 154.

<sup>18</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. G. L. Kittredge, (Boston, 1939), I, ii, 68-73. Further references to the play appear parenthetically after quotation.



Fig. 1. Gertrude, Hamlet, Claudius at court ("cher Hamlet, écarte cette sombre apparence, et jette un regard ami sur le roi") The illustrations accompanying this article (except for Figures 14, 15 and 16 which are from paintings) comprise the complete set of 16 lithographs which Delacroix made from HAMLET. (See cover note on Contents page.)



Fig. 2. Hamlet following the ghost ("Mon destin me crie de la suivre . . . lâchez moi, Messieurs, ou par le Ciel, je ferai un fantôme du premier qui m'arrêtera).

let's discontent; the prince feigns madness, calls the old man "fishmonger," and answers the question as to what he is reading with, "Words, words, words." The lithograph holds little interest for us but for the fact that, once again, Hamlet has a completely different face—this time that of a very young man, all but a boy. As befits his "madness," his face is expressionless.

The French caption to Fig. 5 refers to the passage in which Hamlet says to Ophelia,

Get thee to a nunnery! Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet could I accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not born me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do, crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery. (III, i, 122-134)

Ophelia sits demurely by while Hamlet paces to and fro before her, gesticulating. Hamlet's back is to her but his head is turned so that he looks at her over his shoulder. His right arm is outstretched and his hand bids her go,

but the spread and taut fingers of his left hand seem as prone to grasp as shun her. Hamlet's face, like his hands, belies his words; not expressive of distaste, certainly not of hatred, his face is more indicative of anguish than repulsion. Ophelia bears Hamlet's tirade stoically; she sits humbly, rather bent, her legs and bosom in deep shadow, her hands tense on her lap, spotlighted. The lighting on her hands almost makes them the focal point of the work.

As the plot unravels, Delacroix next deals with the play-within-a-play. The moment is ideal for rendering, not outward violence or excitement, but the very moment before violence explodes. Hamlet's words are packed with the bitter irony born of hatred and desire for revenge:

'Tis a knavish piece of work; but what o' that. Your Majesty and we have free souls, it touches us not . . . He poisons him i' the garden for's estate . . . The story is extant, and written in very choice Italian.

(III, ii, 249-251)

In the lithograph (Fig. 6) Hamlet sits on the floor leaning on Ophelia's lap, his head turned towards the King and Queen, his left hand pointing towards the players off to the right. Since Delacroix had to keep the center of the action on the royal family, he placed the minor ac-



Fig. 3. Hamlet confronting the ghost (*Je suis l'esprit de ton père! . . . Venge le d'un meurtre infame et dénaturé*).

tion, not directly in front of the spectators, but to one side. Wide-eyed in fascination and horror, Claudius watches the play over Hamlet's head; Ophelia looks only at Hamlet; Polonius watches over his "wards," the King and Queen, from behind their chairs; the Queen is bent towards her son but her eyes seem to be raised to the play-within-a-play; Horatio stands conspicuously in the foreground, watching Claudius for signs of self-betrayal; and, finally, Hamlet himself speaks to the King, the Queen, and Ophelia, his eyes lit with malicious glee, his words meant only for the King. The scene is climactic in both play and picture for, in a moment, the quiet ends with the turbulence of an explosion:

Ophelia: The king rises.  
 Hamlet: What, frightened with false fire?  
 Queen: How fares my lord?  
 Polonius: Give o'er the play.  
 King: Give me some light! Away!  
 All: Lights, lights, lights!  
 (III, ii, 276-281)

A moment later, after his mocking interlude with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Fig. 7), Hamlet comes upon Claudius, praying in his chamber (Fig. 8). After the crowded complexity and intensity of the play-scene, De-



Fig. 4. Hamlet and Polonius (*Que lisez vous, Monseigneur? des mots, des mots, des mots*).

lacroix switches to a corresponding simplicity in the silent drama of the near-murder of the King. Delacroix's drawing is rapid and sketchy; the King is massive and inert, Hamlet taut, poised to spring. For this one instant—not more, since the potential is not carried out and Hamlet does not kill the King or the King confess his guilt—dissembling has ceased. The King, as far as he may, shows penitence, though still unwilling to do penance:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.  
 Words without thoughts never to heaven go.  
 (III, iii, 97-98)

Hamlet, his passion finally showing itself, displays the grim hatred he holds for Claudius; his eyes are wide and staring, his lips tightly compressed. The King's robes are rapidly and freely drawn with an angularity almost monumental in its mass; he is, in fact, juxtaposed against a huge marble column—the only time in the series Delacroix uses so present an object. Hamlet, immobile yet vibrantly alive, stands against the solidity and passivity of the King and column and gives the sense of an impending attack upon the state itself.

Many interpretations of *Hamlet* place the next scene (III, iv) at the center of the play: the procrastination-





Fig. 5. Hamlet and Ophelia.

theory insists that with his murder of Polonius, Hamlet's hand is finally forced and the rest follows inexorably from this moment; the Freudian places its weight on the interview between Hamlet and Gertrude in her bed-chamber; the revenge-play argument bases itself on the moment in the scene when Hamlet, pointing to Polonius' corpse, accepts his mission and its consequences:

For this same lord,  
I do repent; but heaven hath pleas'd it so,  
To punish me with this, and this with me,  
That I must be their scourge and minister.  
I will bestow him, and will answer well  
The death I gave him.  
(III, iv, 172-177)

Delacroix, whether or not he held a single consistent view of the play, clearly accepted the importance of Act III, Scene iv, for he devoted no less than three of the lithographs to it. Two of these are concerned with the murder, one with the moment just before the thrust of the blade through the arras (Fig. 9), the other with a moment somewhat after (Fig. 11). The first is interesting in that Delacroix had to distort Shakespeare slightly to avoid the actual moment of thrust; in the play the time lapse between Gertrude's call for help, Polonius' picking up the



Fig. 6. The Play-within-a-play (*C'est une intrigue scélérate, mais qu'importe? Votre majesté et nous avons la conscience libre, cela ne nous touche en rien. . . . Vous voyez: il l'empoisonne dans le jardin pour s'empare de son royaume . . . l'histoire est réelle écrite en bel italien.*)

call, and Hamlet's pass through the arras is almost infinitesimal:

Queen: Help, help, ho!

Polonius: What, ho! help, help, help!

Hamlet: How now? a rat? Dead for a ducat, dead!  
(III, iv, 22-24)

In the lithograph (Fig. 9), Hamlet is poised for the action of a moment later, his weight on his right foot and the ball of his left, but his sword is pointed diagonally towards the ground and his body inclines after it from the waist. The stance is less that of a man about to use his sword than of one hesitating, listening for further sounds before making a decision as to action. The position of Hamlet's left hand anent the Queen, and of her left hand on Hamlet's, supports this reading: Hamlet's hand does not indicate "let me go," but "be still;" Gertrude's hand—as well as the expression on her face—does not indicate "stop!" but "what was that?" The pose, the youthfulness of Gertrude's face (cf. the full middle-aged face in fig. 1 and the tired, aging one in fig. 6) the startled expression on that face are all suggestive of the intimacy of a woman surprised with her lover rather than of a mother frightened by her son's wrath. Noteworthy, too, is the marked similarity in profiles of mother and son: brow, nose, mouth, and chin might have come from the same model. Delacroix need not have read Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* to have seen the ambivalence of Hamlet's attitude towards his mother. The incest-motif is as much a Romantic discovery as a psychoanalytical one.

The third lithograph illustrating this scene (Fig. 10) comes at the moment Hamlet has concluded his speech beginning "Look here upon this picture, and on this, / The counterfeit presence of two brothers;" the French



Fig. 7. Hamlet with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (*Voudriez vous jouer de cette flûte? . . . —Monseigneur, je ne puis. . . —Je vous en conjure . . .*)

caption supplies Gertrude's lines:

O, speak to me no more!  
These words like daggers enter in my ears.  
No more, sweet Hamlet!  
(94-96)

Gertrude's eyes are veiled, indistinct, to suggest the pain which she feels at hearing her son's words and looking at the miniature in his hand. Her left hand grasps the arm with which he holds the painting, her right is under that arm, athwart his chest and other arm. Hamlet's legs are thrown dramatically far apart; his free hand gesticulates; his passion is even indicated in his dishevelment, his doublet unbuttoned to below the middle of his chest. The image presented is one of entanglement—the intertwined arms of the characters: the swirls of Gertrude's gown around her shoulders, arms, and legs; Hamlet's cloak (not apparent in the other lithographs of the scene) falling off the chair behind him. Though Polonius' body is not visible, and though Delacroix avoids the re-appearance of the Ghost a half-dozen lines later, Delacroix still finds ways to portray the extremes of motion and emotion.

Among the more indecorous (if you will) interpretations in the series are those of Ophelia's distraction (Fig. 12) and death (Fig. 13). The latter, which dates from 1843, the outside limit of the nine-year period of Dela-



Fig. 8. Hamlet and the King alone (*A présent je puis le tuer facilement . . . mais qu'il le surprendrais-je au milieu de ses prières au moment où il purifie son âme! non, non—O Conscience plus noire que la mort! Âme engluée dans le crimel je ne puis prier . . . mes paroles s'adressent là-haut mes pensées demeurent ici bas.*)

croix's work on the sixteen lithographs, is unique in its disregard for the limits of an imagined stage. Both the earlier scenes on the ramparts of Elsinore and the later ones in the graveyard can be conceived within those limits; the stream in which Ophelia lies drowning cannot. Delacroix is, of course, picking up on the Queen's report of the facts of Ophelia's death, but it is his imagination which supplies all the sensational details. The relevant parts of the Queen's speech are these:

There on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds  
Clamb'ring 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;  
. . . . .  
. . . . . 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.

(IV, vii, 174-178; 182-184)

In the lithograph, despite the hand that still holds to a





Fig. 9. Polonius behind the arras (*Qu'est ce donc . . . Un rat!*)



Fig. 10. Hamlet and the Queen (*N'ajoute rien de plus: ces mots penetrent jusqu'à mon oreille comme autant de poignards rien de plus, cher Hamlet*)

“pendent bough,” Delacroix is not intent upon the frenzy of struggle but the placidity of easeful death. It simply does not matter that Ophelia’s arm could not possibly support her that far out of the water; or that, if it could support her, her entire body would have to show the strains of the effort. Her face is marked by a mad repose which is reinforced by the softness of her exposed bosom and the calmness of the water and landscape. Yet the calm, if anything, makes the scene more sensational rather than less in this most unqualifiedly romantic of the lithographs.

Delacroix seems to have been particularly fascinated by the graveyard scene; over a period of twenty years or more he did three paintings of this subject as well as the one lithograph. The earliest painting on this theme (1836?) (Fig. 14) bows enough to the Ducis version of *Hamlet* to eliminate the gravediggers entirely. Hamlet and Horatio are alone; Horatio stands with arms folded, sombre, darkly shadowed above the figure of the Prince, who seems to be half in the open grave. One of Hamlet’s shapely legs rests on the gravestone lying next to the grave, his left hand holds the skull though he does not look at it, his right hand is limp and markedly delicate. The characterization in general seems to be very much that of the French stage. Hamlet appears on the verge of tears, a conception more in keeping with what the

French expected on the stage than with the man who says, . . . Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times. And now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kiss’d I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfall’n? Now get you to my lady’s chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that . . .

(V, i, 202-216)

The image of a prince and hero philosophizing on a skull which he holds in his hand on stage, indicating where hung the lips of the deceased, and punning on the missing jaw (“chapfall’n”) would have been too much for a French audience just as it was, a hundred years and more earlier, for an English one: during the Restoration, John Evelyn commented in his diary that *Hamlet* was falling off in popularity because it did not please the more genteel tastes of the age.



Fig. 11. Hamlet over Polonius' body (*Vraiment ce conseiller est maintenant bien silencieux, bien discret, bien grave, lui qui dans sa vie était le drôle le plus bavard du monde.*)

In this painting Delacroix uses the physical elements in the scene to accentuate the note of the dismal; the sky is divided into an extremely dark area above Hamlet and an equally light area over Horatio. Though the setting is considerably more out-of-doors (the view is panoramic—in the distant background there is what seems to be a wall of a castle and, on the left, an ornate cross silhouetted against the sky) the position of the two figures is essentially theatrical. In the lithographs Delacroix uses moments of stasis frequently and to good effect; perhaps that, too, is a bow to the avoidance of the horrific and violent. Be that as it may, Delacroix, successful as he is at times at capturing stasis at the height of intensity—"as cold and passionate as the dawn"—is capable, too, of mere melodramatic theatricality. This painting is a case in point.

The next version of *Hamlet au Cimetière*, (Fig. 15) exhibited at the Salon of 1839 and painted not long before, presents the archetype of the sombre and sentimental interpretation of the melancholy Dane. Hamlet, in half-profile, is lean and delicate, with aquiline nose and large sad eyes; his left hand, as in the earlier painting, is

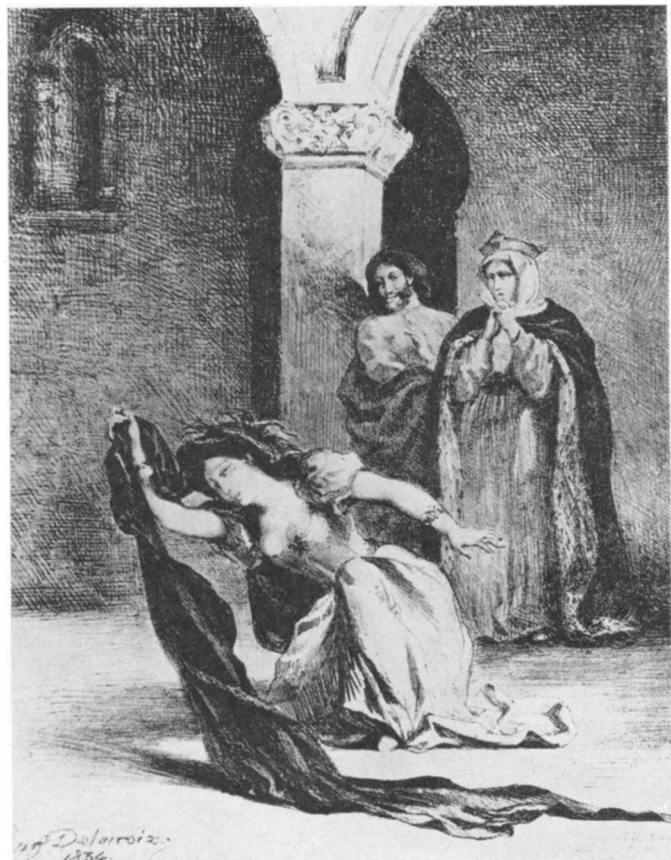


Fig. 12. Ophelia mad.

limp and flaccid at his side while his right, again with long delicate fingers, rather daintily holds up his cloak to expose a graceful leg slightly bent at the knee. As he gazes at the skull held aloft by one of the burly gravediggers, he more resembles a figure out of Dante Gabriel Rossetti than a Shakespearian tragic hero. The flesh of Hamlet's face and hands offer the only soft texture in the painting; Horatio is bearded and not a young man, his features only roughly outlined; the one gravedigger shown frontally is rough and burly, his face, arms, and exposed chest equally coarse-grained. The sky, as so often in these works, is turbulent with fierce black clouds foreboding storm and, as in the earlier painting, gathering over Hamlet's head rather than Horatio's. In no way can the image presented here be taken for the man who would jest with the clown:

Hamlet: . . . Whose grave's this, sirrah?

Clown: Mine, sir . . .

Hamlet: I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in't.

Clown: You lie out on't, sir, and therefore 'tis not yours. For my part, I do not lie in't, yet it is mine.

Hamlet: Thou dost lie in't, to be in't and say it is thine. 'Tis for the dead, not the quick; therefore thou liest.

(V, i, 126-137)

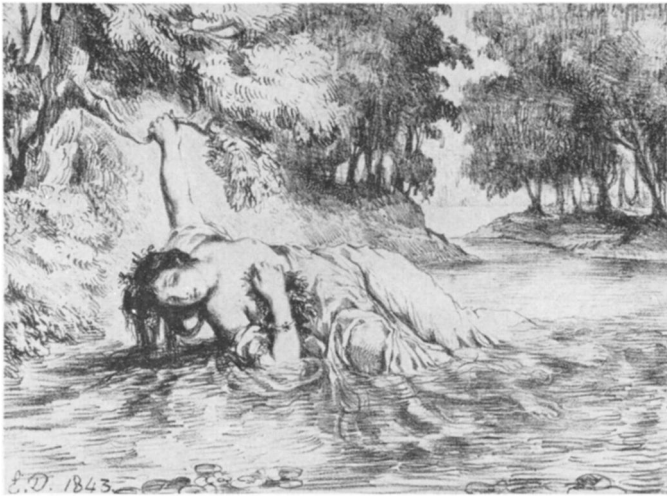


Fig. 13. Ophelia drowned (Ses vêtements appesantis et trempés d'eau ont entraîné la pauvre malheureuse.)



Fig. 14. HAMLET AND HORATIO, oil, 1836? Louvre Museum, Paris.

*Hamlet au Cimetière* is not unusual as a French conception of *Hamlet* but is unusual for Delacroix and unlike Delacroix's work in general. It is alien to his other, better, work, and alien to his own passionate interest in Hamlet as play and personality.

The final *Hamlet au Cimetière* painting (Fig. 16), which dates from 1859 and which appeared in the Salon



Fig. 15. HAMLET AND THE GRAVE DIGGERS, 1839 Albertina Collection, Vienna.

of that year, is a radical change from the two earlier paintings. Delacroix shows little concern with Hamlet as a personality, is more involved with the spectacle of the cemetery than with either the play or the character. Behind the central figures of Hamlet and Horatio a procession of hooded, torch-bearing figures approach carrying a coffin; the gravedigger in the foreground lies sprawled grotesquely on the earth and, though he looks directly at Hamlet, has no relation to him. The three movements are related, not in terms of action, but of painting. The result—Hamlet's isolation—is, I think, the one element the paintings have in common; Hamlet is oblivious of the external world, has no real contact with either the gravediggers or Horatio. He is isolated, aloof, highlighting the essential loneliness of his situation and personality, and, to the romantic mind, of life as a whole.

Hamlet, in this last painting, is no longer the beardless youth of the others; he is bearded, in fact, while Horatio becomes beardless. It almost seems as though Delacroix were trying to reconcile the apparent contradictions in Hamlet by transforming him into a virile man from the delicate youth of the earlier versions of this scene. This would seem to be borne out in the lithograph of the cemetery scene (Fig. 17). Here, too, Hamlet is large, muscular, far from the effeminacy of the paintings of 1836 and 1839. He is cruder and presents considerably less contrast to the roughness of the gravediggers. Again,



Fig. 16. HAMLET AND HORATIO, 1851, Louvre Museum, Paris.

Delacroix may have attempted to smooth over some of the apparent inconsistencies, not only in reaction to the play, but in his need for consistency within each work. He was apparently less interested in illustrating the play than in creating individual works and, as a corollary, interpretations of Hamlet's character.

In the last scene but one, Delacroix allows the violence of the play to break out openly. Hamlet and Laertes struggle in Ophelia's open grave (Fig. 18) their hands grasping one another's shoulders; the gravediggers kneel near the coffin, grasping it tightly in their excitement; a priest raises his hands in an exhortation to Hamlet and Laertes to stop; in the background, right, a throng of people bear crosses and torches; and, in the rear center, Horatio stands with his arms thrown wide as in a crucifixion. There is a pronounced circular pattern which serves to heighten the sense of movement and excitement.

In the subdued final scene (Fig. 19) Delacroix once again resorts to the moment, not of action, but of the moment immediately following. Horatio holds the dying prince while, in the background, several men carry off Laertes and, to the left, another holds the dead Queen. Hamlet is still the alienated, isolated hero even in death: only Horatio attends him or so much as looks at him. The men holding Laertes look to the Queen as Hamlet, still clutching his sword, dies. In death, still more than in life, Hamlet becomes the handsome—almost beautiful—Romantic hero. Delacroix uses the softest of shading in rendering the delicacy of Hamlet's features and complexion. The contrast between Hamlet's beardless beauty—though not boyish (or girlish) as in the cemetery paintings—and Horatio's bearded, tough masculinity is extremely sharp. And, once again, the hands form a diagonal through the center of the action. With his last request to Horatio, the Prince dies:



Fig. 17. Hamlet and the Gravediggers (Ce crâne, Monsieur, était celui d'Yorick, le Bouffon du Roi—Hélas! Pauvre Yorick!)

O good Horatio, what a wounded name,  
(Things standing thus unknown) shall live behind me!  
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in the harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
To tell my story.  
(V, ii, 355-360)

In *The Romantic Agony* Mario Praz says of Delacroix that "*Du sang, de la volupté, de la mort*" might well be the motto of his work."<sup>10</sup> He goes on to catalogue the more bloody and dismal subjects of Delacroix's paintings, particularly those from literature. From the evidence of the *Hamlet* works, however, that motto would seem to need some qualification. Most of the blood in *Hamlet* is shed in the last act, and one might expect Delacroix's concern to lie heavily there, yet the number of lithographs for each of the five acts is 3, 2, 6, 2, 3. (I will not attempt to argue the classical symmetry of the pattern.) Delacroix presents the corpse of Gertrude in the last lithograph, but not her drinking of the poison; he presents the corpse of Laertes in the same lithograph

<sup>10</sup> Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. A. Davidson (London, 1933), pp. 141-142.





Fig. 18. Hamlet and Laertes fighting in Ophelia's grave.



Fig. 19. Hamlet's death (Ahl je meurs. Horatien justifie moi et ma cause auprès de ceux qui m'accuseraient . . . Quelle vaste curée a faite la mort! que de princes frappés à la fois par le trépas!)

and Hamlet fighting him in Ophelia's grave in the preceding one, but not the swordplay that results in Laertes' death and Hamlet's. Hamlet's killing of the King would seem to be a natural and essential culmination for the sequence of events in the play, but Delacroix bypasses it and, in fact, ignores the King after the eighth lithograph. Earlier, as we have seen, Delacroix renders the death of Polonius through events before and after the actual moment of violence and blood. He chooses the most violent of scenes, at times only to avoid the violence by concentrating on the static moment just before or after the action itself.

There are other compromises—and I can only call them that—in the studies. Certainly Delacroix wavers between a virile and a sensitive (if not effeminate) Hamlet, often without pretending to strike the Byronic balance between the two. He underplays the fierce clash between the comic and tragic in Shakespeare. He eliminates Hamlet in soliloquy (for the potential histrionics bypassed by not showing Hamlet alone, see any production of the play on stage or film). Delacroix is interested in Hamlet in relationships human and graphic. In every

lithograph Hamlet is portrayed as he reacts in a particular situation (one might change the cliché about there being as many Hamlets as there are actors capable of playing the part to "there are as many Hamlets as there are situations in which Hamlet may play a part"). Sullen with the King and Queen, determined with the guards, histrionic with Polonius and Ophelia, wily with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, brutal, remorseless, contemptuous, arrogant, if also at times distraught and vacillating—the Hamlet of Delacroix is all these, and hardly representative of the classical balance the artist is so attracted by in the *Journals*. Despite the compromises or qualifications (and despite the clear exception of the two earlier paintings) the approach to *Hamlet* could have had little appeal to Voltaire or to his contemporaries in their admiration for the disemboweled Ducis version of the play. Delacroix was very much concerned with the particular in situation and emotion; he was not interested in being consistent from one lithograph to the next but in exploiting each scene for its own sake and each facet of Hamlet's character as profoundly as possible.

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matter," may be transposed for use in studying a written text as the primary or the apparent, literal meaning of the ideas presented. It is comprised of the facts as stated and their relationships.

The second level of meaning consists of "secondary or conventional subject matter," where the apparent literal meanings in the simple form of the first level are connected to larger themes and concepts which are part of our general cultural and historical knowledge. In the case of a written text we might paraphrase Panofsky to say that on this level we relate the specific ideas under discussion to broad "secondary or conventional ideas."

The third level of meaning involves a synthesis composed of the apparent ideas of the first level, the general cultural and ideological context of the second level together with relevant ideas from other humanistic disciplines. On this high level the knowledge and wisdom of scholars and of evidence from other related fields is brought to bear on the ideas concerned. On this level we are permitted an insight into the intrinsic meaning or the "content" of the subject matter.

The method that prevailed on the two lower levels, called *iconography*, or the description of images, is transformed on the third level into *iconology*, or the science of the study of the meaning of images. Similarly in the study of ideas we may, through a close study of the contexts and by reference to the study of related ideas in other disciplines, be able to penetrate from the apparent or literal meanings of ideas to their intrinsic meanings, or, in the deepest sense, their "content."

Some penetrating thoughts on the value of a study of the context of a work of art for an understanding of it have been stated by James S. Ackerman.<sup>16</sup> First of all, he condemns art historians' excessive concern with historical developments, which he believes tends to engulf both the artist and the work of art in an evolutionary trend. He believes that it is only by studying the art in terms of its context that it may be freed sufficiently from arbitrary classifications to permit its intrinsic qualities to be revealed. Professor Ackerman considers creative activity itself to be a primary value, outweighing conventional abstract constructs, such as the myth of "development," and the dogma of an "*avant-garde*" in art. He writes:

Starting with the premise of the autonomy of the individual work, we would seek out the intention and the experiences of the artist as he produced it. By autonomy I do not mean isolation, because the experiences of the artist inevitably bring him into contact with his environment and traditions; he cannot work in a historical vacuum. So we would need to know what the artist had seen and done before, what he sees and does now for the first time, what he or his patron wishes to accomplish, how his inten-

tions and solutions mature in the course of production. Every tool of history must be at hand to understand all this, and some new ones, too, such as those of psychology and other social sciences. In short, we would formulate the history of art primarily in terms of contexts rather than developments.<sup>17</sup>

When the attitudes and methods suggested here are consistently and relevantly applied, the statements of artists and other similar documents of modern art may become more meaningful and hence more useful to the art historian. By recreating the conditions, facts and ideas contributing to the appearance of the document he may proceed from the merely factual statement, with its apparent meaning, to the deeper intrinsic meaning, with all its richness of association and implication. Such an understanding of documents may help to avoid the common fault, the expedient use of texts out of context for ends other than those intended by the original author. But more importantly, by providing an ideological context for a theoretical document, then analyzing the ideas according to a relevant method, one may gain valuable additional information on the conceptions underlying the art, and eventually a deeper insight into the art itself.

<sup>17</sup> Ackerman, *ibid.*, p. 261.

*This article is based on the introduction to the author's forthcoming reference book, The Theories of Modern Art: The Twentieth Century. MR. CHIPP is Professor of History of Art at the University of California, Berkeley, and is Curator of Modern Art at the University Art Museum.* ■

#### DELACROIX'S HAMLET STUDIES

(Continued from page 351)

Despite the intellectual qualms he may have had about "romantic eccentricities," and despite the concessions to French ("Voltairean") taste in the lithographs, Delacroix was clearly fascinated enough by Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to overrule most of his hesitations. The concessions are there, though whether as nods to the earlier aesthetic or signs of Delacroix's own yearnings for classical order can perhaps only be decided with full analysis of the painter's mind rather than his art. Rather than Baudelaire's comment that the great artist cannot glorify those elements which he has to excess, it might be said, with Yeats, that the will strives towards the mask, that that which a man is strives towards that which he would be. On the one hand, the will, the ego, the particular, subjective beauty and value; on the other, the mask, the "anti-self," the universal, objective truth and fact. And, as with Yeats, Delacroix the intellect was concerned with the attributes of the mask while Delacroix the painter was controlled by those of the will.

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<sup>16</sup> James S. Ackerman, "Art History and the Problem of Criticism," Daedalus (Cambridge, Mass.), Winter 1960.