Shakespeare the poet often burns through Shakespeare the dramatist, not simply in the great soliloquies that have become actors' set pieces but in passages throughout his plays that can stand alone as poems. A remarkable example is the ghost's speech in *Hamlet*, an excerpt from the midnight encounter of father and son on Elsinore's windy battlement. The description by Hamlet the elder of his grisly murder by a treacherous brother, who stole his throne and wife, is a magnificent flight of strange, lurid poetry. The packed images twist and turn with a Mannerist sophistication, fascinating yet repulsive.

"Now, Hamlet, hear": with unnerving intensity and overbearing paternal authority, the ghost (whom Shakespeare himself reputedly played onstage) presses his heavy revelation on his agitated son (1). Hearing is the medium of first shock, but as the saga unfolds, the visual and the tactile take over. Words seem sticky, insinuating, invasive as we are drawn closer and closer to the grotesque scene. The speech builds from a fabrication, the official story issued by the palace bureaucracy: " 'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard, / A serpent stung me" (2–3). The cover-up misleads a nation, stunned by grief into a single thought: "So the whole ear of Denmark / Is by a forgèd process of my death / Rankly abused" (3–5). The people are the body politic: unsettled, manipulated, paranoid, they are reduced to a giant, collective "ear" poisoned by lies—miming the king's secret murder. Government, which should serve truth, has become a fount of lies. The tale has been craftily "forgèd" because Claudius, the new king, is himself a forgery or fake, never destined by God for the throne. An ear "rankly abused" suggests force and trauma, a brutalizing of soft tissue. "Rank" also has a stench of squalor and decay, the pollution caused in *Hamlet* (as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*) by corruption at the top.

The ghost's narrative of the murder begins with the hypnotic lilt of a lullaby: "Sleeping within my orchard, / My custom always of the afternoon" (8–9). "Custom," or routine, is predicated on trust, the illusion of safety craved by all human beings. Taken unawares in his "secure hour" by a disloyal ally, Hamlet senior recalls another king,

Duncan of Scotland, slain in his bed by his host, Macbeth ("Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep," *Macbeth* II.ii.33–34). For the head of state to be at ease on leisurely afternoons means the nation is at peace. In medieval and Renaissance iconography, a king napping in his orchard would symbolize the harmony of nature and society: cultivated land is nature ordered by human reason and design. The well-managed garden, a major metaphor in *Hamlet,* is a paradigm of the wisely governed state. When the true gardener is gone, the world becomes (as young Hamlet complains) "an unweeded garden / That grows to seed," possessed by "things rank and gross in nature" (I.ii. 135–36). Mold, fungi, spiders, and rodents run wild, and fertility is aborted. ("A rat?" cries Hamlet, mistaking Polonius for Claudius and jamming his rapier through a bulging curtain; III.iv.23.)

The Danish royal garden was once Eden before the Fall, with Hamlet senior as Adam in the state of innocence. Thus the spurious report of the king's death by snakebite is figuratively true: the ghost says, "The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown" (6–7). Claudius the crowned reptile (like a quaint emblem in alchemy) is the primordial serpent with its inexplicable malice toward God's creation. Shakespeare's serpent succeeds in capturing Eve: "O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there," laments the ghost, wounded by his wife Gertrude's quick coupling with Claudius (I.v.47). The young prince inherits a world of disillusion after the Fall where, thanks to the serpent's machinations, human life is under sentence of death. The ghost's bitter sexual jealousy is magnified by voyeurism, his exiled watching and his later aggressive solicitude for Gertrude. Spying (a constant motif in this play) is also implicit in the stealth ("stole") with which Claudius ambushes his sleeping brother, who is rendered passive and robbed of potency (10). The hushed sense of trespass gives the murder a homoerotic tinge, as if its violation of a hidden pocket of the body rehearses male-on-male rape. Incest is a shadowy undercurrent in the play: Hamlet is obsessively focused on his mother's bedroom activities, while Laertes, bullying his sister Ophelia about her love life, wars with Hamlet for her affections.

In Renaissance England, poisoning, like stabbing in the back, was a dishonorable way to kill, associated with cowards, fickle women,

and devious Italians. Hence the regicide Claudius is prima facie unmanly. Murder by ear is so esoteric that it makes the body (our own as well as the king's) seem hideously vulnerable. Quietly tipping his vial in the orchard, Claudius resembles a gardener tenderly watering a prize plant. An ancient architectural metaphor is also at work: the true king (as in Egypt) is conflated with the palace, a citadel that proves woefully easy to infiltrate and subvert. His ear is the palace vestibule ("porches"), and his veins are "the natural gates and alleys of the body" through which the poison, "swift as quicksilver," slithers like a snake or a draft of bad air, the medium of plague (12, 15–16). The poison's stunning speed and amorphousness are dramatized in Shakespeare's weaving of its multiple effects through eleven dizzyingly headlong lines. The poison's "enmity with blood of man" is suggestively satanic ("Satan" means "the Adversary"), blocking and canceling God's work (14). "With a sudden vigor it doth posset / And curd, like eager droppings into milk, / The thin and wholesome blood": the toxin mysteriously changes the blood chemically, clotting and curdling it as when acid ("eager") is dripped into milk (17–19). The pure stream is churned to sludge—our mother's milk of natural emotion gone sour (compare "th' milk of human kindness," *Macbeth* I.v.16). Drumming rhythms capture the choking of the king's system with mushrooming tumors and blobby growths like cottage cheese.

The poison is a "leperous distillment," causing or feigning the gangrene in leprosy (13). The surface of the king's skin massively erupts, while his warrior's sinews and muscles melt away. The realm's supreme power is now a pitiable outcast ("most lazarlike," like the biblical beggar Lazarus, a leper covered with sores; 21). His flesh is a raw wound, with the heroic human contours lost in a nauseating mass of undifferentiated tissue. A scab ("a most instant tetter") shoots around his body: his skin crawls, along with ours—replicating the sensation of the serpent-murderer creeping up on his prey (20–22). Suppurating and drying in a magic flash, the king's "smooth body," with its aristocratic refinement, is encased in a "vile and loathsome crust." It is bizarrely "barked about"—covered with bark like a tree (a good example of Shakespeare's typical conversion of nouns to verbs). Animal to vegetable: the king has tumbled down the great chain of being to the subhuman, where he becomes a worthless thing,

a rotting log in a grove. The passage exploits a sensuous concreteness of language to activate our atavistic horror at death and decay. We recoil at the staccato fusillade of consonants that make us hear the crackling of the victim's mammoth scab (20–21).

Robbed of his life, the king has also nearly lost his soul. He was denied last rites ("unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled") whereby he could make confession and receive absolution (26). He was, he protests, "cut off even in the blossoms of my sin" (25). This image sees man after the Fall as a plant bearing (in Baudelaire's phrase) flowers of evil. It's as if sin is intrinsic to organic life. Indeed, "cursed hebona," the plant (possibly henbane) crushed by Claudius for its poison juice, represents a minute segment of nature damned by heaven and charged with the death force (11). There is a striking contrast between the king's physical vulnerability and the severe mathematic imposed by divine judgment: "No reck'ning made, but sent to my account / With all my imperfections on my head" (27–28). The weight of those "imperfections" is ominously transferred to Hamlet ("thou noble youth") through this very speech (5). If the son has "nature" in him—that is, filial love—he must rise to duty (30). Sensitive, indecisive Hamlet will be expected to "bear it not"—to avenge his father's loss of absolution by dragging the murderer to his own bloody reckoning.

The ghost's journey into the painful past comes full circle with his reference to "the royal bed of Denmark"—or more precisely to its female occupant, whom the bed wraps like a pod (31). Claudius is curiously erased from the picture. He is implicitly present as a contaminant, polluting and perverting the bed into "a couch for luxury and damnèd incest"—sloth and unbridled lust divorced from dynastic procreation (32). (Whether a woman's remarriage to her husband's brother constitutes incest is debatable, though Hamlet, like John the Baptist denouncing Herodias, clearly believes it is.) The royal bed as valuable artifact and symbol of succession is found in literature as early as Homer's *Odyssey*. *Hamlet*'s royal bed—declined by the king for his open-air siestas—is repeatedly identified with the queen, possession of whom is at issue throughout the play. The ghost's program of vengeance requires a liberation and purgation of the bed where Hamlet himself may well have been conceived and born.

In forbidding his son to take punitive action against Gertrude

("Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught"), the ghost can be seen as motivated by compassion or by cruelty (34–35). "Leave her to heaven"—the highest court—"and to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her": the brambles of the unweeded garden have invaded the palace (35–37). Does the king spare his queen out of sadism? Does he relish seeing her suffer? His metaphor winds her heart (like the Sacred Heart of Jesus) with a thorny vine: it's the parasitic embrace of the serpent usurper, Claudius. The queen is a fleshy fruit clutched, snared, stung, and blighted. Sexual intercourse is imagined as intimate torture, an excruciating love-death with the penis ("prick") as a darting tongue or poisoned fang. The hovering ghost suffers from his own witness and incapacity. Gertrude's conscience, he insists, will be her own best torturer: her erotic pleasures will always be commingled with spiritual pain.

The ghost's sinister speech is decadent insofar as it shows civilization collapsing into the realm of gross matter. Divine creation is reversed as supersubtle evil dissolves forms and beings. Shakespeare moves swiftly from suffocation and extinction in the garden to bondage and torment in the bedroom. The king's triple cry—"O, horrible! O, horrible! Most horrible!"—is an aria close to a howl, requiring consummate skill from an actor (29). Our ear, like the king's, is invaded by poison via the revolting images, which can barely be intelligibly processed. The abandonment of a mutilated corpse like trash is an affront to human dignity (compare "garbage" as the food of "lust," I.v.55–57). The king's encrusted body is ugly as offal: is this why he wears armor for his nightly walk? The charismatic warrior whom his intellectual son fulsomely compares to Hyperion, the sun god, is physically ravaged and shamed (I.ii.140). His armor warns of Norway's looming threat but also signifies a state of war among his nearest and dearest—those lifetime conflicts of Freudian family romance that Shakespeare so presciently grasped. The garden now breeds pestilence: the king's corpse, restless because of an unavenged murder, exudes the sulfurous bad smells that fill the play.

In eerie mood and macabre detail, the ghost's speech has a style that would later be called Gothic. The flamboyant ghoulishness of

such passages in Shakespeare's plays was disdained as vulgar by Neo-classicists, particularly in France. But the Gothic was triumphantly reclaimed by Romanticism, which would in turn engender modern horror films. The ghost's serpentine speech, like the monumental Hellenistic sculpture *Laocoön* (which shows a Trojan priest and his sons strangled by sea snakes), reflects the anxieties of a turbulent "late" phase of culture. The mature Shakespeare of the jittery Jacobean period may have lost faith in politics and public ethics. Idealism fails in *Hamlet*, as man regresses to the reptilian.