

# The Charges Against King Claudius

From *The King in Hamlet* by Howard Mumford Jones. Austin: University Press.

Hamlet's denunciations of his uncle are those of the ghost, but we can as conveniently confine ourselves to the one as to the other. They, and they alone, find Claudius to be "an incestuous and adulterate beast," "incarnate lewdness," "slave's offal," "a smiling, damned villain" — for these are the expressions they use concerning him. Stripped of all their abusive language (and Hamlet is the only foul-mouthed person in the play), we find the charges against Claudius amount to these:

(1) He is ill-looking.

(2) He is a coarse, sensual man who (a) drinks too much and (b) leads a filthy life with the queen.

(3) He has robbed young Hamlet of his crown.

(4) He is at fault in his marriage with Gertrude in that (a) he seduced the queen; (b) he hurried her into marriage; (c) he committed incest with her.

(5) He is a murderer who has (a) killed his brother and (b) attempted the assassination of Hamlet.

It is my contention that of these points in the indictment of Claudius some

are not true; some require a considerable modification of Hamlet's statements; and some are open to other explanations than the simple but totally unsatisfactory one that Claudius is a "satyr" who does his beastliness out of mere love of evil. Let us consider the indictment in the order in which I have presented it.

(1) *Claudius is ill-looking*. We have no indication that Claudius is ill-looking except Hamlet's unsupported statements that he is a "bloat king," a "satyr," "a mildew'd ear." In his denunciation of Gertrude's conduct Hamlet draws a carefully particularized portrait of his father which he contrasts with that of his uncle, but he is totally unable to name a single physical deformity in Claudius, and takes refuge in general abuse (III, iv.). On the other hand the general impression we have of Claudius is that of a stately and commanding figure, as ancestrally he should be. When he confronts Laertes and the mob, he tells Gertrude:

"Do not fear [for] our person:  
There's such divinity doth hedge a king,  
That treason can but peep to what it would."  
(IV, V, 119-121)

a silly performance, did not Claudius possess a commanding port and embody something of kingly divinity. Lastly, Claudius retains the devoted love of Gertrude throughout the play, even after Hamlet's denunciation of him, for we find her protecting Claudius in the scene with Laertes; and it is difficult to think of Hamlet's mother linked to the ape and beast that Hamlet's lurid curses picture for us. For lack of evidence this charge must

be thrown out of court.

(2) *Claudius is a coarse, sensual man who (a) drinks too much and (b) leads a filthy life with the queen.* Let us consider the second charge under its two heads, (a) Drunkenness is, as we know, a national trait; and in bringing this charge Hamlet would also seem to be condemning his father and his grandfather before him. But however this may be the nation is not so drunken as Hamlet supposes — has, indeed, singular fits of sobriety, since throughout five acts of Shakespeare's longest tragedy, we do not see a single drunken man. Claudius, on every occasion, (how unlike Lepidus in *Antony and Cleopatra!*) is in full possession of his faculties. We know of Claudius's drinking on two occasions only: (1) when he carouses in honor of Hamlet's decision to remain at Elsinore; (2) during the duel between Hamlet and Laertes.

Both of these are public occasions, when it is Claudius' policy to flatter the people; and so he drinks and dances. Nowhere in the play do we see, or hear of, Claudius when he thinks or acts or talks like a drunken man. This charge can not be substantiated.

(b) Hamlet tells us also that Claudius is an arrant sensualist, and his picture of Claudius in the queen's bed is of a sort to turn the stomach. But what can Hamlet know of the intimacies of the conjugal chamber? We must fall back on the explanation that Claudius' general character justifies Hamlet's imaginative description. Unfortunately for Hamlet, no one else in the play finds Claudius unchaste. There is no gossip about the sensuality of his relations with Gertrude, such as there is about the sensuality of Antony's

relations with Cleopatra. We have no account of other women he has debauched, as we have a list of Macbeth's villainies. We have no pregnant comment in this play such as Ulysses makes of Cressida.

There is no scene like that between Charmian and the Soothsayer, to illumine as by a lightning flash the licentiousness of the Danish court. And the ruler of that court throughout the play never utters an unchaste thought or a licentious jest. On the contrary his relations with Gertrude, his attitude toward Ophelia, are marked by the strictest propriety. He does not kiss his wife, he does not fondle her, he does not pinch her cheek, he does not paddle in her neck, he does not do any of the things that Hamlet would have us believe are second nature with him. He is not, in short, so far as we can determine, a "satyr," a "beast," or any other of the elaborate bits of abuse which Hamlet uses.

Hamlet, on the other hand, is filthy-minded. His speeches to his mother, even by the Elizabethan standard, are exaggerated, gross and insulting. Hamlet forces Guildenstern to a dirty jest. Hamlet abuses the innocent Ophelia in the language of the gutter. Hamlet makes obscene jokes in the play-scene. Though we may excuse all this as acting or because it springs from the repression of his nature, we must admit, I think, that Hamlet, mad or sane, acting or natural, is more ready to bring charges of this kind than to sustain them, and that the only ground for supposing that Claudius is sensual must be his hasty marriage with Gertrude — to be examined later.

These counts aside, there remains the matter of Claudius' coarseness. Coarseness, however, is a matter of definition. Hamlet wants to wear

mourning all his life; Claudius tells him to take it off and go to work. Hamlet can not stand anything that is not caviare to the multitude ; the common people want a jig or a tale of bawdry. Hamlet wonders how the grave-diggers can so stultify their feelings as to sing; the first clown takes a professional pride in knowing when bodies will rot. Which of these attitudes is the wiser?

For the purposes of state Hamlet's emotional metaphysics is as wrong as Claudius' murder. Hamlet is tender-minded, Claudius is tough-minded. Hamlet anticipates Schopenhauer; Claudius is a precursor of Benjamin Franklin. Romanticist and realist, idealist and practical man, dreamer and man of affairs — the opposition is eternal, and the tragedy consists in part in this very fact. To say that Claudius is "coarse" is, therefore, merely to say that he is not Hamlet — fire and water are not more opposite. Is not this, then, all that Hamlet's complaints, or the complaints we make for him under this head, amount to in the end?

(3) *Claudius has robbed young Hamlet of his crown.* It is not clear how seriously Hamlet thinks of Claudius as one who has robbed him of his crown, for, as we have seen, he cares little for matters of state, and it is not until late in the play that he makes a positive statement. After his interview with the ghost, he says the time is out of joint and he must set it right; this he utters aloud for the benefit of his two friends (I, v, 189-190); and it is possible he means them to think of him as one robbed of his crown.

However this may be, the most natural explanation of Hamlet's madness that Rosenkrantz can think of, and the one on which he hopes Hamlet will

talk freely in order to gain Rosencrantz as a partisan, is the question of the crown; and it is noticeable that Hamlet neither affirms nor denies Rosencrantz' statement. Indeed, he has apparently reflected on the usefulness of such a subterfuge, for we find him telling Rosencrantz in another scene:

"Sir, I lack advancement,"

(III, ii, 331)

and after Rosencrantz has tried to egg him on by the ordinary device of a denial, there comes the scene with the recorders. Hamlet tells Gertrude that Claudius stole the crown, but he does not say or imply that it was stolen from him, Hamlet. He means, I take it, that the coronation of his uncle was irregular:

"A murderer and a villain;

A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe

Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings;

A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,

That from a shelf the precious diadem stole

And put it in his pocket!"

(III, iv, 96-101)

He tells Horatio, with whom he is always frank and honest, that Claudius

"Popp'd in between the election and my hopes;"

(V, ii, 65)

but it is in the very last conversation they have alone, and in the second scene of the last act, and nothing comes of it. Now Hamlet, as Werder points out, is eager to find some pretext for killing Claudius, and it is largely his inability to find one that makes him appear weak-willed and indecisive. If there were any possibility of using the robbery charge as a rallying cry, we should, I think, find Hamlet employing it. But he does not use it. He toys with the idea through four acts, trying it out, so to speak, and finding it impracticable. It would seem therefore that Hamlet himself, for the most part, regards the robbery argument as thin.