

INTRODUCTION

The law will grant that brothers and sisters lie together if the lot falls out that way and the Pythia [at Delphi] concurs.

—Plato, Republic 461e

There is virtually no undeniable consanguineous kinship, as we have seen. Even where it is all but undeniable that one is the child of one’s parent,¹ it is still, always, deniable. Posthumus’ cry of rage in Cymbeline that “we are all bastards,”² or, in The Winter’s Tale, Leontes’ assertion, based on his fear of being a cuckold, that “many thousand on’s / Have the disease and feel’t not,”³ may seem excessive or desperate, but concern about legitimacy, as well as about changelings and foundlings, is all but inevitable. Societies employ desperate measures in an effort to eliminate bastards and changelings (e.g., keeping women in harems or footprinting babies in modern hospitals). Here the dissonance of civilization sounds between the arguably political need to believe in the logical possibility of being able to know without doubt who’s who—in order to avoid incest, say, or to determine succession—and the logical certainty of always being unable undeniably to know. Nihil scitur (noth-
ing is known) wrote Francisco Sánchez in 1576. The exceptions are the umbilically conjoined mother and child and the conjoined (Siamese) twin—beings who both literalize the figure of consanguinity and suggest a need for legal and literary fictions and religious cults.

Some works of literature (e.g., *Oedipus the King* and the tale of Solomon's Judgment) assure us that we can know who are our kin. Yet without an all-knowing Delphic oracle or Solomonic God, how could consanguineous kinship be known? The possibility of being a bastard casts doubt on one's assigned father; the possibility of being a changeling casts doubt on both father and mother. It is this indeterminability of biological parenthood that ensures its always fictional or figurative character—even in a society like ours, which claims that it really knows the facts of life and that the real facts of life are biological. Montaigne, who was Sánchez's kinsperson, thus hints that kinship claims are essentially literary fictions.

We need these fictions if, as Greek tragedians and latter-day theorists of the incest taboo aver, human beings are political animals and human politics requires belief in the possibility of knowledge of who's kin and who's nonkin. As we will see, even persons who believe themselves to be consanguineous parents will want standards of kinship other than consanguinity. For obeisance to the incest taboo requires not a genetrix but a *mater*, not a biological mother but a societal parent. It requires not a genitor but a *pater* of whom we may think "as of a father," in the words of Hamlet's uncle, Claudius.

Many readers of *Hamlet* have assumed that the bond between members of the same nuclear family is the kinship structure at the play's center. This privileging of consanguineous as opposed to fictional kinship—of literal as opposed to figural—reflects a widespread and perhaps sociologically needful prejudice. Yet some social institutions do not privilege the consanguineous over the figural family: monachism and gossipred, for example, treat the *pater* as more important than the genitor even in determining diriment impediments to marriage; and in some societies the milk-mother or wet nurse counts more than the blood-mother, as the always dubious Montaigne emphasizes. More important in the context of a play like *Hamlet*, literature generally is largely about the very ambiguities in the distinction between literal and figural that any easy separation of literal from figural kinship ignores. *Hamlet*, as we shall see, offers precise access to these ambiguities.

Ignoring or misinterpreting the ambiguity of nonconsanguineous kinship relationships in *Hamlet* has often meant seeing in this tragedy mainly the destruction of the ordinary consanguineous nuclear or extended family through the consequences of incest and kin murder, as if *Hamlet* were a morality play that bolsters the incest taboo by threatening perpetrators with disaster. (That is precisely how *Oedipus the King* is often interpreted.) Yet *Hamlet* essentially involves the destruction not so much of a literal family as of a series of ever-extending figural families, a series that ends with the family of humankind. The tragedy of *Hamlet* resides in the heroic refusal to commit the kind of incest that any such idealized universalist siblinghood requires.
Most of the critical literature on Hamlet that considers its incestuous aspect focuses on intergenerational or mother-son incest. Yet the play is more obviously about intragenerational sibling incest, as in the case of Claudius' and Gertrude's liaison, termed incestuous several times both in the text and its "sources."

The Claudius-Gertrude relationship is incestuous insofar as one's sibling-in-law is one's sibling. According to Saint Paul and the remarkable Catholic doctrine of carnal contagion, marriage transforms the flesh and blood of one's spouse into one's own ("man and wife is one flesh"—4.3.54–55). And since, according to Catholic doctrine, a spouse is to all intents and purposes a lover fulfilled, extramarital sexual intercourse has the same effect of transforming one's lover's flesh and blood into one's own. It follows from this transformation of two into one that a man is no more or less akin to the brother of his wife than his wife is akin to her brother. Kinship is catching, and the agent of transmission is sexual intercourse.

The idea of kinship by contagion may seem like a mere "legal fiction." However, its seeming like a fiction does not essentially distinguish the idea of kinship by contagion from the idea of kinship by consanguinity. For the standard of consanguinity assumes that literal kinship resides in the blood, which may or may not be the case, and also that blood kinship is sometimes undeniably ascertainable and therefore "not a fiction," which is not the case.

Moreover, the way that the idea of carnal contagion conflates fictive with literal kinship informed the foundation of the Anglican Church during the decades of Henry VIII's several divorces. As we have seen, while the Jewish law of the Levirate states that one should marry one's deceased brother's widow (in which case she is hardly a sister), English jurists, during the years of the founding of the Anglican Church, took the opposite tack by adopting the doctrine of carnal contagion, according to which one should not marry one's deceased brother's widow because she is one's own sister. The case assumed importance in the first instance because, as we have seen, Henry VIII had married Catherine of Aragon. As the widow of his deceased brother Arthur, she was, to quote Claudius in Hamlet, his "sometime sister, now our queen" (1.2.8). In 1526, Henry VIII and his counselors used the doctrine to argue that his marriage to Catherine was sibling incest. They used it in 1535 in much the same way when they sought to annul Henry VIII's marriage to Anne Boleyn—and hence to prove Princess Elizabeth a bastard. Anne's sister Mary, they said, had been Henry VIII's lover before Anne was. That made Anne Henry VIII's sister, and it made Henry VIII's marriage with Anne incestuous. For
according to the doctrine of carnal contagion, as we have seen, there is no essential
difference between a sister and either a sister-in-law (Catherine of Aragon) or a
sister-of-one’s-lover (Anne Boleyn).

The conflation of the terms sister and sister-in-law which the doctrine of carnal
contagion requires lends some support to the usual interpretation of King Claudius’
opening statement in Hamlet—he has his “sometime sister . . . taken to wife”
(1.2.8–14)—to the effect that Claudius is using the term sister here as an abbrevi-
ation for sister-in-law and also as a synonym for it. According to the royal head of
the Anglican Church, however, a sister-in-law really is a flesh-and-blood sister.
That is why Hamlet’s author, making much of the difference between blood kin and
kin-in-law in plays such as All’s Well That Ends Well (where the distinction between
daughter and daughter-in-law is all-important), makes nothing of this difference in
Hamlet. Gertrude, whether she is Claudius’ consanguineous sister or not—which
who can know?—is to be thought of as sister in much the same way that Claudius
would have Hamlet think of him “as of a father” (1.2.108). If Gertrude is not the
literal sister of Claudius, she might as well be.

THE INDETERMINABILITY OF FATHERHOOD

Which of us has known his brother?

---Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel

How can I know whether the physical or ghostly being standing before me is really
my father? That is the question which some critics have said sums up Hamlet. Con-
sider from this viewpoint the ambiguities surrounding the physical or spiritual
(ghostly) paternities of the young men Hamlet and Laertes. These ambiguities con-
er on them the status of brothers—which is what Hamlet calls them (5.2.239,
249). And these ambiguities encourage both these sons to avenge the killing of
the man each thinks of as his consanguineous father. (Says Claudius to Hamlet:
“. . . think of us / As of a father”—1.2.107–8.)

Who are Laertes’ parents, really? Claudius, praising Polonius to Laertes, seems
to imply that he, Claudius who holds the throne, is Laertes’ father: “The head is
not more native to the heart . . . than is the throne of Denmark to thy father”
(1.2.47–49). (Compare Claudius’ statement to Laertes that “I lov’d your father,
and we love ourself”—4.7.34). Polonius himself seems unsure what things, if any,
he may have fathered. Told by Claudius that Polonius has been ever “the father of
good news,” for example, Polonius responds, “Have I?”; and asked by Hamlet,
“Have you a daughter?” Polonius has, as we shall see, only a fool’s warrant to
answer “I have” (2.2.42–43, 2.2.182–183).

But the main theme here is not who is Laertes’s actual father (let us grant for
the time being that it is Polonius), but Laertes’ unallayable fear or hope about his
paternity. For example, in the scene where Laertes returns from Paris and heads a
popular insurrection (“‘Choose we! Laertes shall be king’” shout the people, as if
popular "election" were sufficient to secure royal succession), Laertes demands that Claudius tell him his father's whereabouts (4.5.106, 128): as if that father were a corpse in an unmarked grave or a ghost on castle ramparts or in bed chambers. But Laertes' question "Where is my father?" also indicates fear and hope that he is not so much the legitimate consanguineous son of Polonius as the illegitimate one of Claudius. Laertes' fear/hope that he might be a bastard emerges when a "patriarchal" Claudius, threatened with a people's revolt that might "liberate" Denmark from his tyranny, asks Laertes to be calm. The liber, or son, Laertes responds:

That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard
Cries cuckold to my father, brands the harlot
Even here between the chaste unsmirched brow
Of my true mother.

(4.5.117–19; emphasis mine)

By the results of this test, Laertes is a bastard: Claudius does calm him down. Who then is the father that Laertes demands from Claudius? "Give me my father!" (4.5.128). Claudius might be able to give Laertes his father, or give his father back to Laertes, (1) if the dead Polonius were Laertes' consanguineous father and Claudius could arrange for Polonius to be resurrected as a ghost, much like the ghost of Old Hamlet, or (2) if Claudius were to state publicly that Laertes is his illegitimate consanguineous son, or (3) if Claudius were to adopt Laertes as a son in much the same way that he earlier adopted or adrogated Hamlet, in the fashion of Roman emperors (1.2.108–12). On the one hand Laertes wants to acknowledge Polonius as his consanguineous father, which would justify his continuing to revere his "true mother." On the other hand, Laertes wants to be—or to be recognized as—either the illegitimate or adoptive son of Claudius, which would give him some right more than mob election to the throne.

Claudius plays Laertes' fears about what his mother was like against Laertes' hopes for who his father is. First Claudius questions Laertes' love for Polonius ("Laertes, was your father dear to you?"—4.7.106; compare the ghost's words to Hamlet: "If thou didst ever thy dear father love . . ."—1.5.23). Seeking to spur Laertes to kill Hamlet, who killed Polonius, Claudius exploits Laertes' uncertainty about his paternity and suggests that Laertes can best prove his legitimacy by killing Hamlet: "If you desire to know the certainty / Of your dear father . . ." (4.5.140–41). Claudius cleverly convinces Laertes that the way to prove himself to be the son of his "father" is "to show yourself in deed your father's son / More than in words" (4.7.123–24). By this proof ("like father, like son"), Laertes' subsequent deeds tell us who his father is. Like Claudius, Laertes poisons Hamlet—the man who calls him "brother." (As Claudius' "brother's hand" killed Old Hamlet, so Laertes' "brothers' wager" kills Young Hamlet—1.5.74, 5.2.249.)

Hamlet's paternity is as ambiguous as Laertes'. Might not Hamlet's consanguineous father be Claudius? Did the "adulterate" Gertrude commit adultery with Claudius before Old Hamlet's death? Might Hamlet be the offspring of that incestuous union? Gertrude says almost as much when she tells Hamlet "Do not for ever
... / Seek for thy noble father in the dust” (1.2.70–71). If Hamlet’s real father is not in the dust, then where is he? Is Hamlet’s father wandering the night as a ghost (the ghost of Old Hamlet)? Is Hamlet’s father sitting on the throne (Claudius)? Claudius wants Hamlet to think of him “as of a father”—though Hamlet says that Hamlet is “too much in the sun”18 and wants to be Claudius’ son no more than he says later he wants to be Gertrude’s son: “would it were not so, you are my mother” (3.4.15). Yet Claudius soon avows publicly an intent to name, or adrogate, Hamlet as his own son:

... for let the world take note,
You are the most immediate to our throne,
And with no less nobility of love
Than that which dearest father bears his son
Do I impart toward you.

(1.2.108–12)

What does this paternal adoption entail? In imperial Rome, which provides Hamlet with much of its historical backdrop, the Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar adopted the future emperor Tiberius, the son of his wife, Livia, when he married her. In the same way the Emperor Claudius of Rome, a namesake for Claudius in Hamlet, adopted the future emperor Nero, the son of his wife Agrippina. (This is the Nero Hamlet invokes in 3.2.385.) Similarly, the emperor Antoninus Pius adopted as his sons the future rival coemperors Marcus Aurelius (the Stoic writer) and Lucius Aurelius Verus. For these future rulers—Tiberius, Nero, Marcus Aurelius, and Lucius Aurelius Verus—their stepfathers’ adoptions, or adrogations, were essential to their eventual successions (as we shall see in chapter 6).

Laertes and Hamlet fear and also desire the consanguineous and adoptive paternity of Claudius. Their rivalrous brotherhood is therefore one of love in hate, or vice versa. “I lov’d you ever” (5.1.285), says graveside Hamlet to Laertes—as Cain might to Abel, or Claudius to Old Hamlet. And the brotherly men eventually inflict mortal wounds on each other and die forgiving each other—much as Eteocles and Polyneices in the myth of Oedipus. Theirs is a fraternal embrace signifying a momentary reemergence of an old and gracious liberal society like the student friendships they left behind in Paris or Wittenberg.

**SISTER AND SISTER**

*Children of the future Age,*  
*Reading this indignant page:*  
*Know that in a former time,*  
*Love! sweet Love! was thought a crime.*  

—Blake, "A Little Girl Lost"

What are siblings in love with each other to do? They may choose to commit sibling incest, as do Gertrude and Claudius, or they may choose not to commit incest. But what if all human beings are in an essential sense siblings—say insofar as we are
equal children of God the Father? Or what if all creatures are doomed never to
know for certain who are their real parents or siblings? (“How should I your true
love know / From another one?”—4.5.23–24.) In such a situation, as I have
argued, any act of sexual intercourse is essentially incestuous or potentially inces-
tuous. In such a situation not to commit incest means not to commit sexual inter-
course with anyone. If Ophelia were Hamlet’s sister, or if Hamlet were to think of
her as a sister—say in the sense that Claudius asks him to think on Claudius “as of
a father” (1.2.108)—what else could Hamlet do, if he were in love with her, but
flee Ophelia’s presence or demand that she become a nun, or Sister?

Many readers feel the essential or potential sibling quality in the affection
between Ophelia and Hamlet—which is much like that between Orestes and his
sister Electra in the court of their murderous stepfather Aegisthus and their mother
Clytemnestra. (Hints that a marriage between Ophelia and Hamlet would be a
good idea are matched by hints that it would be incestuous. For example, Gertrude
says to the dead Ophelia, “I hop’d thou shouldst have been my Hamlet’s wife”
[5.1.237], which means not so much that Hamlet and Ophelia can marry without
committing incest as that in Gertrude’s view Ophelia was no more barred from mar-
rying Hamlet than Gertrude was barred from marrying her “sometime” brother
Claudius.)

But could we show that Ophelia is Hamlet’s sister any more easily than that
Laertes is or isn’t Polonius’ son? First, we might consider Hamlet’s relation to
Ophelia as a foster sister. In such sources of Hamlet as Saxo Grammaticus’ Historiae
Danicae, for example, Ophelia is defined as such. He and Ophelia share a common
social education (societas educationis) and familiarity (familiaritas): “For both of
them had been under the same fostering in their childhood; and this early rearing
had brought Amleth and the girl into great intimacy.” Saxo’s Hamlet has loved
Ophelia “from her infancy”—which is as long as the Elizabethan Hamlet has loved
Ophelia’s brother Laertes (“I lov’d you ever”—5.1.285). And in Scandinavian lit-
erature as that elsewhere in Europe, collactaneous and foster kinship (that is, as
alumni) generally pose a diriment impediment, both legal and moral, to marriage
no less binding than that posed by consanguineous kinship or carnal contagion.

Second, we might consider Hamlet’s relation to Ophelia as an adoptive sister,
as suggested by the Roman background to the plot of the play: Ophelia has a role
like that of the adoptive sisters/wives of the first Roman emperors. Hamlet as
would-be successor to the throne of Denmark finds himself in a relation to his uncle
and adoptive father, King Claudius, like that of the would-be Roman imperial suc-
cessors—Nero, Tiberius, and Marcus Aurelius—in relation to their adoptive
fathers, emperors Claudius, Augustus, and Antoninus Pius. It was not enough for
Nero, Tiberius, and Marcus Aurelius as would-be heirs to be adopted by the
emperor; they also had to marry the emperor’s consanguineous daughter. (Such
marriage between adopted siblings in the Roman ruling family, generally defined
as incest, was regarded with something like the awe reserved for gods.) Thus Tibe-
rius married Julia, Nero married Octavia, and Marcus Aurelius married Faustina.
Who in Hamlet, besides Ophelia, might be the consanguineous daughter of Ham-
let's adoptive father Claudius? Who else besides Ophelia should the would-be successor marry? In the old Hamlet story "the hero [Hamlet] weds the daughter of... his foster father." (We will see later that not only the sororal Ophelia but also the maternal Gertrude is somehow marriageable.)

The motor of Shakespeare's plot, however, is not that Ophelia and Hamlet are somehow brother and sister, as hinted in literary sources like Saxo and historical situations like that of imperial Rome. It is the recognition and denial, tragic in Roman Catholic and universalist contexts, that any two people might be or are essentially siblings. After all, brothers and sisters who fall in love with each other sometimes deny they are kin. They may argue that particular kinship doesn't matter, in which case they become absolute libertines, like Claudius perhaps. Or they may seek to replace or transcend the particular kinship that makes them brother and sister with a universal kinship that makes them friar and nun, or Brother and Sister, in which case they become absolute celibates. The situation where siblings become Siblings out of love for each other is not unusual. Many of the saintly founders of the Catholic religious orders loved each other perhaps a little too amorous, and, in an attempt to transcend their particularized affections, endorsed that universal love of a Brother or Sister for all human beings, including a sister or brother. According to the terms of this love, physical kinship no longer counts for much, and sexual intercourse with a person previously regarded as a consanguineous sister or brother would be regarded as no worse (or better) than with any other person.24

Hamlet, I would speculate, involves just such a transition from brother-sister to Brother-Sister love. Having loved his collactaneous sister from infancy, Hamlet begins later in life to think of her not only as a buddy but also as a lover. All is well in young Hamlet's Edenic, paradisiacal, or innocent "garden of love," as Blake might call it, until he becomes aware of the horror in sibling incest: until he experiences in thought the identity between chastity and incest—that is, between Hamlet's own "innocent" relationship to his collactaneous foster sister Ophelia and his uncle/father's "guilty" relationship to his sometime sister Gertrude. For Hamlet, the thought of marrying his beloved sister now appears just as taboo as Claudius' having married Gertrude. His new knowledge of chastity and incest, or absolute 'good' and absolute 'evil,' changes his love into something like cruel indifference, on the one hand, and near-worship on the other. Cruel to be kind (3.4.180), Hamlet says to Ophelia, "I did love you once"; then he reverses himself, saying, "I loved you not" (3.1.115, 118–19). Because he fears the incestuous aspect of his brotherly love for Ophelia, Hamlet withdraws intimacy from his "sister" just as he hopes that Gertrude will withdraw intimacy from her "brother" Claudius.26

Toward the end of the play, Hamlet howls at brother Laertes—who embraces the dead Ophelia in her grave as Hamlet will soon embrace him—that

I lov'd Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not with all their quantity of love
Make up my sum.

(5.1.264–66)
What distinguishes Hamlet's relationship to Ophelia as brother from that of an ordinary consanguineous brother and "reckless libertine"—which is how Ophelia jokingly refers to Laertes (1.3.49)—is the desire to transform his ordinary sexual love into a love that transcends both physical sexuality and consanguineous kinship. Hamlet would love Ophelia not as a sister but as a universal Sister to all humankind.

In the nunnery scene (3.1) Hamlet wants Ophelia to transform such marriage vows as he had once made to her as lover ("almost all the holy vows of heaven"—Polonius had called them "mere implorators of unholy suits") into the nun's most holy and heavenly oath of marriage to God (1.3.114, 129). Five times, Hamlet demands that Ophelia "to a nunnery go" (3.1.121–51). Ophelia should go both to a nunnery, because she is whorilike, and to a brothel, because she is nunlike. Critics who, like J. Dover Wilson, insist that Hamlet's nunnery means primarily "whorehouse" ignore the vacillation in Hamlet between saintly Sisterhood, with its holy liberty from the flesh verging on spiritual incest with God, and profane sisterhood, with its commercial liberty from the flesh verging potentially on literal incest with human beings. Ophelia in Hamlet, much like Isabella in Measure for Measure, vacillates precisely between the prostitute's "beautification" and the nun's "beatification." In Shakespeare's Pericles, Prince of Tyre, the unlike daughter Marina, a latter-day Virgin Mary, incestuously gives birth to her own father in a sort of reconstructed brothel: "Thou that beget'st him that did thee beget."27

The ceremony of becoming a Sister that Hamlet here requires Ophelia to undergo generally comprises three parts: the service for the dead, in which the novice Ophelia would die to the world and hence free herself of her consanguineous ties to such persons as ordinary parents, siblings, children, and spouses; the service for rebirth; and the marriage service by which the reborn and renamed Ophelia would become the sponsa Christi and God would become her only father, brother, child, and husband. None but a nun can have this incestuous, yet chaste, fourfold relationship to another being. The evil of incest can be undone only by a nun's relationship to God. ("Bad child, worse father, to entice his own evil should be done by none.")28 Hamlet wants Ophelia, whom he thinks of as (of) a sister and as (of) a lover or wife, to become a Sister so that the oppressive taboo might be annulled.

That Hamlet wants the sisterly Ophelia to become a Sister—to give over her old paternity—helps to explain why his principal question to Ophelia in the nunnery scene is "Where's your father?" (3.1.130).29 Ophelia answers that he is "at home." Perhaps she is purposefully lying about his whereabouts. (Doesn't Ophelia know that Polonius is "seeing unseen" this very scene?—3.1.33.) Or does she think that Polonius is not her father? ("Have you a daughter?"—2.2.182). But one way or another, Hamlet's question seems connected with the requirement that a nun break off her earthly kinships. Whether or not Polonius is Ophelia's genitor (which he thinks he is: "I have [a daughter]"—2.2.183), the real father of Ophelia as novice is that God who is, like Our Father in the Pater Noster, not "at home" but "in Heaven."
A MOTHER TONGUE

Is't not possible to understand in a mother tongue?
—Hamlet, 5.2.125 (Tschischwitz ed.; conjectured by Johnson)

For what should I be called, my son?
—Alexander Neville, Oedipus (1563)

Nuns, modeling their family relations on those of Mary, stand in a fourfold relationship to God. They are mothers of God as Mary was the mother of Jesus, daughters of God as Mary was the daughter of God the Father, wives of God as Mary was the wife of God, and sisters of God as Mary was the sister of Christ. (As we have seen, Queen Elizabeth provides a standard definition of this fourfold kinship in her version of Marguerite of Navarre’s Miroir de l’amé pécheresse.)

At first blush, it might seem that no being could be more different from the chaste nun that Hamlet hopes Ophelia will become than the incestuous mother that he fears Gertrude is. But when we compare the physical kinship relations Gertrude has to earthly rulers with the spiritual (ghostly) ones a nun has with God, the structural identity between Hamlet’s mother and his near fiancée emerges. For Mother Gertrude stands in the same relationship to the rulers of Denmark as a Sister stands in relation to God. She is the wife of one king (Old Hamlet) and perhaps also another (Claudius), and the mother of a man who might properly be king (Young Hamlet); according to Belleforest, Geruthe = Gertrude is “daughter to a king.”

Perhaps most important in this play where figural and literal kinship are often conflated, Gertrude is also a king’s sister.

From Gertrude’s fourfold relationship to the king that was and is the question of these wars (1.1.114), it would seem that the royal succession in Denmark goes with the queen. Hamlet suggests a wide variety of other ways, of course, to execute succession. There is dueling as entered into by Old Hamlet and Old Fortinbras, warfare as entered into by Fortinbras and Poland, consanguineous kinship of the sort Hamlet claims, and filial adoption by the king of the sort Hamlet gets and Laertes wants. Sometimes Denmark appears to be a fratriarchy where the oldest brother passes the kingdom on to the next; at other times it seems to be a fraternal diarchy where two brothers share a kingdom, as in Saxo’s version of the story and as in the Roman imperial history of the peaceful co-Emperor brothers Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Aurelius Verus. Moreover, we encounter hints of popular election of the sort that would choose Laertes and also of aristocratic election of the sort that would choose Fortinbras. Yet throughout the play the queen is not only part of the kin of Denmark; like an earthly Mother Superior, she is also transcendent to the kin.

Gertrude, as “the imperial jointress to this warlike state” (1.2.9), thus conjoins four different rulers:
1. As daughter she receives the kingdom—a jointure, or dowry for a husband—from Gertrude = Geruthe’s father Roderick. 

2. As wife she was involved with the gift of the kingdom to her first husband Old Hamlet = Horvendile—perhaps as a dowry settlement. Upon his death she got it back. (Coke-upon-Littleton writes that a jointure is “a competent livelyhood of freehold for the wife, of lands and tenements; to take effect, in profit and possession, presently after the death of the husband; for the life of the wife at least.”) And then she was involved with the gift of the kingdom to her second husband Claudius. In Hamlet Claudius tells the filial Laertes that the “jointress” Queen is “conjunctive” to Claudius (4.7.14). It is as if Claudius became king only through his wife—as when in 1567 James Bothwell, sometimes said to be the illegitimate father of King James, had the title of King conferred upon him thanks to his marriage with Mary Queen of Scots.

3. As sister Gertrude gave the kingdom to her sometime brother Claudius, helping him to consolidate power through marrying him.

4. As mother whom the son must marry in order to be king, Gertrude is the stuff of the play. In Saxo’s account, indeed, it is explicit that the son must marry the queen mother as a precondition for coming to possess the kingdom. For Amleth = Hamlet, as for Claudius and Old Hamlet, “the sceptre and her hand went together.” During his adventures in Britain, Amleth, who is already married to the daughter of the King of Britain, has a sexual affair with the queen whom his royal father-in-law sent him to woo on the King’s behalf; Amleth’s eventual bigamous marriage to his queenly mother-to-have-been gains him the kingdom, according to the tradition that “whomever she thought worthy of her bed is at once king, and she yielded her kingdom with herself.” In Hamlet the filial Laertes is similarly told that the throne is to be conjoined somehow with the queen (“we will our kingdom give, / Our crown, our life, and all that we call ours”—4.5.205–6; compare Claudius’ claim that Gertrude is “conjunctive to my life and soul”—4.7.14). In 1581 Mary Queen of Scots, imprisoned by Queen Elizabeth since 1568, desperately stated that she would allow her son James title to reign as king of Scotland conjointly with herself.

Gertrude in Hamlet, like Clytemnestra in the Oresteia and Jocasta in Oedipus the King, might be viewed as “an instrument for conveying the property to another male.” By virtue of relations with father, husband, brother, and son—by virtue also of her becoming “one flesh with her husband”—she is the unionizing joint of a matrilineal and vestigially patriarchal state.

If, as Stanley Cavell writes, “Gertrude’s power over the events in Denmark has not been fully measured,” it is because, like any secularized sponsa Christi, she lacks “character.” But she makes up for this lack in her polyandric structural position in family and state: a position that allows her to join and separate rivalrous
fraternalistic powers. It is a role that arbitrates war and peace. For what keeps kings at warlike peace is "a commere 'tween their amities... (5.2.42)." Commere" means something like "godmother," but it also has a salacious aspect involving commatres, or Sisters, who commit incest with Brothers. In many polyandrous societies, where fathers are called "uncles," a fraternal peace reigns among husbands who call one another "brother"; but there is no such peace in Denmark—and most especially not for Hamlet, who calls Claudius "uncle-father" (2.2.372) and is unseemingly called upon to marry his "aunt-mother."

**INCEST AND MATRICIDE IN ROME**

Soft, now to my mother.

*O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom;*  
*Let me be cruel, not unnatural.*

—Hamlet, 3.2.383–86

The history of imperial Rome pervades the story of Hamlet's Denmark. There are the figures of Aeneas, the Trojan founder of Rome in the wake of the Trojan War; Marcus Junius Brutus who killed Julius Caesar—Brutus' natural father, perhaps, and his mother's lover; Lucius Junius Brutus, whose name means "dim-witted" and is connected by Belleforest with the Danish Amleth; Seneca, philosopher and author of tragedies; and Roscius, the well-known actor. Among other links between Hamlet's Denmark and ancient Rome is the analogy between Hamlet and Nero, nephew-son of the Roman Emperor Claudius. Claudius was the first Roman Emperor to set foot in Britain. (The nurse in the Senecan play Octavia has it that Claudius was "the man who first made British necks to bow," which is one theme of Cymbeline.) And together with the Emperor Claudius "Gothicus"—who was called both "uncle" and "father" by Emperor Constantine the Great (the probably illegitimate son who "Christianized" Rome in the fourth century and thus founded Roman Catholicism)—Claudius helped to provide Hamlet with its villain's name.

Certainly when it comes to their actual or potential relations with their mothers, Hamlet's situation is like that of Claudius' eventual successor, Nero. Consider, for example, the role of Agrippina, Nero's mother, as imperial jointress of the state during a period when imperial Roman mothers played a key role in choosing or making successors. The powerful Agrippina was in Roman history what Gertrude is in Hamlet's Denmark and what the Virgin Mary is in Roman Catholicism: "the daughter, sister, wife and mother of an Emperor," as Tacitus says. (In Racine's Britannicus, Agrippina arrogantly and aptly calls herself "the daughter, wife, sister, and mother of [the Romans'] masters.") Agrippina was the daughter of Germanicus, the sister of Caligula, the wife and niece of Claudius, and the mother of Nero. In order to become ruler and become a free man (liber) in his own right, Nero had to unite carnally with this matrilineal jointress—just like the hero of the Oedipus of
Seneca (Nero’s actual tutor) when he marries his mother Jocasta. Tacitus and Suetonius, both influential writers in the Renaissance, stressed this incest.\textsuperscript{37} and English Renaissance writers refer to Nero as one who “ripp[ed] up the womb / Of [his] dear mother” and gained thus advancement into the womb of his mother just as he gained advancement to the throne of the Empire.\textsuperscript{56}

After this union with his mother Agrippina, Nero had to separate entirely from her by such means as filial matricide or maternal suicide—as perhaps does Oedipus from Jocasta.\textsuperscript{37} Tacitus draws attention to the suicidal aspect of Agrippina’s death when he tells how Agrippina had been warned by astrologers that a son of hers would become Emperor if he were to kill his mother. The ambitious Agrippina thus has to choose between killing her infant son now or being killed by him eventually. With suicidal courage and with eyes on the imperial prize, Agrippina—unlike Laius and Jocasta when confronted with a similar dilemma—chose her own death in order that her son might rule. “Let him kill me,” Tacitus reports that she responded to the oracle, “provided he becomes Emperor.”\textsuperscript{15}

Gertrude in Hamlet plays a similar role in this context to that of Agrippina in imperial Rome. For so long as Gertrude lives, Hamlet can come to life politically only through incest with her or through her death. But Hamlet wants—or he strives to want—neither to marry nor to kill Gertrude. He wants merely to outlive her in order to succeed to the throne. Hamlet indirectly expresses his hope for Gertrude’s death in his delight at the story of Pyrrhus the matricide, which is told from the Trojan/Roman perspective to the Carthaginian widow Dido. The name “Pyrrhus” should be understood here not only as Pyrrhus the father, that is, the Greek Achilles, who killed Priam as Hecuba watched. (That is the usual interpretation.) It should also be understood as Pyrrhus the son, that is, Neoptolemus, who was the son of Achilles and who killed his mother, or stepmother, Polyxena at the bidding of Achilles’ ghost.\textsuperscript{59} Pyrrhus’s matricidal murder of Polyxena is like the murder that Hamlet the son fears he wants to commit and that Hamlet the father warns his son against committing: “Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught” (1.5.85-86).

Gertrude in Hamlet may understand that her continued existence bars Hamlet from succeeding to the throne in chaste and nonmurderous fashion, that is, that only her death would free Hamlet to succeed to the throne without incest.\textsuperscript{60} (Agrippina and Jocasta, each in her own way, has this understanding.) Does Gertrude, as loving mother, have an inkling that the cup that Claudius gives to Hamlet with its awful “union” (5.2.269, 331) is poisoned? Does she overhear perhaps the conspiratorial conversation between Laertes and Claudius? (She interrupts them just as Claudius describes how he will supply Hamlet with a poison drink—4.7.161.) Apparently testing the drink on behalf of Hamlet and thus saving Hamlet for the throne, Gertrude commits a suicide that allows Hamlet his momentous “advance-ment” from womb to throne (cf. 3.2.331). Hamlet thus manages, in fact, to outdo the rule that he who would be ruler must marry or kill his mother. He outlives Gertrude for a few moments. His political triumph, a Pyrrhic victory, resides in the few moments that he enjoys as dying king apparent.
Hamlet hesitates to kill Claudius not only because this would mean killing a kinsperson but also because he fears that a newly widowed Gertrude would want to marry him according to the imperative of the Player Queen: “None wed the second but who kill’d the first” (3.2.175). By this imperative the Player Queen, like widow Dido, seems to condemn outright all remarriages. That a widow should wed none, or no-one, and live like a nun, or Sister, is presumably what Hamlet wants for Gertrude and what he will try to prepare her for in the bedroom scene. (Tertullian’s De monogamia calls all second marriages adultery.) But what Baptista actually says is that a widow should marry her husband’s killer; and marrying her husband’s killer is what the Player Queen in the dumbshow seems to do and what Gertrude herself has done. According to the terms of dramatic irony, moreover, the Player Queen will do what she says: “O, but she’ll keep her word,” says Hamlet (3.2.226).

Hamlet, were he to kill Claudius, might have more to fear than marriage to his mother: The “adulterate” Gertrude may have conspired in the murder of her first husband. (Recall that Queen Mary was charged with helping to poison her first husband Darnely, the pater if not the genitor of King James.) Who could say whether Gertrude might not kill a second time? Hamlet indirectly hints that Gertrude is a husband-killer when he says of his own killing of Polonius that it was “Almost as bad, good mother, / As kill a king and marry with his brother” (3.4.28-29). In earlier versions of the Hamlet story, the Danish people believe that Gertrude murdered Old Hamlet in order that she might live in adulterous incest without restraint. In Hamlet there is no clear-cut evidence that Gertrude is a regicide like Clytemnestra or the husband-poisoner Agrippina. But the figures of the wife-killing King Henry VIII, father of Queen Elizabeth, and the husband-killing Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, mother of King James, hover uncertainly about this play. And there is in Hamlet the implication that Gertrude is figuratively a multiple murderer of her husband. For according to the Player Queen, “A second time I kill my husband dead, / When second husband kisses me in bed” (3.2.179-80). Each time Gertrude sleeps with Claudius, she is accessory to the murder of Old Hamlet: she is guilty of killing a king.

Hamlet identifies with his father and his uncle. So he fears that if he were to kill Claudius, Gertrude would marry and then kill him. Remarkably, the counterpart to Hamlet in both Saxo’s and Belleforest’s versions of the story is killed by his wife Hermetrude = Gertrude, who conspired with Hamlet’s uncle Wigelunde in the murder of Hamlet and eventually marries Wigelunde.

Just as the Player Queen, when she says “I kill my husband dead” (3.2.179), virtually counsels kin murder, or fratricide, so the Player King, when he encourages the Queen to find after his death “one as kind / For husband” (3.2.171-72), effectively counsels kin marriage, or incest. Men, if they should not be their brothers'
keepers ("kindly"), should be at least their brothers' brothers ("kin"); but in Hamlet men are their brothers' killers—as Cain was Abel's and Claudius Old Hamlet's. And, if men should not be their sisters' keepers, they should be at least their sisters' brothers; but in Hamlet they are their sisters' sexual partners—as Cain was Calmana's and Claudius Gertrude's. In Hamlet, things are "a little more than kin, and less than kind" (1.2.65), and kinship makes only for fratricide and incest taken together ("the primal eldest curse"—3.3.37). In this context what can one do but be cruel in the name of kindness? "I must be cruel only to be kind" (3.4.180).65

The queen is really the thing of the play. Though Hamlet affects an interest in catching "the conscience of the King" (2.2.601), he seems really to want to catch that of the queen ("If she should break it now"—3.2.219).66 Thus, too, the ghost of Old Hamlet, though it calls for revenge against Claudius, actually changes Hamlet's mind less in relation to Claudius, whom Hamlet already despised, than in relation to Gertrude, against whom the Ghost tells Hamlet not to "taint" his mind (1.5.85–86) and of whom Hamlet comes to think in terms of what Gifford calls "filthy lusts."67

During the play-within-the-play, for example, Hamlet surveys Gertrude for a sign that she recognizes that she is an incestuous husband-murderer, and he hopes that Gertrude will now make a commitment never to marry again. (He hopes for a less ambiguous promise than the Player Queen's: "Both here and hence pursue me lasting strife, / If, once a widow, ever I be wife"—3.2.217–18.) But he has grounds to fear that Gertrude will not "break" off either her marriage ("The lady doth protest too much, methinks"—3.2.225) or her custom of marrying the murderous kinsman of a former husband. For soon after the performance of "The Mousetrap," Gertrude invites Hamlet, the would-be murderer of her husband Claudius, into her "closet ere [he] go to bed" (3.2.322–23).68

Hamlet receives Gertrude's invitation to the closet with trepidation. He is afraid of being driven, like Nero, to commit incest or matricide or both. Although Hamlet decides to accommodate Gertrude ("We shall obey, were she ten times our mother"—3.2.324), he wishes that Gertrude were not his mother ("would it were not so, you are my mother"—3.4.15). If Gertrude were not, then sexual commerce with her would of course not be maternal incest, and killing her would not be matricide. But since she is, Hamlet's decision to visit her in the bedroom is an act of moral courage—he knows that he will have to face down the challenges of matricide and maternal incest as well as his own death.

Belleforest remarks that "the thing that spoyled this vertuous prince was the over great trust and confidence hee had in . . . Hermetrude."69 Gertrude's bedroom is no less dangerous to Hamlet, who "lacks advancement" (3.2.331), than the lair of the Sphinx was dangerous for Theban boys, strangled by her sphincter muscles: she caught her victims in the vagina or birth canal during intercourse, killing them on their advance towards a womb, or delphos, almost as if they had never advanced from one.70 For a time, Nero was trapped in just this way in the incestuous grip of
his mother, Agrippina. Heremtrude, a Sphinx-like "Amazon without love . . . who despised marriage with all men . . . in such a manner that . . . there never came any man to desire her love but she caused him to loose his life," seduced Hamlet and then conspired with his uncle Wigelunde to kill him. Hamlet's visiting this mother is the moral turning-point of the play.

HYPOCRISY AND ACTING

_I will speak daggers to her, but use none._
_My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites._
—_Hamlet_, 3.2.387–88

Freud argues that in _Hamlet_, "the child's wishful phantasy of doing away with his father and taking his father's place with his mother is repressed." Yet Hamlet does not hide the fact that he has wishes, even needs, along lines patricidal and incestuous. He brings them into the open in the dumbshow, for example, and in the many comparisons of himself with Claudius, who killed Hamlet's father and married Hamlet's mother, and with Nero, who committed incest with his mother, Agrippina, and killed both his mother and his adoptive brother, Britannicus. And _Hamlet_ brings the desire to commit kin murder and incest into the open by other means, as in the references to the two men named "Pyrrhus," who between them murdered a father and killed a stepmother (upon the urging of the ghost of a dead father), and to "Cain," who murdered his brother and committed incest with his sister. What is really unique about Hamlet is not his unconscious wish to be patricidal and incestuous, but rather his conscious refusal to actually become patricidal and incestuous. Hamlet is quite clear about this in his prayer: "Let not ever / The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom" (3.2.384–85). Hamlet would be neither Nero nor Neronian.

Like Hamlet, Nero was a playactor, playwright, and spectator. While Rome burned, he dressed for the stage and sang the "Sack of Ilium," the tale that Hamlet asks the Player to recite (2.2). While watching tragedies, Nero would weep real tears over such fearful and pitiable sufferings on stage as he himself inflicted on others in real life: "What's Hecuba to him, or he to her, / That he should weep for her?" (2.2.553–54). Nero's favorite plays included _Orestes the Matricide_ and _Oedipus Blinded_, articulating themes which have drawn the attention of Shakespearian scholars. A third play, equally relevant to _Hamlet_ and to Nero's stagecraft but overlooked by the critics—they generally focus only on problems of intergenerational incest—is _Canace parturiens_ [Canace Giving Birth]. In the Renaissance version of this play, by the Italian Speroni (1546), a sister gives birth on stage to the child of her incestuous union with her twin brother Macareus, on the twin siblings' common birthday. _Canace parturiens_ thus argues against generational difference and succession in a more radical manner than do the other two plays. It levels all differentiation along lines of both kinship (where homogenization means incest)
and gender (where it means androgyny). It is surmised by his biographers that Nero delighted to act in such plays as the Orestes, Oedipus, and Canace because he committed incest with his mother, killed her, and committed both crimes against his adoptive and step-siblings.

Hamlet, confronted with situations similar to those facing his Greek and Roman counterparts, denies himself the way of Oedipus—that is, to unknowingly commit maternal incest and patricide—the way of Nero—that is, to knowingly commit maternal incest and matricide—and the way of Orestes—that is, to knowingly commit matricide. Equally important, Hamlet denies the method of Macareus—that is, to knowingly commit sibling incest. Hence not wanting to commit the acts that Nero performed both on stage and in life, Hamlet must play the scene in his mother's bedroom as though Gertrude both were and were not his mother ("would it were not so . . ."). He becomes an actor in life—literally, in Greek, a hypocrite ("My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites"). In the first scene at the Danish court, Hamlet excoriated hypocrisy as a vice ("I know not 'seems' "—1.2.76). But now, fearing that he sincerely wants to commit matricide, Hamlet wants to be other than he is. He wants to keep his acts inadequate to his wants.

Instead of a choosing to become a hypocrite, Hamlet might choose to be nothing, as in a suicidal wish "not to be" (3.1.56), or to do nothing, as in a wish to be "neutral to his will and matter" (2.2.477). He might want to become like Pyrrhus the son, pausing—perhaps forever—before killing the archetypal parent:

So, as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,
And like a neutral to his will and matter,
Did nothing.

(2.2.476–78)

Doing nothing, instead of becoming hypocritical or murderous/incestuous, is the basis for melancholic delay in Hamlet.

Pretending to be virtuous is, for Hamlet, the first step toward becoming really virtuous. Thus he demands of his mother, "Assume a virtue if you have it not" (3.4.162). Gertrude, whom Hamlet believes to have married Claudius for "base respects of thrift, but none of love" (3.2.178), should now hypocritically "put on" a "frock or livery" like the habit of a nun (3.4.167, 166). The livery is artful, of course, but the "habit" of wearing it will eventually transform Gertrude into a chaste woman. The medieval saying, Cucullus non facit monachum [The cowl, or hood, does not make the monk], which the Fool in Twelfth Night uses against "Madonna" Olivia, is here reversed. In Hamlet the actor's habit really does make the nun, or so it seems.

"Such an act / That blurs the grace and blush of modesty, / Calls virtue hypocrite . . ." (3.4.40–42). Hamlet resolves to "speak daggers to [Gertrude], but use none" (3.2.387). Though his "tongue and soul in this be hypocrites," Hamlet will show Gertrude "the inmost part" of herself (3.4.19). This part is her soul, which Hamlet hopes to reveal and cure by speaking verbal daggers into her ear
(3.2.387). Or it is her gut, which Hamlet might spill with the same dagger he used to kill Polonius. Or perhaps that part is her womb, toward which a man advances with his penis—or “dagger,” in the Elizabethan idiom. Gertrude fears that Hamlet plans to use his dagger to spill her gut: “Thou wilt not murder me?” (3.4.20). Her fear is not obtuse. But when mother and son are left “all alone,” “nature makes [mother and son] partial” (3.1.184, 3.3.32). Without such external restraint on the will of mother and son as a living Polonius might have been or represented, the way is open for Hamlet to advance to that inmost part of Gertrude which is her womb.

The famous kiss in the Hamlet story is at once chaste, of the kind that mothers are ordinarily expected to give sons, and unchaste, of the kind that mothers are ordinarily expected not to give sons. Belleforest, anticipating a debate about the quality of the kiss, protests that Gertrude kisses Hamlet in the bedroom in the chaste manner, “with the like love that a virtuous mother may or can use to kisse and entertaine her owne childe.” But the relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude, if it is not incestuous in the particularist sense, becomes so in the universalist sense. Hamlet gradually transcends the difference between chastity and incest in a higher condition of general liberty that threatens the political and familial order as a whole: “His liberty is full of threats to all” (4.1.14).

SHAMELESSNESS

... proclaim no shame...

—Hamlet, 3.4.85

The conversation between Hamlet and Gertrude in the closet indicates, we shall see, a moral condition beyond the ordinary distinction between chastity and incest (literally, unchastity), or good and evil. Tacitus assigns to Nero’s mother, Agrippina, the incestuous shamelessness that Hamlet fears in Gertrude: “Agrippina through a burning desire of continuing her authorite and greatness grew to that shamelesnes that in the midst of the day, when Nero was well tippled and full of good cheer, she offered herselfe to him drunk as he was, trimly decked and readie to commit incest.” In Shakespeare’s play Hamlet imagines the same shamelessness:

... O shame, where is thy blush?
Rebellious hell,
If thou canst mutine in a matron’s bones,
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
And melt in her own fire; proclaim no shame...

(3.4.81–85)

If it is shame or moral cowardice that alone keeps most men good (“conscience does make cowards of us all”—3.1.83), then Hamlet’s qualified proclamation of shamelessness announces a liberty to murder and make love with whomsoever he
chooses, including mother and father. If his “matron” (3.4.83) is thought of as Gertrude and the “flaming youth” is thought of as Hamlet himself, then his proclamation of shamelessness amounts to a call for father-daughter and mother-son incest. Some readers might say that Hamlet should “blush for shame” (“You Ne-roes, . . . blush for shame!”) in speaking words that can be so interpreted. (By the same token they might say that Nero should have blushed when he contemplated matricide and incest—and that Laertes should have blushed when he contemplated cutting Hamlet’s throat “i th’ church” [4.7.125].) However, Hamlet pitches his appeal to shamelessness to a level beyond that of the ordinary “sinner,” who generally commits acts he himself believes to be wrong in the eyes of others or of God: Hamlet’s pitch is to the level of an extraordinary “saint,” from whom all external compulsion to be good, including shame and moral cowardice, has been removed.

In Hamlet, transcending the difference between “good” and “bad” (“there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so”—2.2.249–50) means transcending that between kin and nonkin and hence the ordinary taboo on incest. The condition of “no shame” thus implies a withdrawal from particularized kinship with one’s family—whether as a religious celibate (saint) or as a secular libertine (sinner). Hamlet is thus like the Roman Coriolanus, who wants to divorce his mother Volumnia, or the Christian Jesus, who tells Mary that she is not His parent. Hamlet wants Gertrude to be not his kinsperson but a stranger, not a mother but an other: “Would it were not so, you are my mother.” If Gertrude were no longer his mother, then killing or sleeping with her would be no better or worse than killing or sleeping with any other woman. Hamlet’s wish to alienate Gertrude from himself as son thus expresses a cosmopolitan and universalist—Christian—love of liberty like that of the Stoics.

Ordinary rules of kinship entail regulations concerning kindness to particular kinspersons (“Be the keeper of your brother”) and concerning sexual activity with kinspersons (“Do not have sexual intercourse with your mother”). So divorcing particular kinspersons, or transcending altogether the standard of particularized kinship, is often the precondition for those ordinary people—that is, for those people who are neither saints who celebrate freedom from the flesh nor natural men who celebrate freedom of the flesh—who want to commit acts of revenge or incest in a psychologically bearable fashion. In Belleforest’s story, when the king of England learns that his son-in-law Amleth = Hamlet has killed the king’s old friend Feng = Claudius, the king is torn between the obligation to avenge the latter’s death, upholding sworn faith to a friend—the king “had determined of old, by a mutual [fraternalistic] compact, that one of them should act as avenger of the other”—and the obligation to protect the life of a kinsperson, upholding marital affinity. The king chooses the former obligation.

In the same manner, the familial bond that kinship presupposes can be replaced by a fellows’ obligation to revenge. In Belleforest’s equivalent of the closet
scene, the revenge-seeking Amleth attempts to divorce his uncle-father—and, significantly, his aunt-mother:

I, for my part, will never account Feng for my kinsman nor once knowe him for mine uncle, nor you my deer mother, for not having respect to the blud that ought to have united us so straightly together, and who neither with your honor nor without suspicion of consent to the death of your husband could ever have agreed to have married with his cruel enemie.88

The effect is to neutralize such terms as kin-murder and incest: so long as Claudius and Gertrude are not kinspersons, killing one and sleeping with the other is merely adultery and murder.

The transcendence of particularized kinship to the point where one person can play four family roles at once—a point figured by Gertrude as jointress and Ophelia as nun—sometimes requires not so much divorce of particular kinspersons as recognition that we do not know who our particular kinspersons are insofar as sexual generation is always subject to surreptitious substitutions in the bedroom and cradle. In this context, the whole world, though it is neither the seat of the Roman imperial family nor the nunnery of Roman Catholicism, is a masquerade peopled with hooded Sisters and “mobbed queen[s]” (2.2.498). At this masquerade, the reveler is like a bedtrick dupe who does not really know whom he kisses. The whole world is a bedtrick-ridden play where the lover does not really know whom he sleeps with.89

Denmark is this endless game of hoodman-blind or blind man’s buff. Here blindfolds remain over the eyes forever and cousins pass for noncousins as easily as two coins of the same denomination. Hamlet accuses Gertrude of being a dupe in such terms: “... What devil was’t / That thus hath cozen’d you at hoodman-blind?” (3.4.76-77). Gertrude has been cozened, or tricked, into taking one cousin, or kinsperson, for another (“This was your husband ... / Here is your husband”—3.4.63-64). She has taken Old Hamlet for Claudius, Hyperion for a satyr, or vice versa.90

Where liberty requires incest or where the inascertainability of parenthood makes incest inevitable, human beings must choose to be either saintly friars or sinful libertines, to be either chastely hooded monks or incestuous players at hoodman-blind. A friar, universally akin to all men, transcends the incest taboo by becoming a Pauline “eunuch for God” through a “castration of the heart.”91 A libertine, in contrast, delights unashamedly in “sullies” and he acts out the Parisian “liberty” of which Polonius asks Reynaldo to accuse Laertes,92 whom his sister Ophelia taunts with the term “libertine” (1.3.49; cf. 2.1.32). For a libertine, with his liberty of the flesh, as for a friar, with his liberty from the flesh, sexual intercourse with any person, including a sister or mother, is as chaste or unchaste as with any other person.

In Hamlet, then, it is not only “revenge [which] should have no bounds”
Hoodman-Blind (4.7.127) but also love: "No place indeed should murder sanctuarize" (4.7.126). In the moment between Hamlet's outcry—"Proclaim no shame!"—and Old Hamlet's appearance in the bedroom, there is "no place" that is holy for Young Hamlet. Or, to put it otherwise, every place is holy for him. No place should incest sanctuarize unless, as in the Christian church—with its adoration of the spiritually incestuous Holy Family and credo of universal siblinghood—it is every place.

CHRISTIANITY AND STOICISM

We are all sprung from heavenly seed. All alike have the same father, from whom all-nourishing mother [alma mater] receives the showering drops of moisture.

—Lucretius, On the Nature of the Universe

As Hamlet lies dead, the English ambassadors bring the news that "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead" (5.2.376). What are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to us that we, at this moment of high tragedy, should care for them? Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, I would suggest, do as "the indifferent children of the earth" (2.2.227). The societal end of the political institution of friendship that they represent is the same as the aesthetic telos of Hamlet itself.

Hamlet's friendly relationship to his Wittenberg buddies or alumni has an aspect of kinship. "Friendship," writes the anthropologist Shmuel Eisenstadt, "always involves an aspect of submerged kinship." Hamlet and his university pals share the same alma mater, or nourishing mother—a Lucretian term suggesting common descent and nurture that the Renaissance humanists applied to the university.

Equally important, Horatio's counterpart in Hamlet's sources is Hamlet's actual nurse-sibling; and Horatio values his collactaneous tie to Hamlet more than his political obligation to the king: "Among these [men appointed by the King and Queen to attend Hamlet] chanced to be a foster-brother of Amleth, who had not ceased to have regard to their common nurture; and who esteemed his present orders [from the King and Queen] less than the memory of their past fellowship." Not only Horatio (and, as we have seen, Ophelia) but also the "schoolfellows" Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were "of . . . young days brought up with [Hamlet], / And . . . neighboured to his youth and haviour" (3.4.204, 2.2.11–12)—as in the medieval institution of foster brotherhood in which young men growing up together became intimate friends.

What were the characteristics of this familylike fellowship of alumni? One was equality. Hamlet's first words to Horatio—"Horatio, or I do forget myself" (1.2.161)—already suggest that he and Horatio are equal or even interchangeable beings. Hamlet would be "even" with Horatio: "Sir, my good friend, I'll change that name with you" (1.2.163; cf. 254). In the same vein, Hamlet begs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to "be even and direct with [him]" (2.2.287). The indifference or interchangeability of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, their twinlike coequality,
is their memorable aspect (2.2.33–34). They are "Dead for a ducat, dead" (3.4.22)—like the bits of wergeld—literally man-money—for which the lives of their counterparts in the sources of *Hamlet* are exchanged. The relationship between the two halves of this duo thus expresses a monstrous perversion of the fraternal or liberal principle of equality.

A siblinghood potentially open to all human beings not only collapses distinctions between families, including the distinction between Ophelia's family and that of her precisely ambiguous foster brother Hamlet, but also between classes. Thus Hamlet, playing the princely pauper, jokes liberally about how "the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier he galls his kibe" (5.1.136–38); Polonius considers that the love between Hamlet and Ophelia may be appropriate after all (2.1.114–17); and Horatio, although he is no landed aristocrat like Osric and although he lacks "revenue," has for his fellow the apparent heir to Denmark (3.2.56–58). Horatio thus manifests in himself that Stoic spirit of leveling political distinctions and of indifference to the goods of this world (adiaphora) which in *Hamlet* extends even to the physical world, where the night becomes "joint-labourer with the day" (1.1.81).

A fellowship in which all human beings are equal or indifferent siblings leads to one of several conditions. It may lead to academic celibacy of the kind that the scholarly brotherhood in Navarre in Love's Labour's Lost would practice. Or it may lead to religious celibacy of the kind that Brother Martin Luther had practiced in pre-Reformation Wittenberg. But as I have argued, such Brotherhoods as Luther's old order always involve problems of incest, Thomas More thus following the great Catholic tradition when he insists, in his attack on Luther's marriage to Sister Catherine, that membership in a Catholic Brotherhood makes any sexual intercourse incestuous.

One way for a society to skirt the problem of incest that the hypothesis of universal siblinghood entails is to encourage all human beings to remain at a presexual or supersexual stage of physical or spiritual development—like children or Blackfriars. "Consonancy of youth" and "ever-preserved love" (2.2.284–86) are the qualities that Hamlet praises in the Wittenberg fellowship. Joining a troupe of child-players with low statures and high voices—like the cry of child-players that performed at the Blackfriars in the 1590s—would appeal to Hamlet if it might halt the process whereby one generation succeeds and is distinguished from the next—hence arrest "this fell sergeant, Death" (5.2.341). In the ordinary course of events, however, adulthood succeeds childhood, boyish voices crack (2.2.423–25), and child-players "exclaim against their own succession" (2.2.349). Child-players become adult-players such as the ones with whom Hamlet—who play-acts at madness and produces a "Murder of Gonzago"—fraternizes and might have joked about getting "a fellowship" (3.2.271–72).

The society of "indifferent children of the earth" in *Hamlet* suggests a utopian fellowship of free sisters and brothers (*liberi*), like the fellowship we might profess to admire in *As You Like It*'s Forest of Arden. Here people of different generations
and different birth orders can be or pretend to be "co-mates and brothers in exile." But unless Hamlet and his fellow siblings somehow manage to avoid or transcend sexual maturity, they will become incestuous libertines, committing sibling incest, much as do Claudius and his Gertrude. The only real question is whether their incest will be earthly or Edenic/paradisiacal—sinful or guiltless.

The Stoic basis for the Christian conjunction of saintliness and shamelessness is worth pursuing here because *Hamlet* is as much a Stoic tragedy, with its emphasis on "cosmic" kinship and "shamelessness," as it is a Sophoclean or Aeschylean classical tragedy. The Stoic thinkers invoked the Pythagorean notion of a "union of friends" (haetery) to hypothesize a republic transcending consanguinity, where people would share all things sexual and propertal and be fully equal. The Stoic "union of friends" was thus both political and familial—or it was neither. According to the "cosmopolitan" theorist Epictetus, man in this transcendentally fraternal association is essentially neither Athenian nor Corinthian; man is *kosmos* and *huios theou*.

For Plato, a fraternal fellowship approaching national autochthony is the noble lie of the ideal polity, and Plato understands that fellowship to require universalist incest. Plato only retreats from stating this ideal requirement outright because he had too much shame (aidóς) or because he judged it politic to feign shame. The Stoics, on the other hand, were not ashamed and did not feign shame. For them, such distinctions as those between family members (e.g., between Hamlet and Ophelia) and between social classes (e.g., between Hamlet and Horatio) are transcended. The Stoic Zeno, in his *Republic*, and Diogenes of Sinope, in his lost work of the same title, thus consider how fraternity in the *politeia* transcends all kin ties, as in a fully politicized version of the Greek fraternalistic ceremony of the *apatouria*, in which the barrier between children and parents (e.g., between Hamlet and Gertrude) is dissolved.

This Stoical transcendence required a new shamelessness (*anaideia*). Thus Chryssipus asserted that virtue is merely conformity to nature and that vice is merely deviation from nature. Besides this, for the Stoics and Cynics, there is, in *Hamlet*'s terms, "nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (2.2.249–50). In his *Republic* and in his *On Things for their own Sake Not Desirable*, Diogenes permitted marriage with mothers, daughters, and sons. Diogenes of Sinope, a prototype of the Cynics and author of tragedies based on Stoic principles, says that incest is natural and that "what is natural cannot be dishonorable or indecent and . . . should be done in public." The Stoic philosopher Zeno, who did not distinguish between the nature of men and that of dogs—cynic means "doglike"—says that incest is not wrong in itself.

In some respects traditional Christianity does not differ from Stoicism in regard to shamelessness. (As I have suggested in chapter 1, sixteenth-century thinkers such as Montaigne were much influenced by Stoicist ideas.) In Christianity there is an innocent shamelessness, characteristic of many universalist and chiliastic sects,
which affects the wholly natural and also the wholly saintly human being. For such people, the sign of Pauline grace and liberty is doing what you want, including committing incest, without feeling guilty: "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty," said Saint Paul, and all things are allowed; Rabelais' "Abbey of Thélème," which demonstrates a universalist kinship structure, has for its motto, "Do what you want." According to some Christian groups, as we have seen, not to commit incest out of a fear of "disgrace" was itself sinful. Incest was actually required by some Christian sects, including the ancient society in Corinth and the Elizabethan Family of Love. They, too, would "proclaim no shame."

FROM NUN TO NONE

Boy, What sign is it when a man of great spirit grows melancholy?
—Love's Labour's Lost, 1.2.2

The Door of Death I open found
And the Worm Weaving in the Ground
Thou'rt my Mother from the Womb
Wife, Sister, Daughter to the Tomb
Weaving to Dreams the Sexual Strife
And weeping over the Web of Life

—Blake, *For Children* (1793) [see fig. 7]

*Caetera silere memineris.* [On the rest see thou keep silent.]

—Amleth to his mother (Saxo, *Historiae Danicae*)

The tragedy of *Hamlet* resides in the revelation that marriage, monachist celibacy, secular libertinism, and imperial joinery—institutions which at first blush seem quite different from each other—are one and the same. Such a nun, or Sister, as Hamlet enjoins Ophelia to become in her relation to God and such a jointress or mother superior as Gertrude is in her relationship to the imperial ruler are structurally identical. Everything in *Hamlet* expresses this uniformity. In this sense Denmark is no different from Wittenberg, England, and Paris. They compose a prison nightmare with no exit. Like Sophocles' *Antigone*, *Hamlet* can end only in incest or death or both together.

In comedies about kinship, the dilemma that the incest taboo poses is often dissolved through the sublation of incest in some kind of marriage. In *Hamlet* this comedic dissolution is figured in the essentially brother-sister love between Hamlet and Ophelia. It is a love that might have ended in marriage—as Gertrude, who married her brother, had hoped it would end. (Ruskin calls Ophelia Hamlet's "true lost wife.") But from the moment that Hamlet is called upon to abhor his mother's remarriage—or to avenge the death of his father—the possibility of such a marriage is denied.

Besides marriage, as with a sister (Ophelia or Gertrude), another comedic way
to attain resolution is figured in *Hamlet*: the way of universal fellowship in national socii. Such fellowship would dissolve the tragic problem that incest and its taboo poses by denying the possibility of incest in the ordinary sense. The destruction in *Hamlet* of such fraternities as the Wittenberg fellowship (Hamlet, Horatio, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern), the cry of children in Old Hamlet’s court (Hamlet, Horatio, Ophelia, and Laertes), and the association of child-players is of the greatest consequence; that is why the deaths of sister Ophelia and brethren Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, sometimes dismissed by critics as incidental to the main movement of the plot, figure prominently in its overall structure. The announcement by the English ambassador near the end of the play that “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead” marks the close of an era.
"You do surely bar the door upon your own liberty," says Hamlet's old school chum, without a fraternalistic friendship (that is, "if you deny your griefs to your friend"—3.2.329–30). Rosencrantz threatens Hamlet with prison, or loss of liberty, should Hamlet refuse to share griefs with him; equal brothers should share everything. But friendship or siblinghood universalized as an association of liberi necessarily entails incest, as in the case of the foster siblings Hamlet/Ophelia and of the siblings Gertrude/Claudius, who are related both "in-law" and by carnal contagion.

Hamlet finally gets the familial and political "advancement" that he said he lacked and that we have hoped for him. He gets it in the regal moment following his mother's death, between the death of his uncle-father Claudius and that of Hamlet himself. And thanks to his liberal brother Horatio he gets more, or rather we do. From Horatio—who like his counterparts in the sources never puts obligation to the polis above that to friendship—Hamlet has expected no advancement (3.2.57). Yet it is Horatio who absents himself from felicity awhile to tell the story of Hamlet as Hamlet's body is brought "high on a stage" (5.2.383). The tale that this cosmopolitan and scholarly Stoic tries to tell is Hamlet once removed: instead of getting incest in the play we get the play itself.

Some people have said that Hamlet is a domestic tragedy of incest like Sophocles' Oedipus the King. But I am here arguing that Hamlet is a tragedy of incest denied, in which the liberal, or fraternal/sororal, community—the only community that offers hope for comedic liberty—is destroyed by an inherent contradiction within itself. The tragedy does not lie principally in the destruction of a regular nuclear family, or even of a larger "extended" family or nation, through the consequences of incest and kin murder—a destruction which is the theme of Oedipus the King. Rather, it lies in the destruction of siblinghood by the incest taboo that the nuclear family, or the larger extended family, presupposes and perhaps requires. In Hamlet, fratricide (such as that of Claudius) is punished only as siblinghood (such as Horatio's and Ophelia's) is destroyed forever.

From nun to none. From the start of his first soliloquy, Hamlet puts before us two kinds of death: an extraordinary or religious carnal deliquescence and an ordinary or secular suicide.

O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter.

(1.2.129–32)

Hamlet wishes for a "self-slaughter" that is at once in apposition to the "death" of Christian celibates, since they "die to the world," and in opposition to the Christian canon 'gainst self-slaughter. "Literal" suicide was endorsed, however, by such Stoic counterparts to Hamlet as the anti-Christian Emperor Marcus Aurelius and the moral philosopher Seneca (Nero's tutor). In this Stoic tradition, Montesquieu,
Hoodman-Blind in his *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and of Their Decline*, admires suicide since it "gives every one the liberty of finishing his part on the stage of the world in which scene he pleases." The ability to choose "not to be" (3.1.56), as did many a man like Horatio ("more an antique Roman than a Dane"—5.2.346), frees and equalizes everyone. And for Hamlet, the end is to become not a comedic nun (or friar) but none of living humankind. There is throughout the play a pervasive vacillation between ascent into absolute chastity (the nunnery) and absolute incest or death (universal homogeneity), but finally it is not the religious celibate's "death to the world" that obviates physical incest but rather Death. Death homogenizes everything in *Hamlet*; the worm of death—"your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service" (4.3.23-24)—is the true "Diet of Worms." It is the night of *la mort*—the centaurlike knight named "Lamord" (4.7.91)—that Hamlet, like the Stoic hero Hercules, has to face down.

We are "indifferent children of the earth" because we are, like Adam, "kin" to dust (4.2.5). Our indifference to such emperors as Alexander and such kings as Old Hamlet resides principally in the dust of which we and imperious Caesar are made (5.1.196-209). "Do not for ever . . . / Seek for thy noble father in the dust" (1.2.70-71.)

Consider in this context of autochthony the Roman historian Livy's story about the brutish (i.e., "mad") Lucius Junius Brutus—the Roman political hero who was Saxo's and Belleforest's model for the Danish hero Hamlet. Brutus, son of Tarquina, was the indigenous liberator of Rome from his uncle, the tyrannical Tarquin. Tarquin had murdered Brutus' father just as Claudius in *Hamlet* has murdered Hamlet's father. Brutus succeeded in liberating Rome from patriarchal and avuncular tyranny principally by acknowledging a universal siblinghood with all human beings and downplaying so-called blood kinship. Thus Livy writes that Brutus went with a group of aristocratic young men, including two sons of Tarquin, to the oracle at Delphi—literally, to the womb of the earth. The oracle spoke these words to them: "Which of you (O yong men) shal first kisse your mother, he shal beare chief and soveraigne rule in Rome." All but one of the young Roman bluebloods raced home to kiss his consanguineous mother—all but Brutus. He "touched the ground with his mouth and kissed the earth, thinking this with himself, that she was the common mother of all mortal men." By thus denying particularized consanguineous kinship and embracing national autochthonous siblinghood Brutus liberated himself and politicized Rome. He turned Roman society from one governed by a pseudopatriarchal tyranny into a society of free brothers, or "liberi"—a democratic republic of "liberty."

Livy's tale is pleasant, but it is also utopian. It does not resolve the old conflict between family and state, for example. The consequence of Brutus' denying particularized kinship and embracing a more general political siblinghood comes to the fore, for example, when he inflicts capital punishment on his own sons, who were political traitors to Rome. Liberal democracy, even as the Renaissance
came to know it, requires the sacrifice of generational heterogeneity. An alliance with the *liberi*, or *socii*, replaces an alliance with the divine or regal *pater*. For the sake of the national society a son might now kill his father and a father his son.\(^{125}\) Already in the fourteenth century, Coluccio Salutati, surveying the prospects for a new nationalism, writes in this spirit:

> Thou knowest not how sweet is the *amor patriae* [love of fatherland]: if such would be expedient for the fatherland’s protection or enlargement, it would seem neither burdensome and difficult nor a crime to thrust the axe into one’s father’s head, to crush one’s brothers [*fratres*], to deliver from the womb of one’s wife the premature child with the sword.\(^{126}\)

> “Justice it is to defend the brothers [*socii*] even at the expense of the consanguineous brother [*frater*],” insisted Lucas de Penna.\(^{127}\)

The notion of a common social parenthood in *Hamlet*, while it may well serve to underpin a national ideology, is not without its awesome social contradictions. For Shakespeare’s play does not allow for the real appearance of the relatively happy liberation that Livy hypothesizes for Brutus and Rome. And Roman historiography, like our own, is filled with tales of false “liberations” from vestigially patriarchal tyrants. In the *Pumpkinification of Claudius*, for example, the author (sometimes thought to be Seneca) reports that on the day of Emperor Claudius’ funeral “the Roman people walked like free men;”\(^{128}\) but Nero, “put on” the throne by means of matricide and incest, was soon to become monster and master of cruelty. Does Fortinbras, son of Old Hamlet’s sparring partner, really know what kind of king Hamlet would have made had he been “put on” (5.2.402)? And what of Fortinbras, who cuts off Horatio’s tale about Hamlet—the tale that is our *Hamlet*—as if he knows already that the tragedy of siblinghood is too much for the Danish political order to tolerate? What kind of king will Fortinbras be?

The union with which *Hamlet* ends is the tragic and genocidal conjunction of kinspersons all in death (“Is thy union here?”—5.2.331). We might hope that the union in *Hamlet* is also a conjunction in genuine burial in the earth and reunion with kin, of the sort that Old Hamlet sought and that the childless Antigone, the last of her line, sought underground with her mother, father, and beloved brother. But the old brotherhood or sisterhood, with all its beauty and horror, is gone.