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MY, CLAUDIUS :
A CASE AGAINST THE KING AS VILLAIN

by
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ABSTRACT

The role of Claudius in Shakespeare’s The Tragedy of Hamlet has traditionally been affixed with the label of villain, coupled with a presumption of malice. This prejudice has plagued the role, relegating it to shallow melodrama throughout the majority of the play’s 440 odd-year history. Although it has now become more commonplace to see him portrayed as a capable, intelligent, even initially likable king, this has only been the case for the past 50 years or so, and even so the label of villain and the assumption of malice persist and prevail even in contemporary practice. While the author is reluctant to insist on the benevolence of the King as imperative, they do contend that Claudius should not be portrayed as a villain. Doing so undermines the primary conflict - that of Hamlet vs. Claudius - cripples the possibilities for exploration of the King as a role, hinders the potential for Hamlet’s journey, and absolves the viewer of active engagement by playing directly into expectations.

Within this thesis, consideration of historical analysis and editorial tradition are utilized in order to demonstrate a progressively encompassing disregard that has led to the role’s neglect. An account of the 2006 University of Central Florida Conservatory Theatre production is used to validate the necessity of avoiding a villainous portrayal of the King. A brief description of the author’s ideal Claudius explores the realm of possibility opened by such non-villainous portrayal, and potential for the role’s complexity is examined through a thorough voice/text analysis and brief discussion of Jaques Lecoq’s movement equilibrium theory via appendices.
This thesis is humbly dedicated: to the faculty of the UCF Conservatory Theatre, for providing the tools that made this possible; to Joseph, for stepping up when no one else would; to Julia, for smiling and shrugging at those who doubted; to Terry and Karen, for all their support in its many, many forms; to my Mother, for always being proud of and believing in her son, no matter what path he takes in life; and to Rachel, for her unconditional love, her infinite patience, her perpetual inspiration, and for putting up with and never loosing faith in me.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................................. ii

INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................................. 1

HISTORICAL ATTITUDES TOWARD THE KING, A GROWING PREJUDICE, AND THE GRADUAL DIVIDE BETWEEN ACTOR AND TEXT .......................................................... 5

  The First Folio ................................................................................................................................. 5

  The End of the Elizabethan Stage, and the “Improvement” of Shakespeare’s Texts. 11

A CASE AGAINST VILLAIN .................................................................................................................. 23

  Experience in Production – UCF 2005-06 .................................................................................. 23

  My, Claudius .................................................................................................................................. 39

CONCLUSIONS .................................................................................................................................... 57

APPENDIX A: VOICE - TEXT ANALYSIS .......................................................................................... 62

APPENDIX B: EQUILIBRIUM - DISEQUILIBRIUM ............................................................................. 77

APPENDIX C: RELEVANT EDITED PERFORMANCE JOURNAL ENTRIES ...................................... 83

REFERENCES ....................................................................................................................................... 95
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Inspiration for Costume of Claudius ................................................................. 27
Figure 2: Costume for Claudius ......................................................................................... 28
Figure 3: Hamlet Above in the Opening Scene ................................................................. 30
INTRODUCTION

In my second year at the University of Central Florida Conservatory Theatre I found myself in a post-class discussion with my Shakespeare Performance professor Mark Brotherton, during which he expressed a long held desire to play the role of Claudius in The Tragedy of Hamlet: Prince of Denmark. He described to me in loose detail his ideal King: a master tactician engaged in a deadly Cat and mouse scenario with Hamlet, the conflict focused on an open battle of wits to see who would eliminate whom first. Until that conversation I’d never bothered to recognize that the King had such rich potential, that I was guilty of omission, and admitted at the time that his ideas were intriguing. I still never considered Claudius as a potential role though; why would any actor in his thirties bother to consider Claudius when there was Hamlet, the perceived role of all roles? Hamlet is, after all, the title character and hero; the mad, brooding, vengeful Prince that English professors write entire books about and theatre scholars make careers out of. It's the role by which, justifiably or not, history’s greatest actors have come to be measured. Whereas The King; why he’s just the villain. And, seeing as he manages to get himself and nearly everyone around him slaughtered, apparently not a very good one at that. Who really longs to take on that role? After all, no one ever wrote “Great Claudius’ of the Stage”.

I am of course being ironic, the point I’m getting to here though is that within the following year I found myself actually cast in the role. During my early preparation I came to realize, to my dismay, that I carried a certain predisposition toward the King, a
prejudice if you will, which I might not have even become aware of had I not been cast in the role. Thanks to that conversation with Mark Brotherton so many weeks before I certainly recognized the potential for complexity in the character, but I had to admit that I'd developed a certain distaste for the King, both as a character and as a role. But now, compelled to re-examine him, I came to a full realization that I might not have otherwise been privy to had I not been cast in the role: Claudius is no simple villain.

With only minimal examination it becomes clear that Hamlet is biased in his contempt and loathing for this man who married his mother and succeeded his father. Before, I'd never questioned Hamlet's animosity, but why, I now wondered, should we take the words of both Hamlet and an ethereal disembodied figure - two far from objective sources - at face value? And yet that's what I – and, I believe, most viewers - had always done: assumed the validity of Hamlet's word. This all seemed too obvious at the time though, and I discounted my previous assumptions as careless oversight, the aforementioned prejudice brought on by my own vanity and misplaced preoccupation with the Hamlet mythos. However, to my surprise I soon began to realize - first by way of experience with my cast and director, then later through deeper academic inspection - that this instinctive deference to Hamlet and condemnation of the King has far more universal prevalence. Indeed, it has become tradition that the role of Claudius be affixed with the label of villain coupled with a presumption of malice.

After examination it becomes clearer that this presumption has led to what amounts to a progressive and pervasive blight on the role throughout the majority of the play's 400 odd-year history, eventually relegating it to caricature and shallow
melodrama. As of late it’s become somewhat more commonplace to see Claudius portrayed as a capable, intelligent, even likable king, but this has only been the case for the past 50 years or so, and much of even that consideration is manifested as gimmickry: appropriation rather than genuine reevaluation. Even with a recently renewed increase in reevaluation though, ‘villain and malice’ have remained a tradition, if only subconsciously, which persists and prevails in contemporary practice. Such was the case, it would turn out, during my own performance of the role in the Fall 2006 University of Central Florida production of Hamlet, throughout which I was constantly urged towards the image of a dark, sinister interloper and ineffectual despot - an ideal which I consistently found to be in direct opposition to my own basic evaluations of a complex, capable Claudius. My ultimate conception went even further beyond this basic consideration to that of a King trapped by causality, riddled with remorse, and as equally doomed as Hamlet, who while culpable for his actions, is no more a villain than Hamlet himself. I would be reluctant to insist on such benevolence within The King as imperative; such a concept is far too dependant on a myriad of directorial decisions. However this reluctance in no way mitigates my primary contention that whether villain in concept or not, Claudius must not be portrayed as villain. Doing so undermines the primary conflict - that of Hamlet vs. Claudius - cripples the possibilities for exploration of the King as a role, hinders the potential for Hamlet’s journey, and absolves the viewer of active engagement by playing directly into expectations. A complex vision of Claudius, unfettered by the superficial label and appearance of villain, is not only closer in composition to the Elizabethan portrayal, but is a far more engaging, compelling, and
efficacious depiction in contemporary portrayal. It was this vision of Claudius that I attempted to employ, but ultimately failed to implement with my own portrayal of the King.

Within this thesis, consideration of critical analysis and editorial tradition are utilized in order to demonstrate a progressively encompassing disregard that has led to the role’s neglect. An account of the 2006 University of Central Florida Conservatory Theatre production is used to validate the necessity of avoiding a villainous portrayal of the King. A brief description of my ideal Claudius explores the realm of possibility opened by such non-villainous portrayal, and potential for the role’s complexity is examined through a thorough voice/text analysis and brief discussion of Jaques Lecoq’s movement equilibrium theory via appendices.
HISTORICAL ATTITUDES TOWARD THE KING, A GROWING PREJUDICE, AND THE GRADUAL DIVIDE BETWEEN ACTOR AND TEXT

The First Folio

No question of Shakespearean analysis is as fundamental, or it seems is taken as personally, as that of, “which Shakespearean text?” Given any particular application, there is ample justification to be mounted regarding one individual text’s superiority over another’s. Conjecture aside though, for the moment, regardless of personal preference it is certain that within performance studies reverence for the First Folio continues to gain support, and with it so does acceptance of the so called Folio Technique. Or, perhaps vice versa is the case; as reverence for Folio Technique grows, so too does appreciation of the source material. “All serious Shakespeareans refer to the first folio and some swear by it as the bible,” affirms Kristin Linklater. (204) Cecily Berry and John Barton, among other preeminent pundits of Shakespearean performance theory, subscribe to and promote comparable beliefs. So too do Patrick Tucker and Neil Freeman, the two most ardent and outspoken supporters of the technique; I should note though that Linklater, Berry, and Barton, although not vocal supporters of the Folio Technique per se, are nevertheless proponents of the principles that comprise the technique. And although it may feel like an early digression, an examination of the First Folio will help clarify some of the foundation for my assertions. Much of my perspective
on Claudius stems directly from the way I interpret and explore the text, so understanding my choice of source should provide some insight on that perspective.

I was first introduced to the Folio Technique during my second year of training at UCF by Professor Kate Ingram, who has in turn studied with those most current, and most fierce, champions of the technique, Patrick Tucker and Neil Freeman. Its origins ostensibly stem from the rehearsal practices of the Elizabethan stage, or to be more precise, a lack thereof. The scarcity of documentation from the period makes it difficult to declare with absolute certainty precisely how the Lord Chamberlain’s Company - which later became the King’s Company - and their Renaissance contemporaries - went about preparing for performances. However, there is considerable evidence that Elizabethan productions had “no rehearsal [at all] in the modern sense of the word”. (Tucker 14) Those archival materials that are available -letters and company records, as well as the plays of the period themselves, including of course Hamlet - do include frequent reference to actors “studying” or “making study of” lines. Tiffany Stern, one of the few scholars to even attempt to crack the Elizabethan Rehearsal nut, is careful to point out that one possible Oxford English Dictionary definition for “study” is, “the action of committing to memory one’s part in a play.” However she also clarifies that, “actors in the professional and non-professional theatre alike studied alone, away from their fellow players….after individual study, group preparation was a luxury, not a necessity.” (62) This indicates that Elizabethan actors did prepare in advance, but they did so on a primarily individual basis spending little time, if any, with fellow actors prior to performance. Furthermore, players were provided only with their individual portion of the
script. (This is, incidentally, the probable etymological origin of the term “part” in the form of a “scroll” or “roll”, which is likewise the probable etymological origin of the term “role”.) In practice, only the writer and a hired book-holder, or prompter, would have complete copies of the text. This procedure was most likely followed not only because copying of texts was a laborious manual process, but also out of legitimate fear that the script might be stolen; copied illegally, or reproduced from memory by some unscrupulous actor, an all too common practice. All of this meant that players had little or no prior knowledge of their full relationship to other characters or the context of their part (previous experience with a play or familiarity with adapted material being two obvious exceptions.) Time available was an additional limiting factor since rehearsals could hardly be performed at night in dark, and because raucous crowds would begin to arrive and congregate long before performances began. The luxury of an empty house during daylight was rare. Seasonal company breaks were standard practice and periods of rest up to several weeks did occur between performances within the season, both providing what might appear at first glance to be adequate time for rehearsals. However, performers frequently had to contend with a rotation of multiple plays, sometimes even dozens, with a different play performed each day six days a week. Also, it was not uncommon for nobles or even mobs of unruly groundlings to request (nay insist) that a long unperformed play be revived on short notice, or even immediately on the spot. Furthermore, these productions had no director to speak of, especially in the modern sense; even writers were not considered to have any particular artistic precedence, meaning that though occasional instruction from an author may
have been sought out, writers had very little input regarding actual production, although
Shakespeare is an obvious exception of note, one which may lead to the erroneous
perception that the practice was more common.

What Tucker and fellow defenders of the Folio Technique assert is that in order
to mitigate these circumstances, the player’s scrolls, or “cue scripts” as Tucker calls
them, were imbued with a kind of shorthand (though not a code by any means as some
allude.) This instruction set of sorts helped to equip the player beginning a new role, or
perhaps returning to an old one after a lengthy period, with all the guidance they would
need to quickly pick up a role or jump back into one. The text of the cue script itself
therefore was laced with all the direction necessary to allow maximum transfer of detail
with minimal expenditure. Particular spelling, capitalization, scan, assonance,
consonance, comparison, or contrast, for example could imply certain inflection, vocal
quality, or emphasis; particular punctuation could suggest pacing, pauses, poises, or
moments of suspended tension. All of these combined could imply an emotional state,
or provide particular point of view. The direction of stage movement via the text - both
literal and implied - including entrances, exits, and bits of business, together with these
clues provided everything the actor would need to individually prepare for their many
appointed roles.

Whether a believer of the techniques origins or not, any actor who has taken the
time to explore its application in practice would find it nigh on impossible to deny the
presence of these cues or argue that they’re simple clumsy happenstance. The
frequency and reliability with which they provide valid, relevant, even revelatory
possibilities is far too consistent and ubiquitous to be easily dismissed as mere coincidence. Admittedly, all of these virtual cues may be subjective to today’s performer, just as they would have been to the Elizabethan actor as well; live performance is, after all, not an exact science. Nevertheless, they would (and do) provide at the very least some context for performable actions and circumstances, and some semblance of status and relationship, all of which are necessary elements of communicative performance, and all of which would otherwise require at least some, if not extensive, deliberate exploration and rehearsal. (Further exploration and demonstration of this process is carried out in Appendix A)

This in turn brings us back to the namesake First Folio, and its compilation by John Heminges and Henry Condell beginning in 1621. A full script in the possession of the book-holder would have been composed of the same text as that of the scrolls, meaning that the promptbook would, by virtue of these “cues”, have comprised a full record, so to speak, of the direction and action going into a particular production. Heminges and Condell compiled the First Folio directly from just such promptbooks, and whenever possible, it’s thought, from actual scrolls leant by company players (a point which ironically later became a criticism for those touting the superiority of particular Quartos over the Folio). This then implies that, in theory, the First Folio is, by extension, a virtual facsimile not only of what was performed textually, but more importantly it offers an example of how the text was performed in actuality.

By now this may beg the question: Why is this important? Because it means that the First Folio offers us a detailed, virtually direct archive of the texts that Shakespeare’s
actors would have actually held in their hands while preparing to perform, and in turn an example of how they performed them. Knowing how they would have interpreted the cues within gets us the best approximation of actual performance available. While we may not have literal detailed records of Shakespearean performances, inspection of the Folio affords us virtual archival insight into Elizabethan interpretation of Shakespeare’s characters and - in this case - that of the King in particular, revealing the full scope and central importance that the role of Claudius afforded and necessitated. Of course, without thorough and specific direct critical commentary regarding performance we cannot be certain of precisely how the King was characterized by those who played him: despicable, likable, humorous, or even, as I suggest, just and redeemable. Again, at the very least though, analysis of the First Folio shows us that the role would have been filled with subtlety and complexity to rival even that of Hamlet. (See Appendix A for elaboration on Folio Technique.)

As remarkable and useful as they may be to us now though, these textual ties to Shakespeare, his fellow actors, and Elizabethan performance provided within the First Folio would soon be shunted by the repression of the Reformation, followed by inevitable changes in evolving scholarly and artistic forces. The theatrical practices that led to these Folio cues would soon be progressively shunned in favor of more contemporary ones, and literary use of the Folio would fall from favor. As a result, the complexity found in the Claudius of Shakespeare’s actors would begin to fade, as would the textual and theatrical relevance of the role with it.
The End of the Elizabethan Stage, and the “Improvement” of Shakespeare’s Texts

Shakespeare’s works continued to be prepared and performed in much the same Elizabethan style following his death in 1616, and would likely have continued in this same fashion following a natural process of artistic evolution had it not been for the reformation of 1642. Under the rule of Oliver Cromwell, the theatres of England were closed, or worse, as in the case of the Globe, razed, and public performance was banned on grounds of gross immorality. While illegal “underground” performances certainly continued throughout the period in spite of Protestant edict, they did so without the organization, regularity, or relative impunity as before, and faced harsh retribution, such as public flogging, or worse, if caught. Certainly Shakespeare’s plays were not performed in any official capacity during the interregnum, and there’s little evidence as to whether Hamlet was performed in its entirety at all. Even if surreptitious performances did occur, the circumstances of the period would have had roughly 18 years to affect and shape the habits of those who came out on the other side, and 18 years to separate those involved with the original productions and original cue scripts from their familiarity with the play.

Though attempts were made to re-form The King’s Men following Charles II’s restoration to the throne, the new troupe bore little resemblance to their predecessors. Naturally, Shakespeare’s tragedies, including Hamlet, continued to be revived in the new open period (in authorized theatres), but even before the end of Puritan rule Elizabethan traditions had begun to give way to trends that favored the newly popularized French styles which were later carried back to England by members of the
exiled court. As the theatre began its rapid resurrection, more and more the restoration stage migrated, for the most part deliberately, toward that of the French pattern, influenced heavily by the popularity of Moliere, which was feeding the rise of Restoration comedy. Charles II had developed his ideals of theatre while in France, as had most courtiers of the day, and as a result, it became “normal for the court to denigrate English practices [as passé] and promote French ones.” (Stern 135) Similarly, thanks to a fashion driven court, an increased number of nobles, relative amateurs to the craft, took up playwriting and romantic poetry. These entitled aristocrats were likewise preoccupied with the current vogue and furthermore had the influence to implement these fashionable trends, lending to their eventual predominance. Noble or not though, most authors of the day either followed, gave in to, or were willing to accommodate the new tastes of returning theatre patrons. A shift was inevitable.

It would be going too far to say that all performers were following these trends; even as this new continental style of plays began to take over England, the old Elizabethan production methods were being stubbornly revived on a smaller scale, in spite of the inclinations of most patrons. But the premier theatrical driving forces, both artistic and financial, were nevertheless steadily turning their backs on the pre-Commonwealth conventions, and with them the practice of individual actor study and preparation. By 1710 regular daily group rehearsals had become the norm, and solitary preparation lost its place of prominence, further obviating recognition of cue scripts and First Folio relevance with regard to Shakespearean roles.
Around the same time as this steady disappearance of traditional Elizabethan stage practices, new editing practices began to appear which would reshape the texts themselves, dissociating Shakespeare’s plays from their Renaissance roots even further. Jonathan Bate details these emerging scholarly conventions in his introduction to the recently published RSC commissioned edition of *The Complete Works*. They began with Nicholas Rowe as he became the first modern editor in 1709 with his edition of Shakespeare’s works, a compilation that was essentially the 1685 fourth folio updated to include modern spelling. This "improved" spelling would mean that a significant percentage of cues present in the First Folio would consequently be omitted, and soon, Bate notes, the Folio itself would fall out of favor:

The classical procedure was to establish which surviving manuscript was the oldest, the aim being to get as close as possible to the lost original, weeding out the errors of transcription which had been introduced by successive scribes in the centuries before the advent of print. As Shakespeare began to be treated like a classic, the same procedure was applied to his texts. The 18th century also witnessed his rise to the status of national genius, icon of pure inspiration. That image required the imagining of a single perfect original for each play. Shakespeare couldn’t be allowed second thoughts -that would imply some deficiency in his first thoughts...

So it was for about two centuries, from Capell to the successors of Greg, the quartos held sway... initially because of the classical principle that the earlier text is always to be preferred to the later one and subsequently because of a certain preference for the writer over the players: that is to say, in many cases it was proved to the satisfaction of most scholars that the quarto text was printed (directly or indirectly) from Shakespeare’s working manuscript, whereas the corresponding folio was printed(directly or indirectly) from the book-keepers copy (the so-called ’prompt-book’) and the playhouse. During these two centuries, there was something of an anti-theatrical prejudice in Shakespearian editing. (15)
Scholars weren’t alone though; from the early years of the Restoration practitioners began to take their own liberties with Shakespeare’s verse, modifying the plays “according to the whim of the adapter or the fashion of the passing hour.” (Odell 1:24) William Davenant’s company, the Duke of York’s Men, or The Duke’s of York’s Company, became the first to stage such an adaptation of Hamlet. In 1663 The Duke’s Company became one of only two theatres legally authorized to perform the works of Shakespeare, and they remain the sole patentees of Hamlet for the next decade – this patenting of Shakespeare would continue in England, with few exceptions - until Parliament declared the practice illegal in 1843. Suffering a better fate than many of Shakespeare’s plays, Davenant’s adaptation of Hamlet was primarily one of removal rather than of addition, consisting of the cutting or alteration of around 841 lines, among these, much of Claudius’ opening speech and portions of his chapel confession. As well, G.C.D. Odell, chronicler of the Shakespearean stage writes:

All the Voltimand and Cornelius matter is eliminated, as well as all of Fortinbras, until the very end of the play. The actor-scenes are greatly curtailed, as well as the scene of the mock play; Hamlet’s advice to the players is not delivered. The Reynaldo-Polonius scene is gone; Hamlet has far less conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or indeed with himself, his soliloquy “O what a rogue and peasant slave am I,” being shorn of twenty-seven lines…Altogether, this version is not a bad acting edition and differs little from subsequent stage-versions for decades to come. (1: 26)

The primary concern of theses revisions seems to be that of brevity - the preface to the 1676 print edition read “[t]his play being too long to be conveniently acted” - and of the requirement to meet stipulations written into Davenant’s patent to purge the play of
those elements that had come to be deemed as profane - “[m]ost of the cuts…have to do either with sexual explicitness or with lack of reverence in matters of religion.” (Mills 19) An effect of this would have been a much more presentable, idealized Hamlet that, intentionally or not, tended more toward burgeoning neoclassical ideals: gone were so many references to the Prince’s vacillation and self-reproach and with them went much of his complexity. True, Thomas Betterton had been instructed in his portrayal of Hamlet by Davenant, who ostensibly had learned of the role’s traditions from Joseph Taylor, who was in turn Richard Burbage’s replacement upon his death, theoretically providing a direct lineage to pre-commonwealth performance. However this lineage is only conjecture, and even if Betterton did have designs to perpetuate a legacy of the role’s traditions, he would still have been beholden to Davenant’s alteration.

All in all, Claudius fared well within Davenant’s revisions: he retains much of his humanity, is minimally reduced, and is not as demonized by omission as he later would be. But it is nevertheless a first step away from an unadulterated perspective of the play, and a step towards something that is not entirely Shakespeare. Furthermore, altering the characterization of the Prince would have an unavoidable effect on the characterization of the King as well; diminished complexity of Hamlet would affect the complexity and perception of the entire play. The seal had been broken on revisionism, and these changes would certainly not be the last.

For the next 50 years Davenant’s Hamlet dominated with little change. This is not to suggest that it remained unchanged, variations in cuts must have continued to suit each presentation, but it had come to bears so little consideration as an artistic whole
that it hardly warranted significant revision. It had become a mere stock play for the
Duke’s Men, including the period under leadership of Betterton following Davenant’s
death, and through the formation of a united company with the King’s Company, the
rival patent holder. *Hamlet* had devolved into something of a showcase for individual
performers - primarily Betterton in this regard - during a time in which we start to see,
“audiences rush to see the actor, not the play.” (Odell 1: 229)

No other revisions of considerable note are seen until Hamlet’s advice to the
Players is reinserted sometime around 1718. Ironically, this occurs at a time when the
contemporary styles were increasingly in direct conflict with Hamlet’s advice. Operatic
staging had gained in popularity, including an operatic Saxo-Grammaticus adaptation of
*Hamlet* staged by the non-patent holding Haymarket theatre. Pantomime was gaining
greater prominence, and there began a rising trend of spectacle over substance that
would eventually consume Shakespeare’s language by the 1800’s as the text yielded
even more ground to the additional time needed to change the increasingly elaborate
moving sets.

David Garrick’s appearance at Drury lane in 1747-48 marks the end of what had
become a “wearying repetition of Hamlet,” but it came at a price. (Odell 1: 337) Where
he had failed critically in other roles, Garrick excelled as Hamlet; as such the play bore
a constant presence in his repertoire. It was perhaps even Garrick’s very mastery –
similar in construction as it was in his early years to that of Betterton - that renewed
interest in *Hamlet* enough that it came to finally be deemed worthy of the same
aggressive adaptation - not mere cutting but drastic rewriting - that so many others of
Shakespeare’s works had faced. However, while his divisive 1772 revision may have been performed with the best of intentions, it’s also indicative of just how little regard for the aggregate text of Hamlet existed at the time; he may have been attempting, in his own way, to restore Hamlet to its original glory, but he did so at the expense of Shakespeare and of the play, the very thing he was trying to glorify.

Garrick’s adaptation failed to outlive him and was performed only briefly following his death in 1779. The following period of 41 years was dominated by Joseph Kemble, who made a practice, as was briefly the vogue, of publishing print versions of each performed revision; naturally, as the performer of the title role these cuts favored his character: his Hamlet was characterized by its focus on the Prince’s melancholy, and for his “commitment to gravity” punctuated by “seemingly interminable pauses.” (Mills 55) His cut of the play was, “a polished gem of dramatic intensity; much of the fine poetry is gone.” (Odell 1: 54)

I could go on, but the pattern of revisions remained the same from the Restoration on, with each subsequent generation showing less concern for Hamlet as oeuvre, compressing, cutting, and appropriating for the sake of spectacle and celebrity. Carol Jones Carlisle confirms the result of this pattern, noting that throughout the entirety of the 18th century, Claudius “was not regarded very highly” with respect to either “his position in the play [or] his worth as a dramatic role... for the part of this character was much curtailed in the usual acting editions of Hamlet.” Echoing this is her account of actor-critic Edmund Keane’s comments regarding a cast list from a 1774 production of that famous (or infamous) Garrick adaptation of Hamlet (1772-1778) in
which Keane complained that the role of The Ghost, “a part of great importance,” was given to “an actor of no fame”, while (Joseph?) Jefferson, "an excellent actor then, and second only to Garrick" was relegated to the role of the King. She further asserts, "that the implied evaluation of Claudius was typical of the time is suggested by the fact that John Genest, in Some account of the English Stage (1832), frequently omits this character from his record of the chief members of the cast, even when he includes the Ghost, Polonius, the Queen, and the first Gravedigger,” adding," when it is remembered, however, that the prayer scene was customarily omitted at this time, it is easy to understand not only why the role seemed less rewarding than we now realize it to be but why the characters seemed a pettier conception." (Carlisle 124-125) Again and again, until it became standard practice, Claudius was dismissed as a character of consequence and pared textually to bare minimum with all but his basest attributes exorcised, so as not to obfuscate the neoclassicist preeminence of Hamlet.

There were those who did give Claudius some due, exceptions as they may have been. Garrick’s overhaul for example did, after all, provide an increased emphasis on Claudius, even if the result was a character that bore only a vague resemblance to Shakespeare’s King. Still, his efforts do indicate an acknowledgement that the role had become flaccid. In fact, in an ironic instance that indicates at least a renewed recognition, if not appreciation, period satirist and Garrick supporter Henry Fielding uses Claudius in Tom Jones to mock those who disapproved of Garrick’s 'innovations'; following a performance of Hamlet the title character is asked his opinion of the best performer, and, shunning the popular choice of Garrick, he replies, “the king for my
money; he speaks all his words distinctly, half as loud again as the other. Anybody may see he is an actor.” (Mills, 31) Champions and critics alike though, found more common ground in their moral disapproval of The King. Thomas Dawes for example, who was less disparaging of Garrick’s creation in general, was nevertheless critical that Garrick had permitted Claudius a "manly death" on the grounds that it, “lessened the meanness of his character, which the author takes pains to inculcate throughout the play" (though this is clearly erroneous since in this case Garrick was more author than Shakespeare). (Carlisle, 127) So, while general opinion might have granted the King the rare occasion of depth and complexity, he was seldom permitted scruples, and a presumption of malice remained firmly affixed.

It is only in the mid 1860’s, through the familial rebellion and fresh ear of William Booth - who, in spite of his British father, was unencumbered by the long shadow of the English traditions - that we see the cycle of Shakespearean stagnancy begin to be diverted. His performances as Hamlet, though not quite revolutionary with regard to Claudius, brought a renewed vigor and appreciation for the whole of the play, as well for the Folio which he frequently, though not exclusively, utilized to inform his critically respected work. Still that he had at least an appreciation and respect for the King’s importance is clear and he says as much in his 1887 correspondence to longtime collaborator Lawrence Barrett: "the neglected King is a part not to be despised... I may be mistaken, but -with the exception of, perhaps, two scenes- I fancied that it is full of subtlety and affords scope for quiet but intense emotion: I consider it a very difficult part to portray properly." (Carlisle 125)
Finally then, at the turn of the century there is a concerted and deliberate return to original Elizabethan era considerations of Shakespeare and a genuine reevaluation of his plays by William Poel. He aggressively denigrated and rejected the long common practice of cuts for the sole purpose freeing time for set changes and, “had some hard words for certain traditional omission which, in his opinion, had given rise to false interpretations.” (Carlisle 21) Of the effect on Claudius in this regard, Rinda F. Lundstrum writes:

Poel maintains that the modern misinterpretations of Hamlet stemmed in part from misunderstanding of the importance of that complex figure, the King. Modern stage productions tended to trim the role beyond recognition and force the character into a one-dimensional melodramatic villain. Poel believed this to be a burlesque of Shakespeare’s intention. Claudius is a villain to Hamlet, but to the rest of the court he is a charming, rational, capable leader. (103)

Poel would go on to found the Elizabethan Stage Society in 1894 and with the collaboration of Harvey Granville-Barker would put his theories into practice on stage, implementing his interpretations of Claudius at least once in his 1914 production of Hamlet. Poel’s influence on Granville-Barker ensured that this interpretation would continue well into the first half of the 20th century. With what was probably boldest acknowledgement of the King to date, he proclaimed in his preface to Hamlet, “[w]e have in Claudius the makings of the central figure of a tragedy. Something of him will be found very highly developed in Macbeth.” (269) A like mind can be found just a few years later in G. Wilson Knight who details his own appreciation for Claudius’ competent complexity in his essay on Hamlet in The Wheel of Fire. These revelations would be further perpetuated within the foundation of numerous 20th century institutions and
theatres dedicated to a much more fundamental and long neglected appreciation of Shakespeare’s works: The Folger Shakespeare Library is founded in 1929 and opens in 1932; in 1953 Tyrone Guthrie helps found and becomes the artistic director of The Stratford Shakespearean Festival of Canada; The New York Shakespeare Festival is established by the Public Theater’s Joseph Pap in 1954; 1960 sees the official establishment of the John Barton led Royal Shakespeare Company, spawned on the foundation of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, but patterned after Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble; “lesser Shakespeare festivals proliferate, particularly in the United States”; and The Riverside Shakespeare Company of New York City opens in 1977, culminating their First Folio based productions in the 80’s led by the RSC’s Patrick Tucker. (Taylor 306)

Surprisingly though, it would seem that this belated re-appreciation for the role, motivated as it was, did little to change the King’s place in the collective consciousness. True, within certain elite circles the importance of Claudius had come to again be recognized, if not always honored, but those “modern misinterpretations” referred to by Poel had already become too firmly cemented in the greater public and artistic consciousness to be readily altered. Poel had informed and influenced subsequent generations, giving rise to a much greater appreciation of the Elizabethan implications on modern application, and with it came a renewed recognition of the role’s complexity. But those entrenched traditional labels - the stigma of a simplistic villainous Claudius included - would stubbornly persist, as they still do, obscured by a mushrooming of 20th century Shakespearean literary criticism, the rise of the Avant Garde, and repeated
adaptation for film and television aimed at mass consumption - a dizzying flood in which, according to Gary Taylor, “[a]ccelerated productivity and magnified exposure build instant obsolescence into every new production. Consumed today, replaced tomorrow.” (306) To most, those erroneous labels had come to be associated as Shakespeare’s own intentions, which were, and still are, considered old fashioned, and thus eminently less desirable in the face of the “new”. Upending tradition became the means, not the end. As a result, there was little widespread impetus to shake those general assumptions of what tradition actually was. Those traditions would then, ironically, endure by default.
A CASE AGAINST VILLAIN

Experience in Production – UCF 2005-06

It becomes apparent then that following years of progressive omission and commission, shifting of mores, and drifting of tastes, the dominant initial presumption of Claudius as a character had come to be that of an obvious villain; a murderer, a scourge for Hamlet to justly smite. It also appears that this perception became so entrenched that it exerts influence, consciously or not, on the manner in which he is approached in contemporary practice by practitioner and viewer alike. As previously alluded, I became aware of my own tendency to this bias as I began my preparation for the role. But, hints that such a biased view is to this day more broadly endemic came to light at the very first table reading for the 2005-06 UCF performance of Hamlet. As is familiar practice at first readings, each performer was in turn given the opportunity to contemplate their own character, and express developing perspectives of those around them (“Is Rosencrantz a friend?” “How do you feel about the Queen? Do you trust her?” “How long have you known Polonius?” etc...). We would then engage in discussion regarding the potential for relationships with and attitudes toward one another, with the result being concurrence, elaboration, or occasional contradiction and debate. And so it went, Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude, Laertes, Polonius, Horatio, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and I, Claudius, each asserting opinion, formulated viewpoint, and proclamations of affection or aversion toward one another, and as one would expect reactions to each character varied widely. There were however, without fail, two points
of consensus shared by each of my fellow actors: each of the other characters respected, loved, or appreciated Hamlet and each distrusted, despised, or were at the very least ambivalent toward The King. The point of view expressed by the actor playing Hamlet was understandable: “Obviously I don’t like him ‘cos he killed my father and married my mom.” That’s fair enough; it’s incomplete since this perspective fails to acknowledge that Hamlet doesn’t actively suspect Claudius until four scenes in, but given Hamlet’s attitude toward the marriage, it’s an easily accepted general point of view. But this was soon followed by Laertes, “I don’t think I like him very much.” Likewise for Horatio, and then Polonius as well, who declares that she - the role was cast female - holds no significant respect for the King and views her relationship with him is merely pragmatic. Even Gertrude, who asserts that she “loved and cared” deeply for the previous king, reveals with crinkled nose that she doesn’t think she “really loves” Claudius and that the marriage was one of expediency. Not a single character in the meeting vocalized any appreciation of the King. No one it seemed deemed Claudius, the ostensibly elected ruler of the realm, worthy of even minimally positive consideration. The character was already subject to summary persecution, and yet we hadn’t even begun a first read through.

I reassured myself though; these were generalizations. I’d been guilty of the same hasty judgment myself before after all, and only with the benefit of research had I come to find further potential. It was early in the process, only our second meeting, and much of the cast was young and relatively inexperienced; perhaps some hadn’t done their homework, were unprepared, or were merely shooting from the hip with the most
obvious of initial choices. Certainly after further reflection my fellow actors would, as I had, come to discover more sophisticated attitudes toward the king and would develop complex relationships as the process evolved. For the time being I would simply play devil’s advocate – no pun or admission intended - and calmly defend my character, pointing out that there was much more to the king than may immediately meet the eye, ensuring that they would come to recognize the flaws in their logic before we began in earnest. To my disbelief though, this proposal elicited chides and immediate wholesale rejection. I insisted that they at least consider, as actors if not characters, that there were a multitude of pre-action possibilities that must be considered. Perhaps, as an extreme example, King Hamlet was an oppressive tyrant and Claudius was the best thing that could happen to Denmark; that simple choice can distinctly change the perception of him. But my peers continued to refuse. The situation reached comic proportions, when the actress playing Gertrude shoved fingers in ears, crying “No! I can’t hear this!” after I innocently suggested the possibility that her character could have easily been taken for granted and neglected by her first husband, misused, or even abused. To my dismay though, to a person, no one would acknowledged my position as valid, and not even the director contradicted a literal voiced consensus of, “Just face it, you’re the bad guy.”

“You’re the bad guy.” But my perspective had, and still has, absolutely nothing to do with any aversion to being the “bad guy.” It is completely removed from any fear of portraying a villain, or some vain notion of being viewed in a poor light. To the contrary; I’d played “villains” on multiple occasions before and found that it can in fact be quite
gratifying, and even liberating; many audience members almost literally recoiled from my presence at meet and greet following performances of Neil Labute’s *Bash*, but that never lessened the catharsis that I experienced within the performance. My perspective of Claudius in this regard has never been about the *substance* of portraying Claudius as a villain, but rather the result of portraying him as villain.

The King is certainly Hamlet’s antagonist - and this is a crucial point of distinction - but he need not, and I even suggest should not, be the villain. Relegating Claudius to an obvious villain instantly undermines his conflict with Hamlet, removing any element of suspense for an audience that is in all likelihood already well versed with at least the basic synopsis and gist of Shakespeare’s most proliferate play, if not in fact thoroughly acquainted with the details. (See Equilibrium in Appendix B.)

Any actor playing Hamlet must walk a tenuous path. They portray a character that has been perceived and proclaimed through history and literature as a tragic hero and an archetype of intellectual, philosophical, and by contemporary analysis existential thought, one who reflects on the most fundamental dilemmas of personal choice and human existence. But given the wrong approach Hamlet can just as easily be perceived as weak, indecisive, smarmy, ungrateful, spoiled, petty, selfish, or spiteful. He’s a hairsbreadth away from either paragon or punk. Where the lines of delineation lie depend upon directorial determination and actor choice, but regardless of which choices are made conceptually, the span of potential within the confines of those choices relies upon Hamlet’s arc as a character. In turn, that arc is contingent upon the quality and depth of Hamlet’s conflict. If the conflict is inadequate, Hamlet will appear petty and
histrionic. If his arc is insignificant he is no longer tragic but pathetic and cautionary. In this sense the potential for Hamlet as protagonist depends as much upon the strength and complexity of Claudius as antagonist as it does upon that of the role itself; his limits are defined by those of his adversary. In my case those limits were consistently hampered and reigned in, as it became ever more obvious that any defense of my own well researched interpretations of Claudius would be an uphill battle.

I realized quickly that my notions of The King as wholly just, as morally sound as Hamlet and in no fashion a villain would find no place within the play’s creative concept when at our third rehearsal, we were provided a first glimpse of set and costume design.

![Figure 1: Inspiration for Costume of Claudius](image)
I was disheartened when it was revealed that the inspiration for my costume was the black clad, glowing red eyed, gun wielding, almost vampiresque lead character of the video game “Darkwatch”. The image was indeed striking from a design perspective, but it left little room for ambiguity regarding the designer’s inclination toward a sinister alliance. I would also later discover that in a similar design choice the majority of my presence on stage would be accompanied by deep red lighting panels on the stage’s side walls, providing an additional “red means danger” suggestion of violence. In the end the actual costume was not nearly as stark as that original implication of evil, but it was nonetheless aggressive and dark, with black breastplate, and shin guards reminiscent of H.R. Giger, that suggested aggression by their mere appearance.

![Figure 2: Costume for Claudius](image)
It became progressively apparent to me then that even from a design standpoint the King would be assumed to have a clear proclivity toward violence, if not clear villainy. In the end, stubbornly contradicting visual indications over which I had little control might have served principle, but only to the detriment to the production. I was of course disappointed to not have the opportunity to fully implement my developed approach to Claudius, and although I am to this day still baffled by how aggressively it was rejected as untenable, I do now recognize that such a nontraditional approach would have been a long shot in a production over which I had no directorial input. Recognizing that compromise is necessary in collaboration then, I tacitly accepted that Claudius would be a villain; the direction the play was taking precluded any other approach. However accepting that Claudius would be a villain in nature did not mean that I must accede to the extent that he would be depicted as such. I continued to believe that even as villain, the King’s nature should not be prematurely revealed. To do so would encumber, or worse nullify, the potential inherent to the role. Unfortunately, the unmistakable sinister bent of that dark inspirational image was, as I’d feared, the harbinger of a broader stroke.

The tone of the production was to be immediately established within the opening scene through the use of visual device. Characters representing the court were backlit at floor level in a silhouetted tableau of multiple pairs, some hand to mouth, others lending ear, leaning in, suggesting whispers, gossip, and rumor. The scene began by skipping the initial tower scene of Act I Scene 1, with Hamlet from I.2 as standing above on a higher second level, “Oh that this too, too solid flesh would melt, thaw and resolve
itself into a dew!" Throughout this soliloquy, Gertrude and I strode slowly from opposite ends of extreme downstage, as Hamlet gazed down upon us as we kissed, and, lamenting his plight and his Mother’s marriage, made his proclamations of, “Hyperion to a satyr,” and, “no more like my father than I to Hercules,” as the back lit plot rose with intensity in concert with a crescendo of unnerving audio tone, peaking and suddenly dropping to stark silence as I began the first note of The King’s I.2 speech, “Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother’s death the memory be green…” The effect was immediate, distinct, and powerful. Dramatically it had significant impact. Stylistically it was stunning and unsettling. Yet successful as it might have been at establishing mood, it also undermined Shakespeare’s sense of dramatic progression.
In the unedited text, the I.1 tower scene does establish that ominous events are afoot, but no implications of cause are proffered, and no insinuations are yet made regarding the new king and the recent marriage. In I.2 then, the audience is free to formulate their own first impressions of Claudius - whatever those are designed and destined to be - and only later, when The King is standing within the court and the tenor of his relationship with Hamlet has been established by action, are they exposed to Hamlet’s expressed opinion on matters. This progression affords the opportunity, if availed as I assert it should, to provide a balance between how circumstances are perceived by the audience versus how they are declared to be by Hamlet, presenting two potentially differing but no less valid perspectives. This encourages the audience to withhold assumptions, and in doing so suspends the audience’s presumptions and helps to ensure that they will continue to be engaged, continually formulating and modifying opinion as the story evolves and detail is progressively revealed. Though this is true for most dramatic structures, this progression is not always necessary. It is however necessary with regard to Hamlet for at least one glaring reason: familiarity. The majority of audience members will inevitably come to Hamlet with presupposed moderate to extensive knowledge regarding the play’s characters, structure, and outcome. It is Shakespeare’s most well known, most written about, and most performed tragedy, and perhaps his most produced play in general. With all likelihood viewers will have already read, watched films of, seen prior productions of, written papers, reviews, and books about, read Cliff’s or Spark Notes of, or at the very least been exposed to second hand allusions to various incarnations of the play. As such, telegraphing the
production’s intentions and cementing opinion so early in progression is dramatic death. It plays directly into audience expectation and in doing so nullifies any incentive for continued engagement, absolving the viewer of any obligation while encouraging already passive tendencies. As consumption of modern mass media through television, film, and now internet, has increased, concurrent with decreased exposure to live theatre, and in spite of a rise in so called interactive media, contemporary viewers have become more and more passive, conditioned toward a propensity to “sit back and be entertained” rather than metaphorically “sitting forward” in the active and engaged involvement required for stimulating theatre. Shakespeare’s theatre was always intended to be interactive and involving by design, with fools physically entering if not accosting the audience, and characters directly engaging spectators, breaking the fourth wall during asides and soliloquies. Playing into expectations ignores these intentions and too readily relieves audience members of any obligation to remain involved, permitting if not reinforcing a predilection to passivity. (See Equilibrium in Appendix B for elaboration on the necessity for dynamic flow.)

The opening scene as it was designed and presented in this production, committed this offense immediately with regard to Claudius, effectively poisoning the well before affording me the opportunity to speak a single line. The foreboding visuals coupled with Hamlet’s bleak despondence, now as prologue, instantly tipped the scales of audience opinion in his favor, assuring from the onset that any attempt by me, as performer, to sway audience presumptions of The King as anything but villain would be an uphill battle, possibly one of futility. I felt that my only alternative then was to
approach the situation as a challenge, still believing it an obligation to present Claudius in a fashion that would keep the audience engaged and off balance, never permitting equilibrium to settle in, never allowing the audience to sit back. The opening scene confirmed the convention of Claudius as the Villain, so my insistence then was to continue to discover an arc for him within this convention, never allowing his guilt to show until the time was right. This would facilitate progression from sincere, to suspicious, to duplicitous, to panicked, to villain, to dead. Incredibly though, this evolution of character, which I viewed instinctively as basic logical dramatic necessity and my only recourse under such an unavoidable structure, was also destined to face wholesale rejection.

Throughout the rehearsal process I was continually urged by the director toward a more and more sinister depiction of Claudius; he needed to be brusquer, less sympathetic, more arrogant, and darker they insisted. My primary objection to this was not in content, but in context; at the point that this occurred we’d not yet spent any significant time on the latter part of the play, and yet these notes were given with regard to Acts I and II, long before there is any reasonable provocation for the King to show his hand. The notion of making such a premature commitment toward a dark portrayal went against every instinct I had regarding the character, and ironically contradicted many of the tenets that I was being taught at the time. Against my own objections though, I attempted to accommodate these directorial wishes, even deciding at one point, seeing no choice but to embrace the moniker of villain, to approximate Ian McKellan’s delicious
cinematic turn at Richard III. If I must be a villain, and I must be an obvious villain, then I would revel in it by taking the King to an antithetical extreme.

Inevitably though, I found myself veering back closer toward my initial choices, not out of wavering conviction, but out of a realization that Claudius in no way, shape, or form bore any resemblance to characters like Richard III or to his ilk Iago; Claudius simply has too many shades to be associated with souls as utterly black and twisted as Richard or Iago. I was discovering that even within the framework in place around me, one which ostensibly demanded an evil Claudius, I simply couldn't find any means to justify making such glaring choices.

Though no direct declarations were ever made to the effect, a gradual realization began to creep in that the director's desire to darken Claudius seemed to have as much, or perhaps more, to do with a desire to portray him as weak, ineffectual, and abhorrent as it did with labeling him a despot. The first indications of this came to light within scene work involving the corps ensemble, actors who represented subjects of the Danish court. We'd previously participated in exercises led by the show's Co-director that were intended to help us each become acquainted with the notion of status: who we were, where our rank placed us within class structure and aristocracy, and how that status would inform our interactions. Yet in spite of this effort, I was surprised to discover that when not interacting directly with me, most courtiers were reacting to the king not with deference, but with a lack of respect approaching deliberate contempt, an act of blatant insolence for which any king worth his salt would have them removed if not exiled or executed; acts which when not commented on or corrected by the director,
even after I expressed exception, were tacitly approved.

Further implication that a contemptible, incompetent King may have been a goal, consciously or otherwise, emerged during a work-through of IV.3, which comes quickly on the heels of the play within the play, the King’s chapel confession, Hamlet’s confrontation with the Queen in her closet, and the subsequent killing of Polonius. As the scene was, Hamlet is forcibly dragged into the throne room by my order, entering on the second level above struggling to break free from his escorts. On my command, signified by a silent wave of the hand, he is released, and the dialogue continues, “Now, Hamlet, where’s Polonius?” Hamlet then begins the, “At supper” exchange, bounding up and down levels aggressively, openly mocking and provoking me throughout, even as I have banished him to England, culminating with, “Man and wife is one flesh; and so, my mother,” as he grabs me by the head and forcibly kisses me on the mouth.

The King knows at this point that Hamlet suspects him of his father’s killing. Additionally, Hamlet has just accosted the Queen and murdered the King’s chief advisor. By my analysis this was to be a pivotal scene with respect to the King’s demeanor; he has recovered from his shock and the emotion of his confession, and he now has full justification to act openly against Hamlet, able to actively nullify him as threat, both to his throne and his life, without question to his actions. He now has the opportunity to regain control. Yet throughout the development of this described scene I was continually directed to stand in place, verbally and literally banned from making any contesting movement, never countering, never approaching Hamlet, no matter how strong the impulse to react to this circus of action. I was directed to stand, flat-footed
and flustered, as Hamlet bounced his way around the throne room with impunity. It made no logical or dramatic sense to me that the King, would allow Hamlet, who whether insane or merely affecting insanity is nevertheless a demonstrated mortal threat to both Claudius and those around him, to run unfettered throughout a room filled with guards, much less permit him within striking range, close enough to accost him with a kiss. I understood the theatrics of it -theatrics which I felt to be misguided gimmickry - but to allow this scenario made the King look impotent and incompetent, powerless to act even to defend is own life. Not only did this depiction of a Claudius characterized by confusion, cowardice, and inaction feel impossibly contrived in practice, but it is also directly contradicted by the actions in his very next scene, IV.5, as he confronts Laertes.

In this scene The King deftly handles an incensed Laertes, who “in a riotous head” has already overcome several officers, and with a willing supportive mob has mustered a legitimate threat of rebellion. Yet in this instance the King stands down this immediate threat of violence and assuages Laertes’ suspicions of culpability with sensitivity and cunning, making ally of threatening executioner, all extemporaneously. Whether devious or sincere, this is no King of confounded incompetence; this is a king of clever capability.

The notion that a weak Claudius could in any manner benefit the production or serve Hamlet’s plight bewilders me. It seems evident, from even the most basic considerations of dramatic structure, that Hamlet’s journey is dictated by the quality and rigor of the obstacles that he is compelled to overcome. If Claudius is portrayed as an obvious powerless letch, as was the case, then overcoming the King physically,
mentally, or emotionally becomes an accomplishment of little significance. It similarly makes Hamlet’s hesitation to exact his revenge appear more like cowardice than quandary to the audience and only serves to make Hamlet appear weak of character, lacking fortitude. “What’s the big deal? Why hesitate. He’s clearly a loathsome, wretched murderer, just kill him already.” In such a case this act could hardly be construed as one of revenge, the damnable offense demanded by the Ghost that Hamlet so fears will condemn him, and would seem more akin to morally if not even spiritually permissible justice. Why would he waver under such circumstances? This could in theory be an obstacle to overcome, but not one that would gain an audience’s respect or sympathy.

If, on the other hand, Claudius appears to the audience as man of at least superficial worth, of even meager credibility, an apparent sound leader and likable figure, it creates the complication that Hamlet’s hesitation necessitates. This scenario places his personally driven desire for vengeance - and what is vengeance but personal – at direct odds with his proclaimed belief in universal and religious ideals of right and wrong.

Some might argue that the primary conflict is actually that of Hamlet with himself, of his inability to decide and his struggle with his own humanity and existence, in which case strong external conflict is unnecessary and Claudius is free to become a Villain, his only purpose being that of dramatic device, more Mcguffin than foil. This concept is naturally intriguing and may be reasonable from a literary, philosophical, or existential perspective, but in performance this approach becomes misguided and futile.
Internalizing the focus of the character gives rise to circumstances that are for the performer unactable. Hamlet’s internal conflict is relevant, but it is important to the actor and the character, not to the audience. An internalized reflective focus makes for objectives that are unactionable: those which cannot be actively depicted in an external manner on stage. An overtly contemplative performance is always in danger of becoming self indulgent, more about the performer than performance, subject to emotional wallowing, and will ultimately fail to engage the audience with its introspection. It is this stentorian, bombastic, ego driven approach, characterizing so many neoclassical based performances, like that of Kemble, which led to what we now often scoff at as hammy and pompous melodramatic Shakespearean cliché; gravity and emotion for the sake of it. Only by utilizing external conflict to reflect and exemplify Hamlet’s internal conflict can the audience be kept engaged and involved.

The examples provided here arose from my experiences in one particular production, and as such may be initially discounted as relevant only to instances directly related to that production, resultant of inadequate direction, misguided conception, or a lack of clarity and complexity in individual performance, perhaps even on my part. But regardless of this particular production’s qualities, or the origins of fault within it, the ideas formulated from my experience are still universally applicable. Each instance in which my choices were challenged, I was forced to reevaluate my assumptions and consider the validity of alternatives possible within given scenarios, and each time I returned to the same conclusions. The multitude of specific choices and combinations therein can never be fully addressed here, but this single direct assertion holds true: For
the benefit of audience engagement, and support of Hamlet as the central character, Claudius should not be portrayed as Villain.

My, Claudius

I must concede that there is a dangerous potential for negativity inherent to the manner in which I have approached the portrayal of Claudius. My performance experience verified in practice that which I instinctively believed in theory: what-not-to-do with Claudius. But unfortunately within artistic endeavor what-not-to-do can be unproductive and even stifling; it provides criticism without necessarily offering solutions. This problem was in fact exemplified by my actual performance; by finding myself constantly fixated on what I shouldn’t be doing – my own choices were rejected, yet the direction I was obliged to pursue proved fundamentally flawed - I failed to clearly define what I should be doing. The result was a performance mired in indecisiveness. I became so concerned with doing something wrong that I never fully committed to what was right (right and wrong are used here as abstracts, not absolutes). But even in light of that potential negativity, my failure, and my convictions (perhaps even because of them), I remain reluctant to make unequivocal assertions regarding specific details of how the King must be approached in lieu of deferring to a villainous portrayal. Directorial choices made within any given production will guide the ultimate determination as to what is or is not appropriate within individual schemes, and there will inevitably be a myriad of valid choices within those schemes. However, that should by no means suggest that I am devoid of solutions. I do in fact carry strong convictions regarding how I would liked
to have performed the role, how I personally think Claudius should be approached, and what choices I believe can garner the most productive results.

Following the realization of my prejudices toward the King I attempted to cast aside my own assumptions and prepare for the role with as clean a slate as possible. Fresh perspective became a necessity, and after much research I found welcomed refuge in Lars Kaaber’s *Staging Shakespeare’s Hamlet: A Director’s Interpreting Text Through Performance*, which in turn led me to follow Kaaber’s sources. His work provided a rare perspective that was objective but not radical; one which re-evaluates traditional approaches, but not at the expense of gimmick. These inspiring revelations galvanized my own analysis, guiding me through the formation of my own conclusions toward the role, much of which is in concert with those of Kaaber, some of which are variations, and some that are in contrast.

When Claudius enters the stage in Act I scene 2 he does so as a man who has only recently been *appointed* to the mantle of King. I emphasize appointed because as Kaaber reminds us, Denmark was an elective monarchy during the period of *Hamlet*, meaning that no ominous dealings should be inferred from this change of power, as is traditionally the case. Elizabethan audiences could possibly have viewed this situation in a somewhat different light given their exposure to 16th century English hereditary monarchy, but that possibility alone provides no valid reason to assert, as traditional critics have, that Claudius has somehow usurped the throne from Hamlet. Neither is there any indication that Shakespeare intended such an implication since he alludes to this election in Hamlet’s own words to Horatio in V.2 that Claudius, “Popt in betweene
th'election and my hopes” and again later just before his death: “But I do prophesie th'election lights On Fortinbras, he ha's my dying voice.” There is therefore every indication that Claudius has assumed the throne legally and without controversy. And though the death of a leader may carry the potential to foster uncertainty, it need not be viewed as grounds for instability. It can be assumed then, since there are no initial accounts of turmoil or civil unrest, and no indication that members of the Court or subjects of the populous have objections to this change in power, that the Denmark Claudius takes control of is healthy and stable. Scene I.2 metaphorically indoctrinates the audience as inhabitants of a stable prosperous Elsinore, guiding them back at ease after the foreboding opening of Scene I.1, and offering a positive contrast to the tumultuous deterioration that lies ahead.

Within this healthy state of affairs, there is also plentiful suggestion that Claudius is a capable, even skilled leader and tactician. In his introductory speech he manages in a space of only 39 lines to recognize the desire for mourning, encourage a focus on the future, address and ameliorate any potential anxiety over private affairs (anxiety however does necessarily equate to unrest) while also easing the political concerns of war and stability in a period of change. Critics often denounce this speech as clumsy and cite it as evidence of the new King's incompetence. Kaaber himself considers the speech to be strategic and effective, but simultaneously describes some of the usage as “tactless”, “cross-eyed”, and even “downright disastrous”. (38, 40) However, here I differ with Kaaber. Claudius’ metaphors may seem thoroughly mixed in places, but this is more indicative of Shakespeare’s penchant for complex antithesis as a rhetorical device
than it is an example of convoluted diplomacy. When handled correctly the actor can in fact use this language to demonstrate the King’s linguistic prowess, rather than allowing it to reveal deficiency. Within only a few lines he shows that he is sensitive but pragmatic, diplomatic but firm, and does so with an economy of language that Polonius could take lesson from (see appendix A. for further text exploration). Granted, mentioning the funeral of the previous King and the marriage to his widow in the same breath is brash and potentially awkward if handled poorly, but by addressing any lingering controversy in such a direct fashion it can also be viewed as bold and daring, with the potential to instantly win the respect of the masses. It’s an aggressive gamble, but by owning his scandal, so to speak, Claudius instantly confronts any doubts, and proves he has nothing to hide; that is the embodiment of tact and diplomacy.

Whether in actuality he does have something to hide is a different subject. We as the actor know that he does: the murder that he’s committed. But at this point there are two relevant reasons to disregard the knowledge of this fact. From an audience perspective, as previously addressed, suggesting through subtext at this point that he is anything other than sincere telegraphs intentions prematurely, and spoils any opportunity for viewers to realize the experience of the play as it unfolds. Furthermore, I believe in this scene Claudius is sincere. Even if only operating out of denial, he’s sincerely seeking to progress past the events that led to his fratricide (events which will be addressed shortly). He now seeks to focus on the affairs of leading a country, preserving and furthering the prosperity of the state, and keeping his advisors and subjects content. But more importantly, and more actively as the scene progresses, he’s
prepared to focus on his household and his family.

Claudius must have harbored some degree of envy towards his brother, and admits as much in the III.3 chapel scene: “those effects for which I did the Murther. My Crowne, mine owne Ambition, and my Queene.” Whatever the circumstances may be that have led Claudius to this point, he must have had some desire for his brother’s position and has now assumed that position. Having taken great risks to get there – perhaps even at the peril of his eternal soul – it makes sense that he would do everything in his power to preserve that. Later those actions do become hostile, but only much later and only after Hamlet’s provocation. At this point however he’s operating on a forthright basis, with no indications within the text that there are any ulterior motives to his exchanges with Hamlet, whose increasingly morose behavior cannot be ignored. He’s critical of Hamlet when he accuses him of “vnmanly greefe”, but he’s still congenial and respectful in the process. He tries to express empathy towards Hamlet, but without coddling, which would only be patronizing. It’s no stretch here to portray Claudius as a man who is genuinely seeking his stepson’s acceptance, whose request to “thinke of vs As of a Father” is heartfelt. Even the proclamation that Hamlet is ” immediate to our Throne,” a gesture which is often portrayed as a self served opportunity for public grandstanding, can as easily be seen an expression of respect as well as recognition that the Prince is still an important part of the royal family. His request that Hamlet stay in Denmark and not return to Wittenberg then is not an attempt to merely appease Gertrude or to “keep enemies closer” as the saying goes, but an attempt to keep his stepson close within the fold, healing the divide between them rather than allowing
Hamlet’s simmering resentment to fester in seclusion.

What we have then is the picture of an intelligent, competent, perceptive King, who even in his faults is concerned for those he rules. It’s a man who loves his wife, and desires only the best for her son, his stepson. I believe that Claudius has the best of intentions, and has no expectations that his circumstances will turn, or that he must result to authoritarian means to maintain his position, but that need not even be the case in practice.

An actor’s “secrets” and internal monologue do affect and guide the nuances of performance, but a prime advantage of this approach is that even for those dubious practitioners who are skeptical of the Kings motives and insist that he is insincere, those who view his benevolence as a façade and believe his motives are ulterior, this treatment will have the same initial result regardless of his actual designs: it elevates him to a position of esteem, providing the necessary room for dynamic. Claudius is going to fall, it’s the nature of tragedy, but there must be somewhere to fall from. Similarly there must be somewhere for Hamlet to rise to. This approach provides the opportunity for that contrast, one in which Claudius is initially received even more positively than Hamlet. Introducing Hamlet as a son mired in inconsolable grief and not instantly elevating him to hero makes it even more compelling when he confronts and transcends his shortcomings, and this scenario provides a dynamic foundation that is necessary if the play is to have room to build upon.

Establishing a positive opinion of Claudius and supplanting audience expectations of ignobility provides a point from which to gradually represent the King's
human faults even as he tries to bridge a relationship with Hamlet and maintain a kingdom. By Act II the ghost has appeared, and the audience shares in Hamlet’s knowledge, or at least reasonable suspicion of Claudius’ offense. This on its own though is still no instant condemnation since a specter condemned to limbo, one that would potentially damn its own son for the sake of vengeance, should no more be presumed benevolent than Claudius should be presumed evil. The Ghost’s word does however provide the audience with grounds for a more critical inspection of Claudius and by II.2 the King’s actions will be met with renewed scrutiny.

Even under scrutiny though, or rather in spite of it, his actions should still remain free of malevolent undertones. His initial dealings Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should not be construed as espionage of any sort, but a well meaning - if intrusive - attempt to ensure Hamlet’s well being in spite of himself. Furthermore the Kings confusion between the two - which should not be interpreted as ineptitude – coupled with Gertrude’s interjection is ample evidence that this intervention may not even be his idea, but rather simple acquiescence to his wife. By the second meeting with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern however, Hamlet’s behavior has become much more provocative and worrisome, as have reports from Polonius, further validating this course of action. Eavesdropping on Hamlet however does directly implicate Claudius in the espionage, and his words will begin to betray his benevolent intentions as he oversteps his moral grounds.

Still, it should never be implied at any point throughout these scenes that his intervention in Hamlet’s affairs ever carries any malevolence. Only after the surreptitious
observation reveals Hamlet’s deception should the King’s words and actions begin to turn to suspicion, and even then he should never suspect that Hamlet knows of his deed. Claudius must be blindsided by both the insinuation delivered by Hamlet’s players and the sudden revelation that his secret is known. The believability of his reaction to *The Mousetrap* depends upon his ignorance of Hamlet’s true goals. Only if he is completely unguarded at the moment of realization will his sudden display appear uncontrived.

What occurs next is easily the most pivotal moment with regard to the audience’s exposure to Claudius. With the exception of a brief aside in III.1, this is the only time the audience is able to observe him fully exposed, unguarded and emotionally bare as he shares his deepest fears and secrets directly with the audience. He has finally been forced to confront his own guilt for his actions and yet is unable to repent, even as he pleads to the Angels to “make assay”. However, I don’t believe that this inability to repent stems from any sort of hardened ambitious nature that prevents him from giving up the physical trappings of his sin, but from a rational acceptance of his situation. Claudius is a killer, there’s little denying that, but he doesn’t revel in his act; he uses the word murder, but this is more self-flagellation than admission, and yet he “cannot repent.”

Repentance is more than the mere desire for absolution in spite of an act, it is genuine contrition for the act: admitting the sin and sincerely wishing - with the affirmed knowledge that it was wrong - that it had never occurred. With this in mind his hesitant pursuit of forgiveness can be viewed to be more indicative of spiritual integrity than of a
stubborn blackened soul. He realizes there is no hiding from the truth of what’s been done:

In the corrupted currants of this world,
Offences gilded hand may shoue by lustice,
And oft 'tis seene, the wicked prize it selfe
Buyes out the Law; but 'tis not so aboue,
There is no shuffling, there the Action lyes
In his true Nature, and we our selues compell'd
Euen to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
To giue in euidence.

And, he’s honest enough to fear the spiritual consequences of his sin. Yet he admits that his guilt over the act is insufficient to alleviate that fear, not because he’s a hardened killer, but because he doesn’t truly regret the killing. He takes no pride in his commission but is convinced, given the same scenario, that he would have done nothing differently.

Claudius and Hamlet have much the same problem at this moment, only Hamlet has yet to actually commit his act. In this sense the King represents what Hamlet will likely become if he does in fact fulfill the Ghost’s task: a fundamentally moral man unable to reconcile a horrible act no matter how justifiable that act may seem. This moment of crux shows that these adversaries are in fact much more similar than they are different.

This moment marks a fundamental transformation within Claudius. He has crossed a threshold and, realizing that taking another life has changed him irreparably, concludes that there is no turning back. He ruefully resolves that if his stain cannot be removed- “My words flye vp, my thoughts remain below, Words without thoughts, neuer
to Heauen go" - then he has no choice but to forge ahead and preserve what he has wrought. Most immediately, this means he can clearly no longer trust Hamlet, which makes his decision to send the Prince to England rather fortuitous. While the King’s actions are no longer purely benevolent at this point, they are nevertheless now justified by Hamlet’s tacit threat which has forced his hand. Just as before though, his actions should continue to be free of malicious subtext. Nevertheless, structurally speaking, the gauntlet has been thrown, and the duel has now begun, though Hamlet’s aggression – which has likely crossed a line into genuine madness - will soon become his own undoing and will make the King’s task all the more dangerous and sympathetic.

The King’s decision to send Hamlet to England might have met with quiet suspicion and possible opposition from Gertrude, even when he was ostensibly doing so out of love. But, the murder of Polonius soon provides Claudius with ample justification for such action, as well as a convenient smokescreen for the revised motivations behind it. He can now act with relative impunity, and what might have been otherwise perceived as an overzealous attempt to nullify the competition instead becomes imperative to his own safety and that of those around him.

The report of Polonius’ murder from Gertrude brings an even greater revelation, as Claudius is shocked by the discovery that Hamlet’s intentions have already progressed much further beyond that of mere threat. Here he is, only having just steeled himself into action, whereas Hamlet is already prepared to kill and has done so. Moreover, had he again been eavesdropping at Polonius’s side again, he would likely have been killed as well: “It had bin so with vs had we beene there.”
While it could be interpreted that the King is tactfully priming Gertrude’s acquiescence to his plan to send Hamlet to England, I find it more appropriate, and at least more active, that he’s genuinely dismayed by such a rapid turn of events, since he laments:

But so much was our loue,
We would not vnderstand what was most fit,
But like the Owner of a foule disease,
To keepe it from divulging, let’s it feede
Euen on the pith of life

He does, after all, conclude the scene with the word dismay: “My soule is full of discord and dismay.” Shakespeare so adored irony, and how ironic that Hamlet, the person Claudius went to such earnest lengths to gain the trust of, whom he tried to win over as loving son, who even when displaying melancholic madness he attempted so diligently to aid, always with Hamlet’s best interest in mind, should be the one to confront him with the guilt and suppressed grief of his act and then be the one to potentially reign vengeance upon him for that act. What’s worse, Claudius knows that he will be the one who must clean up Hamlet’s mess, which will be no simple task: “We must with all our Maiesty and Skill, Both countenance, and excuse.” Hamlet’s blade may have missed its desired mark, but his actions could still very well culminate in Claudius’ undoing anyway, and the Prince’s fiasco manages a victory that his direct actions could not yet muster. Additionally, these events will have a prophetic affect upon Claudius by beginning a transformation into the very type of steely tactician that Hamlet believed him to be in the first place.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have found Hamlet, but they cannot locate the
body of Polonius and only after thorough taunting will Hamlet divulge its location to the King in IV.3. Claudius has recovered by now though and is resolute, displaying remarkable restraint in the face of Hamlet’s insolence and macabre musings on regal death, going so far as to tell Hamlet that he’s being sent to England, “for thine especial safety Which we do tender, as we deerely greeue For that which thou hast done.” This time his concern is probably disingenuous though and is intended less for Hamlet – unless as a veiled jab – than it is for the sake of those looking on. It also continues to obscure the unequivocal malice that is afoot until it is finally revealed to the audience in gripping aside:

The present death of Hamlet. Do it England,  
For like the Hecticke in my blood he rages,  
And thou must cure me: Till I know ‘tis done,  
How ere my happes, my ioyes were ne’re begun.

There can be no denying Claudius’ intentions, now. Hamlet has clearly gotten under the King’s skin to say the least, and if set up properly this moment can provide a chilling look into the fraying wits of both men. We know now that either Hamlet or Claudius must be eliminated before the other can find peace; someone must go down.

Presumably some considerable time has passed between IV.3 and IV.5, yet we find that Elsinore is still contending with Hamlet’s aftermath. The king walks in on Gertrude and Horatio as they attempt to mollify Ophelia who is now overcome with the grief of first being used and then subsequently abandoned by the two closest men in her life. Here, Lars Kaaber comments once again that, “Shakespeare gives us no reason to believe that the compassion expressed by Gertrude and Claudius is anything other than genuine.” (322) The act of opening his heart to dark thoughts need not have made him
entirely cold to the plights of those around him, not yet at least. Suddenly though, there are far more dire matters to tend to, as the rebellious mob arrives led by Laertes who believes the King is responsible, either directly or indirectly, for the death of his father.

Here we have yet another scene that flies in the face of those estimations that Gertrude’s affection for and trust in the King is false, or that Claudius is either cowardly or inept. Gertrude consistently jumps to the King’s defense both verbally and physically as she either attempts to restrain Laertes or uses herself as a shield between the two men, prompting Claudius to twice say, “Let him go Gertrude.” He stands down this mortal threat though, and is beginning to make headway with an incensed Laertes when Ophelia’s woeful reappearance further transforms her brother’s rage to anguish; anguish which Claudius seizes upon:

Laertes, I must common with your greefe,
Or you deny me right: go but apart,
Make choice of whom your wisest Friends you will,
And they shall heare and iudge ’twixt you and me;
If by direct or by Colaterall hand
They finde vs touch’d, we will our Kingdome giue,
Our Crowne, our Life, and all that we call Ours
To you in satisfaction. But if not,
Be you content to lend your patience to vs,
And we shall ioyntly labour with your soule
To giue it due content.

He thus manages to, at least temporarily, stay both the potential coup and Laertes’ blade, closing with the prophetic foreshadowing promise, “where th’offence is, let the great Axe fall.”

Scene IV.7 confirms to us that the threat has been diffused and that Laertes has been won over as ally under the banner of a common enemy:
Now must your conscience my acquittance seal,
And you must put me in your heart for Friend,
Sith you haue heard, and with a knowing eare,
That he which hath your Noble Father slaine,
Pursued my life.

Curiously though, we learn that Claudius has withheld knowledge of Hamlet’s death sentence, instead manufacturing an excuse for why he hasn’t yet acted upon the Prince, when in fact he has. This would indicate that he hasn’t yet been entirely truthful with Leartes, perhaps attempting to maintain his benevolent image – and avoid any potential wrath from Hamlet friendly masses - by pinning the pending death on England. This would further verify that Claudius has by now embraced the art of deception and adopted a much more devious modus operandi. Or, perhaps he’s simply trying to spare Laertes complicity in the plot since he says, “You shortly shall heare more.” Either approach is active, and will result in the same appearance to the audience.

Still, his exchange with Laertes becomes so amicable, so paternal, even after he is once again blindsided by Hamlet, learning by letter that he is still alive and his plan did not work, that he seems to revel in this new found relationship with Laertes. He is replacing Polonius as Laertes’ father figure, and Laertes is supplanting Hamlet as the son that never was; one almost begins to envy the King. They’re two peas in a pod as they plot Hamlet’s comeuppance, the king stoking Laertes’ thirst for vengeance. And when he says, “I lou’d your Father, and we loue our Selfe, And that I hope will teach you to imagine…” was he about to say, “imagine me as a father?” I think so, but that, we will never know for sure.

Once again though, just as things begin to go well for Claudius, the other shoe
drops, and we learn in mournful detail that Ophelia has drowned, most likely by her own hand. This news will affect Claudius just as deeply, internally and externally, as it does the others who bare witness to Gertrude’s report and lamentation. It’s perhaps the most heartbreaking moment in the play, given that Ophelia is one of the few entirely innocent victims of the play, and all those on stage will be overcome to some degree. But Claudius has little time to indulge in his sorrow since he must pursue and console Laertes, exiting with the final statement, “How much I had to doe to calme his rage? Now feare I this will giue it start againe,” confirming that his motives are at least in part opportunistic.

On the other hand, when Hamlet crashes the funeral of Ophelia, Claudius gives the command to “Pluck them asunder,” breaking up the pending violence between Laertes and Hamlet. One might expect him to let the fight continue; perhaps he could be done with Hamlet here and now. But, breaking up the fight implies that King doesn’t view Laertes as mere tool that he’s willing to sacrifice to chance. He may be manipulating him, but he’s not merely using him; he has become attached to Leartes and wants him around after all this unsavory business is all over with. Plus, he’d rather Hamlet be dispatched with a stacked deck, not in a leveled brawl that could go either way in the heat of it. That doesn’t keep him from fanning the flames a bit once they’re parted though: “Oh he is mad Laertes.” The King removes Gertrude from the scene with a contemptuous command for her to ,” set some watch ouer your Sonne” - with your making it abundantly clear, if it weren’t yet, that Hamlet is no longer any son of his – suggesting that Claudius and Laertes are now closer than even the King and his wife.
He finally calms his champion, directing him to stick to the plan, seducing him with thoughts of vengeance fulfilled, and a calm after the storm: “This Graue shall haue a liuing Monument: An houre of quiet shortly shall we see;”

In the final scene of IV.2 Claudius returns to his persona of I.2, a congenial, smiling (but not glib), and gracious King. But we know that this has become a façade. He is changed, and his mask is now but a means to an end. Much as he hopes there might be, as he did following the killing of his brother, no matter the outcome of events there will be no “houre of quiet.” He is jaded and can never return to who he was before.

There is ceremony, and Claudius sets the tone for a competition that by all appearances is founded in goodwill, sport to overcome quarrel and discord. But he is of course only setting the stage for the plot. He is forthright, he is gracious, and he is false. After the first hit, Claudius drinks from the cup to allay suspicion before dropping the poison pearl in plain sight, only to have it intercepted by Gertrude.

What happens next is dictated by directorial choice: either Gertrude is oblivious to events and her possession of the poisoned cup is a pure twist of fate, or she knows, or at least suspects, that the drink is poisoned. If it is the latter, which I believe to be the case, then she is attempting to save Hamlet with her sacrifice and her exchange with Claudius:

*King.* Gertrude, do not drinke.

*Qu.* I will my Lord;

pray you pardon me.
becomes a statement to him that she is no longer willing to be party to this bloody game. Whichever the case, Claudius has the opportunity to stop her. He could say something, do something, he could end it. But he remains quiet, and only reminds us, "It is the poyson’d Cup, it is too late."

And it is too late. He has allowed his quest to see Hamlet dead overcome all else, all sense, and he realizes all too late that there can be no good outcome:

Laer. My Lord, Ile hit him now.

King. I do not thinke't.

After the next neutral pass Laertes dams hiding the plot behind sportsmanship and blatantly cuts Hamlet with the poisoned blade. In the ensuing scrum, Claudius, realizing that the objective has been accomplished, makes one last desperate shot at salvaging events by trying to save Laertes, “Part them, they are incens'd,” but he is again too late. The combatants have exchanged Rapiers in the scrum, and Hamlet returns the favor to Laertes. This final turn demoralizes The King; Laertes is now doomed, and he feels the guilt of responsibility for the death of someone he’d come to care for as a son, guilt that he’d been unable to feel before towards his brother for the murder that he committed first hand. The clearly shaken King then, in contrast to his former verbal prowess, can make only a feeble attempt to excuse Gertrude’s onset of illness: “She sounds to see them bleede.” And, given that he makes no attempt to deny the charge, he seems to not
even blame Laertes’ betrayal when he announces, "the King, the King's too blame."
Claudius can do nothing but share one last rueful smile with Hamlet, knowing that in the end he won, that he defeated his opponent even though he sacrificed all in the process, before Hamlet finally runs him with the poison blade. Despite his pleas, no one comes to the King’s aid as Hamlet forces Claudius to drink of his own poisoned cup.

I could assert that this approach was what Shakespeare had always intended, and could very likely mount a convincing defense to that effect, but that would be tantamount to the same textual appropriation of which I'm opposed. It would also be untrue, since I'm certain I can never know exactly what Shakespeare did want. Instead I assert that the resulting audience response is an accurate parallel approximation of what Shakespeare intended, resulting in very much the same complex outcome as Elizabethan performance would. This is not to say that the end justifies the means, but contemporary responses are invariably jaded by our experiences, as are contemporary actors. Contemporary approaches must therefore be altered to some degree to solicit the same desired effect.
CONCLUSIONS

When I first began this pursuit I initially attempted, for a brief period, to argue the superiority of a wholly redeemable Claudius, whose reasons for killing the elder Hamlet are so mitigating that his act can hardly be construed as murder. I gradually came to the realization that this approach is indefensible in any manner that even begins to approach absolute. It’s valid choice, but it’s just that, a choice, as is that of villain. Even many of those who I have cited here as stern advocates for the King - Poel, Granville-Barker, Knight, Kaaber – still refer to him, albeit grudgingly in some cases, as villain. In this sense, perhaps the title I’ve chosen seems misleading. However, this is still a case against Villain, not because I believe he cannot be villain, but because “villain” as a label is too heavily loaded. It has too powerful a context in contemporary practice to do the character justice; it’s conceptually two dimensional. Perhaps that sounds as if this whole business might be better solved with a much simpler linguistic argument: Claudius is the *antagonist*, not the villain, and strictly speaking there need not even be any villain at all for that matter. But, to mount such an argument alone would belie the heart of the problem: he is *assumed* to be “the villain”, and the *image* that this label conjures is as firmly entrenched as the label itself. It is precisely because he is *expected* to be villain that he cannot be portrayed as such in performance; assuming the label of villain denies the contextual complexity that makes the character whole. This is why Claudius should not be *villain* at least not in so many words, and certainly not in so many images.
Even so, as one of my committee members reminded me, the idea of a complex Claudius is not a new one. This is certainly true, and even if I have managed to structure my justification differently, I’m not the first to say as much. In fact, I’ve shown here that no matter how far from the original Elizabethan portrayal the play strayed in over 400 years - and with it the role of the King - someone was bound to pop up eventually that would guide it all back into place. Paradoxically though, for each individual who would pronounce that the idea is not new, I could easily find one, or more, who claim the notion is foreign. Or worse, one who would casually claim to acknowledge the concept exists, only to then fail to implement its application. Still it’s clear, as obvious as some might believe this concept of complexity to be within contemporary theory; it was drastically lost along the way. Even given the limited reintroduction of the concept around the turn of the 20th century and its expanded exploration in the closing decades, I am now convinced more than ever that blinders to its relevance continue to resist collective removal: this was anecdotally evident from that first 2006 UCF production table discussion, just as it’s anecdotally evident from repeated discussions that I have to this day; it was tangibly evident within the 2006 UCF production, just as it continues to be repeatedly evident in new contemporary productions; and it is empirically evident within contemporary criticism that even preeminently regarded critics, such as Harold Bloom who insists, “[i]f Shakespeare really intended the shuffling Claudius as Hamlet’s ‘mighty opposite,’ then he blundered,” still cling so vehemently to that image of artless villain as to virtually obviate the character’s necessity. (61) But no matter the angle of attack, or perspective from which I
approach the role, no matter the critical contradiction, my determinations invariably return to the same conclusion, and it is in concert with that of Knight:

“If in our attempt to see with Hamlet’s eyes, we are prepared to regard Claudius as the blackest of criminals… - there is no other way - we only blur our vision of [the King] and consequently our understanding of [Hamlet].” (43)

By refusing to give fullest consideration to Claudius, we diminish our fullest perspective of Hamlet.

With regards to the fact that much of my insistence upon interpretation relies upon use of the full Folia text: I will freely admit that the prologue to Davenant’s 1676 and 1695 quartos is probably spot-on, Hamlet is very likely “too long to be conveniently acted.” Unless supremely executed, as virtually never before, modern audiences would likely take to a Hamlet produced in its entirety as they would to Elizabethan dentistry. It is true then that cuts in text are almost inevitable in contemporary production, and it is those very cuts that so often skew the practitioner’s perception. But in reality textual cuts need not effect faithful execution. Even within extensive textual editing, conscientious representation of Shakespeare’s greatest tragedy is still eminently possible, if such cuts are performed judiciously with adequate consideration given to the play as gestalt. However, textual revision should never open the door for directorial justification via editing. By my estimation, utilizing such an approach begins to connote a degree of inherent unfaithfulness to the text that feels somehow dishonest. Choices based on cutting, cutting based on choices, becomes self defining cyclical logic, rationally fallacious; in the words of Lear, “that way madness lies.” That is not to say that I would reject the notion of adaptation as such; it is the very complexity of Hamlet and
the adaptability of its multitudinous themes is probably what has sustained interest in
the play. But, the cherry picking of those themes has become all too common, and
adaptation is just that, adaptation, not a genuine representation of Shakespeare’s work.
This may sound like a fine distinction, but I believe that it is incumbent upon the
practitioner to realize and acknowledge this differentiation in order to ensure that
adaptation and experimentation is viewed and interpreted within proper context. Doing
so helps to keep us out of what is otherwise a mire of misunderstanding and conjecture,
and avoids misleading a public that has too long been inundated with interpretations
that are too often convoluted and contradictory.
This perspective has continually led me throughout the course of this thesis to a
recurring theme of reevaluation; any interpretation of Claudius can be faithful and valid,
as long as it is based on wholistic evaluation of the full text, not filtered assumption,
traditional presumption, or fragmentary justification. While we cannot be certain of just
what Shakespeare’s actor’s were doing with the role, what we can be certain of today is
that it was most definitely complex. What we can also be certain of is that
Shakespeare’s Claudius does not need, and never has needed, our improvement. To
believe that his work is somehow inferior to what we know today, in either substance or
technique would be shortsighted, presumptuous, and supremely arrogant. We simply
view it from a different perspective and use it within a different context, but we are still
human, even if our perception is drastically altered from that of our Elizabethan
counterparts. I cannot, then, say who and what Claudius must be in order to make it
something better, because it can never be made to be more than what Shakespeare
intended, whatever we may each determine that to be. I can only say from my experience and evaluation what it must not be, knowing how easily it can be made into something unfulfilled.
APPENDIX A: VOICE - TEXT ANALYSIS
A thorough analysis and exploration of the text is paramount to the foundations of Shakespearean performance. This does not refer simply to a figurative 'translation' of the literal meaning of the text, a task which is in itself enough to frighten the uninitiated actor, but also -and perhaps more importantly- to the broader comprehension of Shakespeare’s heightened verse. To most modern actors -including myself prior to training- heightened verse is seen as something alien to modern text. We have become so accustomed to the natural style of acting so ubiquitous throughout film and television, even on the majority of contemporary stage, and to thinking that verse is somehow antithetical to this style, that we tend to approach verse as an obstacle to be overcome when in fact just the opposite it the case. Shakespeare’s blank verse is in reality a rich guide for the actor; a trove of hints and clues “about…how to act a given scene”. (Barton 27) Once the intricacies of Shakespearean verse are more clearly understood, it becomes evident that the verse itself can lead us to an Elizabethan inspired performance that bears every resemblance to contemporary styles.

What follows is an attempted explanation and example of the major processes employed in preparation for my performance as Claudius. I say attempted, because the exploration of text is something that can not be fully quantified on paper. It should never be forgotten that Shakespeare’s words were intended not to be merely read but to be performed, spoken aloud and heard. First though, I feel obligated to note that this analysis is wholly indebted to the works of John Barton, Cicely Berry, Kristin Linklater, Patrick Tucker, and indirectly to the writings and techniques of Arthur Lessac and Edith
 Skinner. By extension I am equally indebted to Professors Kate Ingram and Mark Brotherton who brought these theories to life for me through my training.

To demonstrate these techniques, I've chosen the beginning of Act I scene 2, the first appearance of the King. This is considered to be a somewhat public scene, as are most of the King's, and contrasts with Shakespeare's more private soliloquies and asides. It should, however, still be adequate for analysis. I feel I should mention this contrast though because categorizing scenes involving the King by varying degrees of public and private address was a helpful tactic for determining the King's sincerity, or lack of, and his demeanor towards those around him. This is indeed true of most Shakespearean characters, particularly those that have something to hide, whether it's a plot, past deeds, or unexpressed emotions - love, disdain - towards others.

Regardless of motives, characters will behave differently - as do we - before a crowd than they would in solitary with God and audience as sole witness. Not only does this provide a logical process of analysis, but more intuitively the actor can also feel within the context of actual performance and interaction whether their character is behaving in a manner appropriate to a given private/public audience and make choices accordingly. Such classification however - though it is a useful tool and had significant application in throughout my particular experience - should not have an impact on the demonstration of these techniques.

Foremost for me in practice is careful reading and scrutiny of the First Folio text, even if the chosen production text is not taken directly from the First Folio, which it should be noted was the case with my performance of Claudius. Obvious exceptions to
using the First Folio text as a primary source are those that are not in fact among in the First Folio works in any form. Whenever available though, I believe Folio sources should always be consulted. Also, before beginning I should make it clear that although within this paper I do employ theories of the so called “First Folio Technique” to form a logical bridge to Elizabethan performance, when it comes to utilizing the First Folio as a tool and guide I, with all sincerity, could not care less regarding the actual academic validity of those theories. Scholars can debate its merits ad nauseam (and will), but the fact remains that I have used it and, as put best by Patrick Tucker, “it has always worked for me.” (229) Tucker forms a detailed and convincing argument for validity of First Folio theories, but within practice this argument is literally academic. To those who dismiss the techniques as misguided, don’t use them. It’s your performance, do as you see fit. But personally, and for a growing number of others as well, these techniques have helped to open a wealth of possibility in a textual forest of complexity.

Tucker provides a handy checklist of overall techniques in his Secrets of Acting Shakespeare, but here I will focus on the tangible textual aspects of capitalization, and spelling, as well as qualitative aspects of the scan.

Here are the first 16 lines spoken by The King from the Folio text, Act I scene 1. The line numbering is mine, assigned for ease of illustration:

1 Though yet of Hamlet our deere Brother’s death
2 The memory be greene: and that it us befitted
3 To beare our hearts in greefe, and our whole Kingdome
4 To be contracted in one brow of woe: 
5 Yet so farre hath Discretion fought with Nature, 
6 That we with wisest sorrow thinke on him, 
7 Together with remembrance of our selues .
Therefore our sometimes Sister, now our Queene,
Th’ imperiall Ioyntresse of this warlike State,
Have we, as ‘twere, with a defeated joy,
With one Auspicious, and one Dropping eye,
In equall Scale weighing Delight and Dole
Taken to Wife; nor have we heerein barr’d
Your better Wisedomes, which haue freely gone
With this affaire along, for all our Thankes.

Let’s take a look at the first line using the standard scansion of blank verse, an iambic pentameter.

- / - / - / - / - / -
1 Though yet of Hamlet our deere Brother’s death

It simply feels and sounds awkward when spoken, not at all a good first impression for a King to make. Here’s an alternative scan of the same line.

/ / - / - - / - - /
1 Though yet of Hamlet our deere Brother’s death

This has a much stronger and more natural feel. The added stresses help make a solid opening statement. In this configuration the line much more actively commands the attention that one would expect the speech of a King to warrant. This happens to be the scan that I utilized in my performance of Claudius, chosen for several reasons: I felt the first word out of the King’s mouth deserved an attention getting stress; That same first word happens to be a long vowel and long vowels beg to be stressed as does the ‘R’ sound of deere (the spelling of deere is a hint as well, but that well be addressed later); Lastly because it felt right to me. This brings up an important item: iambic pentameter is the norm in Shakespeare’s verse, the foundation by which all of his non prose is constructed. However, John Barton points out that, “blank verse as such is neutral.
Shakespeare gets his dramatic effects by the way he rings the changes on it…Added stress is provided when the norm is broken.” (31) With that in mind let’s add the next three lines to the first:

1 Though yet of Hamlet our deere Brother’s death
2 The memory be greene: and that it us befitted
3 To beare our hearts in greefe, and our whole Kingdome
4 To be contracted in one brow of woe:

If you try, you’ll find it’s impossible to apply a standard scan to lines two and three in performance. You can attempt the standard stress, but, again, it’s awkward. Even with “memory” elided in line two there are simply too many syllables. Further elision of “and that”, “it us”, and “and our” into single unstressed beats helps as well, but for sake of pronunciation one must at least leave the final syllables of “befitted” and “Kingdome” unstressed. This creates feminine endings in these two lines.

These feminine endings can have different effects, but in this instance, I think it has the particular effect of saying, “there’s more to this thought… I have a point to make, but it requires some explanation,” which is precisely what Claudius is doing. This is presumably the first public appearance he’s made since wedding Gertrude, perhaps even the first since his coronation, and he’s burdened with the delicate task of publicly addressing recent events, and in doing so he’s taking great pains here to qualify each statement he makes. Cecily Berry suggests that the feminine ending can, “often give a quality of working through the thought, sometimes giving it a haunted and unfinished
sound as though leaving the thought in the air.” (62) This too fits the situation well. I also find this “haunted” explanation to be an appropriate one given the impending literal haunting that will soon occur, and also given that he’s addressing the death of such a prominent figure who just so happened to be his brother; one would rightfully expect him to be somewhat somber under such circumstances. Additionally these feminine endings, which also occur in lines five and twelve, and their effect of “working through the thought” lend an air of sincerity to Claudius, whether genuine or not, as he deals with highly sensitive matter. I took this last aspect to heart in my own characterization.

Line four signals a rounding out of this hanging thought with a normally scanned line and a standard stressed final syllable. The unusual punctuation of the colon however could be an indication that there is more to it. And indeed there is, because next, he counters the remembrance of the late King Hamlet with an antithetical statement that, for the greater good, he and the rest of the kingdom must cast thoughts to the future rather than to the past. Added here are the next three lines:

1 Though yet of Hamlet our deere Brother’s death
2 The memory be greene: and that it us befitted
3 To beare our hearts in greefe, and our whole Kingdome
4 To be contracted in one brow of woe:
5 Yet so farre hath Discretion fought with Nature,
6 That we with wisest sorrow thinke on him,
7 Together with remembrance of our selues.
You can see how lines five, six, and seven together contrast the previous collected thought. This provides an example of Shakespeare’s use of antithesis, a point counterpoint of ideas. As a rhetorical device antithesis provides logical and dramatic weight to an argument, while simultaneously helping clarify the finer points for the audience. Rare is the case that a Shakespearean character, or even Shakespeare himself in his sonnets and poems, attempts to make a point without antithesis. Shakespeare employs antithesis on a word to word basis as well with even greater frequency. Examples of this can be found in lines ten, eleven, twelve, and thirteen. In line ten:

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/ / - / - - / - /
10 Have we, as ‘twere, with a defeated joy,
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Defeated and joy are antithetical.

Eleven:

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- / - / - - / - /
11 With one Auspicious, and one Dropping eye,
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The ideas of Auspicious and Dropping eyes are conceptually more complex, but the antithesis is still clear once the metaphor is decoded as further representations of happy and sorrowful occasions. Next, line twelve:

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- - / - / - - / - / -
12 With mirth in Funerall, and with Dirge in Marriage.
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This line has a sort of four way antitheses, with mirth to Funerall, Dirge to marriage, mirth to dirge, and Funerall to Marriage, all in one line. Instances of multiple antitheses occur with regularity throughout the canon. I should also note that “Funerall” is elided to only two syllables to help maintain the meter. Finally line thirteen…

- / - / / - - / / /  
13 In equall Scale weighing Delight and Dole

…has the obvious antithesis of Delight and Dole. In this instance I stressed the “and” in order to illustrate that both, though antithetical, were being taken into account.

This passage is wound up in the final three lines with Claudius officially announcing Gertrude as wife, and then instantly reassuring those he’s adressing that the interests and opinions of the court (or public as it were, depending upon directorial choice of scale) have been taken into consideration. He adds a final formal thank you for what must be assumed is an agreeable public support of this union.

So we can now see how these sixteen lines can be broken into two sections of rising, dropping, and landing energy, each individually encapsulated, related to the other, and tagged with a concluding thought. This rising and subsiding structure is another pervasive rhetorical device. Cecily Berry discusses these structures in terms of energy through the verse:

There is an energy which runs through the text…which impels one word to the next, one line to the next, and one scene to the next. I would say that there is really not a full-stop until the end of the play; only places where the thought and the action pause and change direction. (82)
When approached in this fashion it’s much easier to follow one step of energy to the next to form, “common ladders of thought”. Linklater similarly refers to this structure as “The Ladder” and points out how each statement, image, or feeling, “is capped by one that outdoes the first” until it reaches, “the top climactic rung of the ladder,” adding that “very often a final statement jumps back down to the ground again,” which just happens to be the case in this opening passage of Claudius’. (95)

The ability to recognize these ladders is invaluable, not only because this approach makes it easier to follow the logical progression of a character’s point of view or argument, but because the ladders illuminate those dynamic moments that are so crucial to nuanced performance. Actors are so often told, if not tacitly expected, to consider motivation in a scene. What do you want? Who do you want it from? How are you going to get it? Etc…The manifestations of these considerations can be summed up in more simple sense as tactics, and it’s the shifting of these tactics that make up much of the dynamics of good performances. With Shakespearean verse the opportunities for these shifting tactics are laid out before us in these “ladders” which are built into the verse. That is to say, most of the work of finding tactics is already done for us.

So, here’s the passage again, showing the scansion that I eventually used. I’ve also used indentation to help indicate what I interpret to be the lines of rising and falling energy. Highlighted text will be addressed momentarily.

1 Though yet of Hamlet our deere Brot
   / - / - / - / / - / - / -
2 The memory be greene: and that it us befitted
   - / - / - / - / - / / -
To bear our hearts in greefe, and our whole Kingdome

To be contracted in one brow of woe:

Yet so farre hath Discretion fought with Nature,

That we with wisest sorrow thinke on him,

Together with remembrance of our selues.

Therefore our sometimes Sister, now our Queene,

Th' imperiall loyntresse of this warlike State,

Have we, as were, with a defeated joy,

With one Auspicious, and one Dropping eye,

With mirth in Funerall, and with Dirge in Marriage.

In equall Scale weighing Delight and Dole

Taken to Wife; nor have we heerein barr'd

Your better Wisedomes, which haue freely gone

With this affaire along, for all our Thankes.

There are more elaborate methods available for ladder notation within text -
Kristin Linklater offers one similar to that above incorporating font sizes as well, and
Cecily Berry uses one of her own - but I think this gets the point across without
belaboring it. As mentioned, certain words have additionally been highlighted in bold
type. These are words that in the First Folio are either capitalized, printed with a non-
standard spelling, or both. It has been argued that the varied spellings of the same
words are mere errors attributed to a careless compositor or type fitter, or even a case
of simple substitution when a type fitter ran out of certain letters, and as a result it's
become practice for editors to attempt standardized spellings. Another school of thought is that spellings are a reflection of the way Elizabethans either spoke or spelled, and, since we no longer speak or write that way, modern editions should, again, be standardized in a manner more easily understood by modern speakers and readers. Although legitimate errors do exist within Folio printings, Patrick Tucker once again provides the best proof that these arguments are, in most cases, misguided, as does Jonathan Bate in his introduction to the recent RSC edition of the complete works. Elaboration on such proof isn’t even necessary though when the benefits of examining original formats can be shown.

With the exception of line beginnings, each and every word that carries either a capitalization or spelling variation also carries a stress. Additionally, most carry an antithesis to another word or words in the same line or adjacent lines. Some capitalizations can be dismissed as honorary or convention: Hamlet, Kindome, Queene, even Brother’s and Sister since these are in reference to the Queen and the late King. However, Discretion, Nature, Auspicious, Dropping, Funerall, Marriage, etc…, these cannot be so easily dismissed. It cannot be mere coincidence that these capitalizations so conveniently and consistently mark points of dramatic stress. And, although I’ve taken one path of logic to demonstrate the value of observing capitalization - discussing stress, dramatic flow, and rhetoric then pointing out capitalized words - I often find that it’s useful and just as effective to do the opposite, let the capitalization guide exploration of the dramatic flow.
Notice for a moment how highlighted incidences of varied spellings also happen to coincide with breaks from the standard meter: deere, greene, beare, greefe, farre, thinke, and equall all carry a stress, just as the capitalized words do. This then should indicate that the implications of nonstandard spelling are directly related to those of capitalization and stress.

One last analytical topic that should be revisited is that of meaning, both literal and connotative. It’s frustrating to see poor Shakespearean interpretation come from good actors for the simple reason that they don’t actually know what they’re saying. It becomes subtly if not subconsciously, sometimes even glaringly obvious when, even if the for only a moment - one word or one line - an actor looses meaning. Energy drops out of the voice into either a flat drone, or an aimless sing-song. Or, even if they’re adept enough to maintain a façade, something feels out of place; the audience becomes detached, even if they don’t comprehend quite why. If the actor doesn’t understand what they’re saying, then the audience certainly never will. Even if the audience doesn’t grasp the actual meaning they can still understand and follow the text if the actor has done their homework.

Literal meaning of unrecognized words can be daunting enough; Shakespeare’s vocabulary was voluminous, perhaps 25-30,000 words, some of which he coined himself, so we with our modern vocabulary of around half that are bound to encounter uncommon, if not long abandoned, verbiage. But even if we recognize a word it may have non standard, poetic, or archaic usages that we don’t recognize. Lexicons, glossaries, unabridged dictionaries, pronunciation guides, and annotated volumes -
although annotation should be used with caution since they are subjective interpretations - are indispensible for those times when a word, phrase, or context eludes. Personally, I’m not too proud to even resort to the “No Fear Shakespeare” series if it brings clarity to an elusive passage, and did as much in my experience as Claudius.

It would be possible for an actor to perform the previous text reproducing all of the cues, stresses, and ladders of rising and falling energy, while noting punctuation, spelling, and capitalization as annotated to perform the passage conveying clear meaning without really even having to think or act, but simply follow. It would be possible and perhaps even passable, but doubtfully what one would consider good. That is to say, I do not treat these clues and hints as a plot to then be followed blindly as a programmed robot. Although ladders and stresses are written into the verse, and capitalizations and spellings are in theory representative of the way scenes were actually performed by one or more of Shakespeare’s actors, this analysis is not intended to say, “this is how it must be performed.” In the end the analysis is only a tool to help illuminate the text, clarifying possibilities so it can then be explored, and made into something personally driven. Wrought reproduction would come across as affected and choreographed: lifeless; rehearsed. None of this analysis is intended to serve as a substitute for actual acting. Rather, it is a tool to help arm the performer with a foundation, with possibilities that will help provide clarity to rehearsal and exploration, ultimately becoming a subconscious component of the text, not an obtrusive one. An actor trying to remember what comma is where and which word is capitalized can never
be “in the moment,” passively emoting and actively listening. Just as a musician can play the exact same musical score multiple times but with differing variations in the heat of each individual performance, so too can the actor perform variations of their own textual score. Although I can say with certainty that these techniques guided me in the formation of solid opinions regarding my own score of the text, and those choices were greatly reflected by my execution, they were only a guide. My actual performance was flexible, fluid, and, I would hope, alive.
APPENDIX B: EQUILIBRIUM - DISEQUILIBRIUM
In practice, movement is irrevocably intertwined with voice. Neither is independent, nor is one necessarily more important than the other. Voice is dependant upon breath, breath is linked to movement, movement guides voice, and vice versa. It's natural then that I would take several concepts of movement practice into consideration within my performance. Status, attraction-repulsion, focus, eclosion, and effort-shape analysis, to name a few, were all employed in some degree. For my purposes here however, I find it difficult if not impossible to employ movement considerations in the justification for avoiding an outwardly villainous Claudius. Perhaps this is because when dealing with Shakespeare I inherently began with the text, which is the most empirical element of the play and therefore the most immediate, direct, and least subjective link to Shakespeare’s dramatic intent, and, for me at least, text is linked most immediately to voice. With Shakespeare I therefore tend to begin with voice and allow movement to follow. Call it a limitation, but at this stage in my development I simply don’t posses a degree of synesthesia that permits me a greater interpretational reliance upon movement when dealing with Shakespearean text. There is however one movement theory that is, to say the least, of exceptional note in this regard: Jacques Leqoc’s concept of equilibrium. It became an almost subconscious consideration for me from the very beginning of my approach to both Claudius and Hamlet at large. More importantly, it has become even more useful to me as an all-encompassing dramatic guide than as a physical technique.

Equilibrium and its equally important converse disequilibrium can be found within Jacques LeCoq’s Laws of Motion:
1. There is no action without reaction.

2. Motion is continuous, it never stops.

3. Motion always originates in a state of disequilibrium tending towards equilibrium.

4. Equilibrium is itself in motion.

5. There is no motion without a fixed point.

6. Motion highlights the fixed point.

7. The fixed point, too, is in motion.

Although these laws are not empirical like the scientific counterparts by which they were certainly inspired - Newton’s Laws of Motion, Galileo’s Principles of Relativity and by extension Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity - the physical application of them is, as Lecoq insists:

“Very concrete on the stage…They are particularly valuable in production, involving the whole art of knowing how to situate oneself in relation to a fixed point, in a given situation, defined by a relationship with another person. If everyone on stage moves simultaneously, the sense of movement disappears for want of a fixed point, becoming incomprehensible and impossible to make sense of. Actors have to be able to place themselves with reference to others, in a clear relationship of listening and response.” (89, 90)

At first glance this seems to suggest a usage applicable only to directorial overview, placement and blocking beyond the scope of the individual. But its application is relevant within relative scales as well, or more specifically as a means for the individual actor to maintain dynamic physical relationships within set blocking, and as a guide for the actor to maintain relationship relative to their own vocal and emotional shifts.
Lecoq provides simplified examples of usage of equilibrium in the form of oppositions, alternations, and compensations: to stand we must oppose gravity, laughter alternates with tears, carrying weight on one side causes compensation on the other. This of course isn’t as simple as haphazardly opposing, alternating, or compensating for the sake of it, but rather taking an action to a logical extreme and appropriately changing or shifting to a negation of or a compliment to that action (this should become clearer shortly). I personally find that this application of equilibrium complements the notion of energy that is carried within, through, and throughout the text, as is discussed in Appendix A. In this sense it is a physical accompaniment to vocal and textual shifts in emotions and tactics, or equally vice versa, vocal accompaniment to physical shifts. But Lecoq points out that there are further, non-physical applications for his theories:

Paradoxically, this work on movement, evidently so applicable to performance and production, should be even more useful to the writer. Whatever the themes dealt with, the ideas expressed, the stories or the styles employed, it is essential for playwriting to be structured from a dynamic point of view. In particular, it must have a clear beginning middle and an end, for any movement which fails to end has no true beginning.

It is this broader use of equilibrium that has become most relevant to my purposes, though not as the writer as Lecoq suggests, but rather as the practitioner in turn interpreting the dramatic structure and dynamics of the writer’s work. This interpretational use of equilibrium is at the core of my performance analysis of Claudius as a character.
Before demonstrating the application of equilibrium though, some conceptual clarification should probably be explored. The easiest way to do that is I think through the simple analogy of a roller coaster, much as it was conveyed to me by UCF movement professor Christopher Neiss.

The appeal of a thrill ride lies in its dynamics; speed, acceleration, climbs, drops, sudden turns, twists, and loops. There is anticipation as the coaster crawls to the peak of the initial drop - the riders know that something is about to happen, but they can’t see exactly what is past the crest of the monstrous hill. Suppose though the cars never reach their crest, they simply continue to climb. At some point the anticipation will cease. Even though the cars are in motion the ride has reached a point of equilibrium. Suppose now disequilibrium occurs. The ride does reach the pinnacle of the hill as expected, and creeps over the crest into an accelerating, steep angled dive. This acceleration would exhilarate, even terrify, but if the coaster continued to simply dive the thrill would at some point wane as the constant dive reached another state of equilibrium. Instead though, the ride again introduces disequilibrium again, as it enters a turn, a loop, another hill, or another drop. As dizzying as each of these actions might be, any single action approaches and eventually reaches a point of equilibrium if sustained. Only the combination of these actions - each tending toward an equilibrium, which is then broken by an action that creates disequilibrium - is the thrill achieved. The same is true on the stage; once equilibrium is allowed to occur, there is no relative motion and there is no sense of action. Although in this case the ultimate desired
effect is not necessarily that of thrill, or even entertainment, but active audience engagement.

Naturally, Shakespeare wouldn’t have written with any conscious knowledge of equilibrium in mind, but neither did Lecoq invent the concept. His theories of equilibrium simply quantify the dynamics of storytelling and dramatic structure, such as those that Shakespeare intuitively understood and employed through his use of verse and language. Just as textual energy propels the actor from word to word, line to line, and scene to scene, so too should dramatic equilibrium help propel the audience through each.

Utilizing a consideration of equilibrium is expedient in almost any performance scenario, but it is even more necessary when approaching a play such as Hamlet, in which audience familiarity will inherently accelerate the already inevitable tendencies toward equilibrium of action. If the viewer believes they already know what is happening or what is about to happen, they will tend to unconsciously allow their focus to settle onto the fixed point to which the action is approaching long before equilibrium is actually reached. This too is particularly true given the presence of Shakespeare’s heightened language; a viewer not fully engaged in a somewhat foreign verse will tend to defer to physical action, particularly if the language itself is in energy-less equilibrium. Only through performance filled with appropriately utilized physical and vocal dynamics can we avoid the sort of lifeless Shakespeare that we have come to loathe, but all too often expect.
APPENDIX C: RELEVANT EDITED PERFORMANCE JOURNAL ENTRIES
The following are selected relevant entries from the production journal for the performance of Claudius in the fall 2006 production of *Hamlet* at the University of Central Florida, edited for presentation in this thesis.

Sunday January 22, 2006

A concern has developed. First, as [the director] asked how people felt about their character’s relationships with others; when it came to Claudius - "obviously, I don't like him 'cos he killed my father and married my mom", fair enough. But Laertes -" I don't think I like him very much;" Horatio, ditto; even Polonius. And Gertrude who [according to Shakespeare] “loved and cared for the previous King deeply,” and who with wrinkled nose doesn’t think she "really loves" Claudius much, seems to have developed a distinctly negative attitude towards my character from the onset, which is a dangerous proposition.

Now today, we had the first looks at our costumes. As cool as the concept may be, I was… disturbed? Confused? (No not confused because I understand why) to find that the inspiration for my costume comes from a black clad, red-eyed, skeleton fingered, vampire-esque killer found in a magazine ad for a game called "dark watch".

I’m consistently finding myself working hard to defend [against] everyone's view of Claudius, which typically results in chides to the sum of "just face it. You’re the bad guy."

Yes - Claudius kills Hamlet's father. He admits it! But, Claudius is not and cannot be a pure villain. 95% of the people coming to see Hamlet will already know the truth of
the story, but if every character treats the King as a villain from page 1 then the play is
deal from the onset. If we are to be singularly dimensional characters and to treat
other characters as such, then what's the point? May as well stay home and watch a
soap opera, because that's what it is. It certainly isn't theatre, nor is it Shakespeare.

This play has survived 400 years because of its complexity; why take the ghost's
word? Maybe the previous King was a bastard and he had it coming; maybe he
mistreated Gertrude (a notion which when spoken aloud is received by [the actrice
playing Gertrude] with cries of, "No! I can't hear this!" [Fingers in ears]). Maybe King
Claudius is the best thing that could happen to Denmark; and the people know it! Why
not? Everything Hamlet describes of both Claudius and his father are jaded by
subjectivity. And who cares what Hamlet's buddies think. Of course they're going to
agree with him. They're suck-up hangers on. Even Elvis had his yes-men; they were
called the Memphis Mafia.

We must go beyond the most immediate perceptions. I accept Claudius's guilt - I
accept his fate, but only in the final act. I refuse to have my role sabotaged by people
who create inexplicably clairvoyant characters who share the actor's benefit of
hindsight. I refuse to let my interactions with other characters and the audience's
perception of my character to be poisoned by laziness and lack of creativity.

By God lets give the audience dimension and dynamic, [I want to] make the Act
III Sc. 3 confession take the audience by surprise, even if they already know the play! I
will continue to protest otherwise.

Perhaps I was a bit harsh, though my concerns still exist. I should keep more faith until it proves otherwise. I will not cease to fight in my favorite though. I still think it's better to leave moral complexity than to lay clear cut simple lines of guilt.

Today -- 3:1, 3:3, 4:5, 4:6, --

3:1; starting to feel... Well starting to have a feel. The King is livid-he trusted Polonius-and yet it's quite clear that his "madness" is not over love. And though the King may have suspected before, it's dawning more clearly that it may not even be true madness at all but a ruse. He has just heard Hamlet finally, "frankly", and has discovered his true demeanor, followed by a shift in another show (if it continues to be played as such). The wheels will be going around at this point (and Claudius' head) but it can become too cerebral, but it should momentarily drift to distant thought and quickly lock on the decision.

Looking back on the beginning of the scene he does say that Hamlet" puts on" this confusion, which implies he's already growing dubious 24-28. He still wants to keep Gertrude contented and yet he may be genuinely happy that Hamlet is excitedly occupied by what seems a frivolity.

"Madness and great ones must not unwatched go" great line. Right now, I think there should be something ominous, but again, not quite sinister. Still, what initially appeared as genuine concern should be shifting into genuine suspicion, if not paranoia.
3:3 - I like him not - is he really admitting out loud a dislike for Hamlet? Even if understated this could represent a turning point. No not yet, but he is on edge and if that is a genuine admission is a momentary slip only - the craftiness kicks back before he's alone [when] floodgates [will] open. This confession, this is his true face. This will easily take the most work. The soliloquy is my most difficult section for the obvious reasons, but also because I have to decide exactly what I wanted to say about Claudius. Is he a devil, or just demand? A cowering coward, or a flawed human, who is at least honest to himself. After all, he only kills once and only go so far as to plan Hamlet's death. after Hamlet has proved truly dangerous by killing Polonius. Very complex this... More as the days pass. Shouldn't be rushed.

4:5 genuine concern for Ophelia, if only in appearance, but definitely genuine concern that the people are getting restless.

   Ahhh, here we go - time to prove the King is not a coward. He shows true courage in the face of Laertes' advance, if for no other reason than to seize the opportunity to quell this growing rebellion. He has the high ground, and he takes it. Uses it.

   Foreshadowing of what he has planned - "Where the offence is let the great ax fall."

4:7. The plan is devised and put into motion. Laertes is driven by revenge, but still too honorable to go against the King, even though he initially believes him to be at blame, thus he is ruled by the King, and easily, though ingeniously manipulated. Until Gertrude
comes in and ruins it with news of Ophelia's death. Perhaps a real 'Damnitall!' Moment?

Points to consider?
-- Power by dissemination of information.
-- Modern media.
-- Claudius and Ophelia.
-- Claudius's mask -- rage? -- cannot play this before prayer.
-- Why is he so worried about Hamlet's madness? What's his reaction?
-- "murder" figurative i.e. did he actually kill in cold blood, or with a reason?
-- Hamlet is [being played by the actor as] smarmy. How do I deal with this? Reaction?


Start blocking today. So far it seems very stale. Lots of levels to play with at least. But the director doesn’t seem very open to suggestion – in spite of their declaration that they work organically.

Did get some good impulses though. Approaching Laertes in his rage rather than backing down. Handing him his sword back (he drops it when he sees Ophelia) to win his trust.

I’m having a serious problem with the 3:1 seen: unseen scene blocking. We’re hiding in a corner behind the stairs. – Claudius would never get himself into that corner.
He’d leave a way out, a plan b escape route. Visually it may be interesting visually to see two figures “unseen” in the dark, but I don’t like it. We’ll see if it sticks. Maybe I’ll bring it up later. If it does stick, at least I can show reservation in following Polonius.

Friday January 27, 2006.

Breaking down and watch a few versions of Hamlet. Not exactly breaking down since I’d planned on doing it before, but one would like to be able to do the role uninfluenced. But I figure if I watch as many as I can then I’m not stealing because I won’t remember where it came from.

“Help Angels” must be a pitiful plea.

Wonderful rehearsal. Worked 3:3; more accomplished with [the co-director] in 30 minutes than I have all week. Of course I did also do some serious work on the scene on my own and I took time to warm up. It shouldn’t; but it still amazes me how much difference a fifteen minute warm up makes in my performance.

[The co-director] helped me find a stillness that I should have already realized was missing. I discovered it in the Shakespeare acting last semester but I still can’t give myself over to it. I still find myself contriving things or subconsciously adding elements that shouldn’t be there and I wind up suffering bouts of amateurish acting.

Tuesday, January 31, 2006.
Yet another worrisome step toward bewilderment: so much of this work presented is absolutely contrary to every instinct that has come from my character work and is contradictory even from scene to scene.

Act IV Sc. III pivotal for Claudius because it affords him the opportunity to begin acting openly against Hamlet, wait . . . How does Hamlet already know he’s going to England? – A digression, nevermind.

The way it is blocked now Claudius is flat footed and flushed – no action – only reaction to Hamlet’s exploits. I, Claudius, have him dragged in only to signal the guards to release him only to strut around my throne room with impudence. I stand without guard as he approaches me menacingly. He even assails me with a kiss on “Good Mother.” I understand the theatrics of it but it makes no sense!

Hamlet had just murdered my chief advisor in cold blood, in my house, in my wife’s room. He’s obviously dangerous to a fatal extent – mad or not since my observations have begun to, if not completely, obliterate belief in his madness, I have already decided at this point that I’m going to send him to his death (still in secret) and I have an excuse to actively take extreme measures against him. But this Claudius is an absolute push over. If Claudius is this weak and easily flustered then what exactly is it that Hamlet much overcome? He has no obstacle. Is the intent to weaken Claudius simply to give more room for Hamlet to be darker? I was just told, not a week ago to make Claudius more hard hearted and yet here he’s being molded into something weak and flaccid. Like this, Claudius has no journey. He and the others simply become stage props, character devices for the exploitation of a one man show…
There’s still opportunity to show Claudius scared and panicked in IV:7. He must progress from Sincere to Suspect to Duplicitous to Panicked to Villain to Dead. Thus far he is shallow, flat and dull and all my efforts to bring life to him are shunted or shot down without any opportunity to explore. This Claudius doesn’t even have a heartbeat, he’s a cardboard cutout.

My only hope is that these things will work themselves out as we continue to work. We are blocking out of sequence, so maybe she’s just missing the big picture. [The co-director] has been pretty successful in convincing her to abandon the glaringly poor choices so far so let’s hope that continues when he returns. I’ll bite my tongue for now but if it has to go down it won’t happen without a viscous fight.

And oh yea, the openly tableau looks like a high school musical.

Wednesday, February 1st, 2006.

I’d considered this before but now I really think I want Claudius to begin like McKellan’s film Richard III. He’s such a delicious bastard in that. It’s always perfectly clear that he’s up to no good, yet he’s so good at it. I want to root for him. Only on occasion do you see the snarling darkness underneath his scheming, like when the young, prince crawls on his back, “I want to ride.” He growls and yelps and snarls at the boy like an animal. Then quickly composes himself.

He has this contemptuous smile that lets the audience in on the plan without commenting on it; the other characters haven’t a clue what he’s up to. “Smiling damned villain, that once can smile and smile and be a villain.”
Is that about Claudius and Gertrude?

“O villain, villain, smiling damned villain! That one may smile and be a villain.” I think that’s a shift from thoughts of Gertrude to thoughts of the King. Hamlet’s description – biased as it may be.

If she wants a true villain at least I can adapt this approach. A smiling damned villain so at least he’ll have the initial appearance of a good guy. Perhaps the audience will think “Gee this Claudius guy isn’t so bad. That Hamlet’s kind of a punk.” Keep them off balance until my motives are revealed. I don’t think there’s any way for me to get around being a villain. The formation of the rest of the show precludes anything else. Otherwise I’d just look out of sync.

Thursday Feb. 9, 2006

Confronting Laertes – Sincere or Manipulative?

- I’d accepted that Claudius was a Villain; decided to make a more rapid journey from likable to suspect to manipulator to villain (was I acquiescing? Compromising? Compromising I hope). Am I softening on that position? Still trying to make him good; benevolent? Can he be both? Does making him human make him disinteresting? But doesn’t making him inhuman make it boring. I’ve just been thinking today whether I’m letting my own personality over influence Claudius. I feel confident that I have no fear of making him a bad guy. I think, I’ve just made it a choice not to. I’ve played bad people before – really bad people – i.e. Bash – In fact, I think playing these roles influenced me, in what I want to bring to Claudius if he must be dark.
I question whether people can relate to King's anymore. But they can relate to a person of influence that they identify with and can admire. What if after identifying with that person they find out that that person is guilty of something horrible. That is worth watching.

Sunday, February 12, 2006

Laertes is my boy now. We're either close or he’s in my pocket. Not sure which yet. Either way he’s mine to command. We come in smiling – diplomatic. Laertes is still seething though. I put on a reconciliatory act face – make sure not glib though – and savor the fight. I can’t wait to get up on that platform and look down on them. Drink in the violence and watch Laertes take him to pieces – watch all the pieces fall into place. Get Hamlet out of my way and start the way things should have been to begin with – my reign. A good king. My wife and my new son Laertes at my side. I'll be a great and just ruler, I have so many things planned for this society – if I can just get Hamlet out of my side and move on with it! That’s dark but still human, but not simplistic “Villain.”

But the pieces don’t fall into place they fall apart.

So how do I deal with this death thing?

How do I deal with everything falling apart?

Tuesday, March 21, 2006.

Clau dius becomes archetypal!
Okay! That’s it. I officially give up. After a 2 day excruciating cue to cue . . . [the director] calls me to talk to them. “We have to do something about Claudius, he’s just too likable. I really think you need to make him darker.” So, I give up – Claudius is a villain.


Feeling a bit more reassured since talking to [my professor]. Her reassurance: If I have to be a villain – be a good one. Embrace it. Be a bastard – which is all I can do. Enjoy it.

Also, encouraged about the Thesis. They seem to think all the trials and tribulations and head smashing can be a vivid part of it. Discussed what I wanted versus the end product since I feel like this isn’t my Claudius. It’s somebody else’s entirely.

Ready to nail the confession now after getting to work it.

Play the contrasts. Hang on to the thoughts. Let them guide you. Let the thoughts change. Let it build. Don’t peak too early. New thoughts, get new tactics. Ask the audience; really ask that questions: May one be pardoned and still retain the offence?

Putting it all behind me – just do the job that needs to be done. Forget the rest. You can’t change it.
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