Derek Jacobi’s Comments on the “To be or not to be” speech[[1]](#footnote-1)

Over the years since I first began playing Hamlet, I have become more and more convinced that “To be or not to be” is to be treated not as a soliloquy, but as a dramatic speech to Ophelia. And my reasons are very much rooted in the text.

The way the Nunnery Scene is set makes it clear that Hamlet is not merely wandering round the Castle with thoughts of death on his mind. Claudius has just told Ophelia that “We have closely sent for Hamlet hither.” So Hamlet is on his way to a particular place at a certain time to fulfil an appointment.

The person he sees when he gets there is the person he least expected to see. For the last few weeks, every time he’s met Ophelia she’s run the other way; she’s avoided him. If he saw her at the end of the corridor, she would turn the other way and off she’d go. Now he sees her and she doesn’t run away. Of course, the last thing Polonius has said to her is “Walk you here. Read on this book.” But most Ophelias have to not “walk you here” but go to the wings or hide behind a pillar, or do something to get out of Hamlet’s way, whereas the whole point of the scene is for her to confront him.

If we presuppose that they have been lovers, that they are in love, then what better opportunity for him to be able to say, “This is where my head is at the moment: I’m thinking about committing suicide.” He speaks at her, through her, around her. He soliloquizes to her, if you like.

Well, what does Ophelia do while he’s doing this? Does she just sit there? Yes indeed. What else can she do? She’s in a very false situation, having been placed there by her father and the King. She knows they are listening behind the curtain. She doesn’t want to be there. She knows she’s a decoy. It’s a completely false situation to her. Hamlet is the man she loves.

I played Hamlet this way with two Ophelias, and both said it helped them with their character. Because the irony is that the speech is about the very things that happen to Ophelia ⎯ madness and suicide. She goes mad, and commits suicide, virtually. Hamlet talks about both but experiences neither. In effect, though, hearing this speech plants the seed in Ophelia’s mind.

The speech ends with “Soft you now, the fair Ophelia.” This line is usually taken to mean “ah look, there’s Ophelia,” but I take it to be one of those little titles he gives her, that we all give each other: the tedious Polonius, the villainous King. This is the way he sees her and he wants her to know it. Then he goes on to call her “Nymph.” What he is saying is “Soft you now . . . I don’t need you to say anything. Now you know where I am. Just remember me in your prayers. Now, off you go.”

But of course, she’s been placed there by her father and the King, so she’s got to keep him there, however she can. “Oh, good my Lord,” she blurts out, “how does your Honour for this many a day?” [in other words] “How have you been lately?”

So the first thing she says is false, and immediately Hamlet knows that the whole situation is phoney. We don’t have to see the curtains moving to know that Hamlet senses Polonius’ presence. From the beginning of the scene Hamlet has suspected that something is wrong, something is out of kilter. “She didn’t run away like she usually does. She’s had the most extraordinary reaction to what I’ve just said. Then she goes on to give back all these tokens of love and remembrance. Something is extremely wrong.” And then when he confirms it by testing her, by asking her, “Where’s your father?” and she answers, “At home, my Lord,” in spite of the fact that everything in her being might be struggling to tell him the truth, their relationship, and their lives, can never be the same again.

From this point on, Hamlet realizes that there is no one in his world that he can trust. Everyone is acting, and survival will depend on choosing and playing one’s own role as shrewdly as possible.

1. Taken from the Everyman edition of *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, edited by John F. Andrews, London: Dent-Everyman, 1989. xv-xvii. Sir Derek Jacobi is a renowned Shakespearean actor and director who was awarded a knighthood (Commander of the British Empire) in 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)