

HAMLET, STRATEGIST

Rafaelli, Verónica. UNLP. 2006

veronicarafaelli@yahoo.com

It has come to our attention that Hamlet, in his meanderings along the road to revenge, shows a remarkable ineptitude in those matters of military and political strategy which would have been central to the concretion of his objectives in the play. Nevertheless, it is evident that a military-skilled prince would have been entirely unsuited to Shakespeare's presumable intentions for the play: the character of the Dane is much richer dramatically precisely because *he cannot, he will not, and he does not know how*. Whether because he thinks too much, or because he thinks too well; perhaps, simply, because he thinks too much out of turn, Hamlet manages to distance himself from whom would otherwise have been a mere instrument of revenge.

In this work, we shall attempt to view the tactics employed by the Prince through the eyes of the founding father of modern strategy theory, General Sun Tzu. While it is obvious that Shakespeare himself could not have possibly known the actual *Art of War* by the Chinese general —introduced to Western culture by Joseph Amiot only in 1782—, this treatise is simply, and genially, an exploration into the philosophical intricacies of the nature of man in competition: which was certainly not foreign to the remarkable military minds of the West.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Hamlet, Sun Tzu, The Art of War, strategy.

Our first remark is necessarily a disclaimer, for which we must apologise to the patient reader. This take on Prince Hamlet as a strategist is only part of a much larger analysis, currently in the works, of the application of military strategy in *Hamlet* as a whole. Time and space limitations have forced us to select only one aspect of the topic: that of the hero as a general and his success (or lack thereof) in this role.

It is certainly difficult to gain new insights into *Hamlet*, a play which has been intensively and extensively discussed by specialists and laymen alike for the last four centuries. However, Hamlet is *unlimited* (Bloom 1998: 404); and no more limited is our interest in it.

Two were the aspects that drew our attention when reading and rereading *Hamlet*. First, the old conundrum: why does Hamlet not act when he has the chance? Second, the high levels of fictionalisation it portrays. We know that *Hamlet* is far from a historical play: its historical sources have been mediated by at least three intermediary works —Saxo Grammaticus's *Danish History*, Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* and the *Ur-Hamlet*, whoever its author was. In this process of appropriation, complex processes were simplified, participants were condensed, actions and features were turned into symbols, and even the resolution was changed. Therefore, it was interesting to note how the story of Amleth had turned, after many evolutions, into *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.

It might have been difficult for Shakespeare to retain the explicit martial and political basis of the story; very probably, and if we are to believe Spurgeon (1935), it would probably have been dreadfully uninteresting for him as well. Possibly for dramatic reasons, Shakespeare took the story of a murderous takeover —so terribly common in the historic annals of our species— and turned it into what some might call the existential tragedy of a man who cannot. Still, has Shakespeare obliterated completely all traces of warfare from the play's foreground? Is it impossible to read *Hamlet* as the highly fictionalised tale of a war between two contenders to the Danish throne?

It begins with war preparations, but no war ensues. (Watts 2002: 15)

Our view is that it is not only possible, but fully adequate, and that actually it is not difficult at all to read the evolutions of Hamlet and Claudius as those of two generals engaged in war: war of wits, war of interests, war of generations, war of worldviews, war of personalities, and even outright war on the battlefield. Thus, what better way to analyse this aspect of the play than to resort to the forefather of military strategy himself, General Sun Tzu?

Naturally, we do not mean to suggest that Shakespeare himself could have been acquainted with Sun Tzu's treatise *The Art of War*, since its first Western translation (into French) was made by the Jesuit Father Joseph-Marie Amiot in 1782; and the first English translation, by Captain E.F. Calthrop, R.F.A., saw the light only in 1905 (Sutton 2003). Nevertheless, most of Sun Tzu's remarks on warfare are so genially simple, so basic and universal, that they would not escape any moderately experienced man of arms, any martial scholar, or any sensible ruler. Claudius, as king, brother of kings, and son of kings, could not have ignored the elementary rules of warfare; neither could Hamlet, the last heir to a line of warriors.

GENERAL HAMLET IN HIS LABYRYNTH

If we are to analyse Hamlet's behaviour as a strategist, we should first separate him into his constituent parts to find where Hamlet-Strategist resides. If Hamlet is a general, what is his army? And who is his sovereign?

Two factors will give us a hint as to the answer. First, the fact that, actually, Hamlet does not seem to have anyone who is undoubtedly on his side, except perhaps Horatio: Hamlet fights alone. Second, Bloom's passing remark that the Prince is *Hamlet*, and there is little to *Hamlet* without him (Bloom 1998: 388).

Our reading of Hamlet distinguishes in the character a hierarchical triad of Sovereign, General and Army: our Dane is one and all, simultaneously and successively. Furthermore, we shall posit that it is the lack of concord among his parts that so greatly hinders his progress. The microcosm that Hamlet is works on three levels, as a metonymy of the Neo-Platonic conception of man in relation to angels and beasts.¹ The lowest level, *Hamlet-Army*, uses *reason* (i.e., perception) to work downward to process the sensorial data available, and reacts to it in a basic manner: Hamlet-Army hears, fights, banters, loves, hates, suffers. The highest level is *Hamlet-Sovereign*, a crystallisation of Hamlet's *will*. Hamlet-Sovereign looks beyond the minute stimuli of daily life —provocations, displacement, relationships... — and focuses on a greater purpose: revenge, or in other words, a rebalancing of the scales, a return to natural order. Hamlet-Sovereign, in other words, is in charge of devising the *grand strategy* (Liddell Hart 1984)².

In a time prior to the play, Hamlet-Sovereign proves inadequate to assert his authority over our Dane; thus, eventually it is necessary for him to project itself into an external form —the Ghost— whose (insubstantial) substance will serve to awaken Hamlet's familial honour and his until then apparently inert ambition. It is only after hearing the Ghost's demands of revenge that Hamlet seems willing to take any action at all —even if, before that, he is prodigal in silent words against the uncle who has reduced his mother to a *beast* and usurped his throne.

Still, it is the central part of Hamlet that is perhaps the most interesting: *Hamlet-General*. The nexus between Sovereign and Army, the wielder of *understanding*, who will decode the data provided by Hamlet-Army, and redirect it in a manner fitting to the purpose set by Hamlet-Sovereign. It is precisely the General that carries any projects into execution, by

¹ For this description, we have referred to the insightful summary developed in Tillyard 1943, Chapter 1.

² "La política, o más bien la "gran política" o "política total" [i.e., Liddell Hart's grand strategy] reside fundamentalmente en la elección de los objetivos y del cuadro de la acción, y depende, en gran parte, de elementos subjetivos, en tanto que la puesta en acción de esa decisión política resulta de un razonamiento que debe ser esencialmente objetivo y proceder de los métodos de la estrategia." (Beaufre 1982: 37)

distributing and applying the military means in order to fulfil the political ends (Liddell Hart 1984: 529; our back-translation); it is the General who must be responsible for the development of strategy and its branches, tactics and logistics.³

And it is the General, precisely, who fails.

Untune that string, / and hark what discord follows! (Troilus and Cressida, I.iii)

Much as the central role of Man in the universal order, the General is a pivotal point whose stumbling will throw the entire system into chaos.

Now the general is the bulwark of the State; if the bulwark is complete at all points; the State will be strong; if the bulwark is defective, the State will be weak. (Sun Tzu III. 11)

As the *knot and chain*⁴ of the hierarchy, any weakness in the General must necessarily bring down the entire structure. It is not possible, then, for the Sovereign to see his grand strategy satisfied, or for the Army to face the enemy in the best possible conditions.⁵

THE MOVEMENTS

When we set about to read *Hamlet* through Sun Tzu's eyes, we needed to address the fact that the conventional division in acts and scenes was inconvenient to the analysis, since it did not match the martial actions on which we meant to focus. Therefore, we had to redivide the play into eleven movements, which we named:⁶

- Movement 1: Repose
- Movement 2: Appointment
- Movement 3: Plot
- Movement 4: Test attack
- Movement 5: Refraining
- Movement 6: Secondary attack
- Movement 7: Luring
- Movement 8: Surrender
- Movement 9: Escape and return
- Movement 10: Open battle
- Movement 11: Victory

³ Beaufre distinguishes between tactics and logistics: "la táctica es muy claramente el arte de emplear las armas en el combate para conseguir su mejor rendimiento. La logística es la ciencia de los movimientos y de los abastecimientos. Ambas se refieren 'a la combinación de las cosas materiales' [...]". (Beaufre 1965: 17)

⁴ Spencer (1942: 5).

⁵ The reasons why Hamlet-General is inadequate for his role lie, unfortunately, well beyond the scope of this humble and fragmentary work. Much has been written about why Hamlet does not act until it is too late; we would not presume to reach a conclusion here. We might, however, venture a guess that would set *Hamlet* as an allegory which masks a political and historical hypothesis. In this reading, Hamlet is a hinge between two conceptions of leadership: the Beowulfian hero of Medieval sagas, renowned for his boundless courage, heartfelt generosity, exemplary *virtue*, and irreproachable honour; and on the other hand the Borgian and Fernandian prince of the Renaissance, masterly depicted by Machiavelli: full of *virtù* (Martínez Arancón 1988: XXIII), who relies on the word as much as on the sword to achieve his ends, and who is just as ruthless as the former, although much less loved and rather more feared; quite parsimonious, alternatively cruel and element, fair, and skilled in pretence rather than outright deceit.

The men in *Hamlet* neatly fall into either of these pictures —except, precisely, the doppelgänger pair: Prince Hamlet and Prince Fortinbras. Son and nephew of saga kings, respectively, and their natural successors, they both represent a step towards a new conception of leadership. Hamlet, in his failure, proves to be the miscarried foetus of a successful ruler, who both by nature and nurture seems entirely unsuited to his role. He is succeeded by the only one who manages to achieve a suitable combination of old and new, warrior and diplomat, Beowulf and Borgia: Fortinbras the young.

⁶ For ease of reference, we have included a chart with the martial events included in each movement, as well as the approximate correspondence to acts and scenes. See **Appendix A**.

In order to provide a sample of this martial analysis, we will now consider the events of Movements 1 to 3 (specifically, I.i to II.ii) from a warlike perspective.

Hamlet's first movement is, paradoxically, the utter lack of movement that we find at the beginning; even in the face of *invasion* and takeover. The General takes no initiative of his own, but awaits orders instead. These orders arrive in I.v, where the Ghost (as the Sovereign) gives Hamlet his mission. He finds himself in the need to swear the chance witnesses to the appointment to secrecy, appealing to their honour as men of arms—they swear three times, upon their General's sword. Here, in I.v, he makes his first tactical mistake: he communicates his plans to his subordinates, by announcing to Horatio and Marcellus his intention to feign madness.⁷

Fortunately, this unnecessary communication results in no information leak. The plan itself, his—strictly speaking—first tactical move in the play, is to "put an antic disposition on", which would fit Sun Tzu VI.12 ("If we do not wish to fight, we can prevent the enemy from engaging us [...]. All we need to do is to throw something odd and unaccountable in his way", glossed by Li Ch`uan as "We puzzle him by strange and unusual dispositions"). This application of Ch`i (roughly, an indirect manoeuvre) would imply activity; he later thinks of baiting Claudius into taking a course of action that will benefit his plans: namely, he expects Claudius to reveal himself as a murderer and usurper. His original aim when taking on his antic disposition (before II.ii) is probably just intended as a way of keeping a low profile until a favourable opportunity for revenge arises. Nevertheless, what is the end purpose to this plot? What were Hamlet's long-term plans beyond the Mousetrap? It does not seem likely that he expected to lurk in the shadows waiting for an opening to kill Claudius treacherously: his first and only attempt at doing so (III.iii), seemingly brought about by chance, fails due to superstitious concerns that this momentary flash of regret would suffice to cleanse Claudius's soul. Already Sun Tzu had warned us about the inconveniences and dangers of superstition, which impedes action: "Prohibit the taking of omens, and do away with superstitious doubts" (Sun Tzu IX.26).

Through I.ii we hear of Hamlet's first attempts at feigning madness. Admittedly, these sound grotesque and exaggerated, at least to our modern ears, but they are enough to convince the naïve Ophelia and, apparently, Polonius—who obviously has a vested interest in attributing Hamlet's madness to love for his daughter. But by I.iii, Hamlet has devised a new front to face enemies tougher than Ophelia: Polonius himself, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern⁸. Perhaps out of despise for Polonius's apparent shortcomings in terms of wit, cunning and honour, Hamlet feels free to banter at length with the counsellor, in a move of debatable wisdom. First, Polonius might not be as dull as he seems—and indeed, we believe he could hardly be dull at all. Second, they might be overheard by Elsinore's refined network of spies; the entire play reads as a treatise on the art of spying, since almost all the characters act as such at one time or another. He reproaches, though subtly, his use of Ophelia as bait and unwitting spy.

He then proceeds to face Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In his treatment of the pair he alternates between political cunning and showy recklessness. First, he uncovers them as spies, by forcing them dialectically to confess that they have been called to court by Claudius to work on Hamlet from their vantage positions as fellow students. Unveiling the enemy's spies is definitely a wise move; even to call their attention to the fact that they have been discovered—

⁷ Horatio is the only character in the play that might be construed as Hamlet's second, and he is a lieutenant worthy of such a general: his only use in the play is verbal. He tells Hamlet the news about the Ghost; he communicates his plans to Gertrude in Q1 IV.vi; he gives his letter to Claudius; and he is left to relay the whole story to posterity.

⁸ The names of Hamlet's unfortunate fellow students have suffered many adaptations and alternative spellings. Here, we have adopted the spelling used in the Wordsworth Classics edition (see **Bibliography**): *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern*.

as long as they are immediately won over to one's side, into the position of converted spies (Sun Tzu XII.11). It might have been even wiser to let them think that they had gone undetected, and "contrive to let them carry away a false impression of what is going on", in Hsiao Shih-hsien's reading. This would have been more prudent, seeing as Hamlet is undoubtedly in the weaker position. However, this sudden show of strength, courage, and cunning might have won him the upper hand, if he had immediately proceeded to recruit Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for himself.

But does he even attempt to do so? This is his second mistake in this movement: passing up the opportunity of gaining two important pawns to his side; and even worse, allowing them to return to the enemy's camp carrying important information. In Sun Tzu XII.21, "the enemy's spies who have come to spy on us must be sought out, tempted with bribes, led away and comfortably housed. Thus they will become converted spies and available for our service." Instead, Hamlet humiliates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with his verbal pyrotechnics, provides them with vital information on his mental state, makes no attempt to recruit them, and sends them back to Claudius. Unlike Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Claudius certainly can and does properly decode the information unwittingly provided by Hamlet, on hearing their report in III.i, and he confirms these suspicions immediately afterwards, on eavesdropping Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia. Thus he is forced to set up his defence, in terms of a counter-attack: "he shall with speed to England" (III.i.169).

WAR PREPARATIONS

There is concord among the authors on the fact that no strategy can be devised without a political diagnosis, on which the action shall be based (see for example Sun Tzu I.12-14, Beaufre 1982: 31). Before laying his plans, Hamlet should have considered the five constant factors that govern war (Sun Tzu I.4-11):

~ *The moral law.* The harmony between Sovereign, General and Army. From the very beginning, there is discord among these: such is this discord, that it is not until Hamlet is faced with a metaphysical projection of his Sovereign that he is convinced to take action. This lack of harmony in Hamlet's microcosm only serves to reflect the disharmony in Denmark.

~ *Heaven.* According to Wang Hsi, this is "the general economy of Heaven", which Giles explains as "the five elements, the four seasons, wind and clouds, and other phenomena" (Sun Tzu I.7). The play does not deal extensively with Nature as a reflection of human affairs (namely, as *Macbeth* does), but there is a considerable treatment of Hamlet's humours, and how their imbalance and putrefaction have affected his temperament.

~ *Earth.* Here we might class, in broad terms, Hamlet's spatial and political situation: his position as presumably underage usurped prince; his lack of support beyond Gertrude's ineffectual motherly love, the always unreliable love of the people, and the decorative Horatio; his evident inexperience and disinterest in all matters relative to government; his surprising ignorance of either martial or diplomatic politics. All of this constitute his preliminary actual chances of either dethroning Claudius or successfully sustaining his position until Claudius's death.

~ *The Commander.* His five (Chinese) cardinal virtues:

- *Wisdom.* Hamlet's wisdom is at least questionable, as can be noticed in his actions and decisions in the course of the play; it should not be confused with his philosophical position with respect to the world around him.

- *Sincerity.* There is certainly a dangerous wealth of sincerity in Hamlet, which sometimes gets the better of him, since he does not know himself enough to regulate when to let it show (I.ii; III.i; III.iv).

- *Humanity or benevolence.* We can easily find him sorely lacking in this respect, seeing as he shows no true pity, no mercy, no sympathy for anyone else's suffering or pain all throughout the play —except perhaps his own.

- *Courage, or uprightness of mind.* It is debatable whether we might appropriately call Hamlet courageous. He seems to veer between recklessness and indifference instead. The only true show of courage we find is his efficient reversal of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's mission (narrated in V.ii).

- *Strictness.* Self-respect, self-control, self-awareness —not only of himself in isolation but of himself as part of the world and in his context: all qualities we would be hard pressed to find in Hamlet.

~ *Method and discipline.* Another sore failure for Hamlet. His self-discipline is hardly adequate, and exposed only in such passages as I.ii.158, and the last lines of III.ii. He proves much better at managing his other ("external") troops, Marcellus and Barnardo —he effectively reduces them to silence in I.v— and particularly Horatio, whom we believe is his only successful instance of martial management, through a well-balanced regime of encouragement, motivation and reward.

Consequently, by using Sun Tzu's seven considerations (Sun Tzu I.12-14) it is possible to forecast Hamlet's defeat at the hands of Claudius, which in the play results in an utterly Pyrrhic victory for Hamlet thanks to a chain of unfortunate events —the exchange of swords and Gertrude drinking from Hamlet's glass, both of which will end in fatal poisoning and will lead Laertes to confess and thus push Hamlet to kill Claudius at last.

In his preparations, Hamlet also shows little regard for the five essentials of victory (Sun Tzu III.17):

1. *"He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight."* He misses his best opportunities (before the Mousetrap and immediately after; after his escape from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), delays the action unnecessarily, and launches his partial attacks before creating the appropriate conditions.
2. *"He will win who knows how to handle both superior and inferior forces."* If he had planned an overall strategy and kept to it, taking advantage of his resources and attacking at the right times, he would have won even being by far the weakest.
3. *"He will win whose army is animated by the same spirit throughout all its ranks."* Here is perhaps the root of Hamlet's tactical inability: the consistent discord in his microcosm. He is fractured and heterogeneous, and there is no harmony of opinion or purpose in his behaviour. As a constellation of Hamlets, he can never present a unified front in battle.
4. *"He will win who, prepared himself, waits to take the enemy unprepared."* Seemingly obvious; but, for all Hamlet's declarations of subtlety and cunning, he cannot seem to stop announcing his plans to the enemy. Most notably, in III.ii, where the Mousetrap serves as much to confirm Claudius's guilt as to let Claudius know that Hamlet is aware of it, out for revenge, and positively dangerous; and in IV.vi-vii, where he writes to Claudius to announce that he has escaped from his guard and is returning to court, thus giving Claudius even the advantage of having enough time to plan how to best dispose of him.
5. *"He will win who has military capacity and is not interfered with by the sovereign."*⁹ This item, however, seems a reversal of the situation in the play: it is the Sovereign who has the best influence on Hamlet's strategy —in particular, when it projects itself as the Ghost. It is he who gives Hamlet his main motivation to act (his mission) and who restrains him in the meeting with Gertrude, where going further would have meant losing his cause.

⁹ In the words of Liddell Hart (1984: 579), "mientras [que] la gran estrategia debe controlar a la estrategia, sus principios a menudo se oponen a aquéllos que prevalecen en el campo de la estrategia."

AN ANTIC DISPOSITION

Hamlet shows an immediate grasp of the essential rule of planning: "All warfare is based on deception" (Sun Tzu I.18), and acts accordingly. Unfortunately, this grasp seems to be theoretical rather than practical, since he fails at it on several occasions.

We believe there is a tactical mistake in Hamlet's application of this principle. Hamlet, before his appointment, is melancholic, cynical, bitter, overeducated, and powerless in status and political position. Once he has put his first tactic in practice, he still is and acts exactly the same—with the addition of amorous flourishings, basic banter, and random exclamations about the shape of clouds and rats behind arras. Where Hamlet should have played the *fool*, he plays the *psychopath*. Nothing could have been more dangerous in his position. He is in a weak, insecure, defenceless spot indeed: he should have overplayed his weakness to seem utterly harmless and thus allay Claudius's suspicions (as the historical Amleth did, according to Saxo Grammaticus). Then, he would have been able to use this apparently despicable position either to attack freely with all his power—following his father's Beowulfian school—or to bide his time until he could succeed to Claudius's throne, through old age or poison—following Claudius's own Borgian school. He should have seemed unable when able, inactive in activity; then his infamous antic disposition would have actually been useful.

O divine art of subtlety and secrecy! Through you we learn to be invisible, through you inaudible; and hence we can hold the enemy's fate in our hands. (Sun Tzu VI.9)

How could Hamlet have been invisible, inaudible? Quite simply, by pretending to be a harmless fool with no ambitions to the throne; by quietly courting Ophelia, he would have kept Polonius's favour, leading him to believe that he might one day be father to a queen; as a docile son he would have attracted Gertrude's sympathies much more easily. If he had concealed his dispositions, he would have been "safe from the prying of the subtlest spies, from the machinations of the wisest brains" (Sun Tzu VI.25)—though the spies at Elsinore are far from subtle.

On the contrary, as the confrontational psychopath he pretends to be, or allows himself to be, he only forces Claudius to take action against him. He starts a fight on his own terms, but ultimately leaves his fate in his enemy's hands; and he repeats this advance-retreat pattern for every attack (the Mousetrap, in III.ii; the battle with Gertrude, in III.iv; the abduction of Polonius's corpse, in IV.iii; the return to court, in V.i), and every time he loses more ground and is at a more considerable disadvantage.

"Though the enemy be stronger in numbers, we may prevent him from fighting. Scheme so as to discover his plans and the likelihood of their success." (Sun Tzu VI.22)

There is one instance of successful application of this principle in Hamlet's strategy and it is one of Hamlet's few partial victories on the field: his cunning role reversal in Movement 9, which he narrates to Horatio in V.ii—i.e., stealing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's letter and forging a new one so as to have them executed in his place. Here he is further aided by chance, which allows him to escape from their custody immediately afterwards and return safely to Elsinore. Unfortunately, as we have mentioned, he wastes this invaluable opportunity for a surprise attack by having his return announced to Claudius, first; and then inexplicably turns the advantage to the enemy by making a grand dramatic re-entrance into court consisting of a direct attack on Laertes at Ophelia's funeral.

"Rouse him, and learn the principle of his activity or inactivity. Force him to reveal himself, so as to find out his vulnerable spots." (Sun Tzu VI.23)

"Strategy 13 - Startle the snake by hitting the grass around it." (Thirty-Six Strategies)

Hamlet makes use of this sound advice on two separate occasions: the Mousetrap, and the battle with Gertrude. In neither case, though, does he reap the benefits from such a risky manoeuvre. As we have mentioned, the basic intelligence he gains from the Mousetrap is hardly worth the careless exposure of his intentions and position, especially considering there is no follow-up: his preliminary attack, in proving him right and confirming his position with respect to Claudius, leaves an opening in Claudius's ranks that should have been immediately followed by a decisive full-scale attack.

Almost immediately afterwards, Hamlet repeats the use of this tactic when he goes after a protected secondary objective: Gertrude. It is somewhat difficult to believe he gains anything from this encounter, beyond a chance to do away with Polonius, one of the enemy's assets. He does not actually make an ally or conquer a strong position: so far, Gertrude's only actions against him had only been a result of her conviction of his madness, and she is, if anything, even more strongly convinced of it after their interview. In addition, this battle with Gertrude was supposed to be the means to achieve Hamlet's first objective: forcing the queen to repentance. However, besides a few tears and pained words in the heat of the battle, there is little indication in the rest of the play that Gertrude actually has repented, changed her 'incestuous ways', or otherwise taken Hamlet's words to heart. Whether Gertrude really does act as an agent for Hamlet afterwards in the Second Quarto and the First Folio is disputable: all the text indicates is a bland and obvious declaration of support during the final battle (V.ii.281), and a curiously Biblical wiping of his brow —though preceded by a harsh indication of just how little faith she has in him: to Claudius's "Our son shall win", she dishearteningly and brutally responds "He's fat, and scant of breath." (V.ii.278-279).

However, and most interestingly, in the First Quarto (also known as the Bad Quarto), she promises to quieten Claudius's suspicions so that Hamlet might succeed in his plans —in a scene that does not appear in the other manuscripts.¹⁰

Still, in the battle with Gertrude he uncovers his secrets to such an extent, that he is at last forced to swear her to secrecy —and curiously, in his "famous ape" metaphor, he does not appeal to her concern or motherly love, but to her own convenience, in words that carry the vague echoes of a threat (III.iv.190-195). This goes directly against the wisdom of Sun Tzu VI.25.

VICTORY / DEFEAT

To secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands, but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself. (Sun Tzu IV.2)

*[A clever fighter] wins his battles by making no mistakes.
Hence the skillful fighter puts himself into a position which makes defeat impossible,
and does not miss the moment for defeating the enemy. (Sun Tzu IV.13-14)*

This is, we believe, the key to the play's resolution. Although we have chosen to focus this partial analysis on Hamlet's use of strategy, by no means do we lose sight of Claudius's strategic policies. Thus, it is not difficult to see that, while Hamlet himself proves ineffectual at securing himself and developing a consistent series of defence-attack tactics, Claudius in turn is less than effective at actually defeating him. Moreover, on several occasions Claudius himself leaves a flank open for Hamlet to attack (III.iii; V.ii); and he is inefficient at defending his assets (III.iv; V.ii). This is evidently the reason for the play's final twofold defeat, or twofold victory: neither of the generals has been good enough, even though Claudius does show a much better command of strategy and

¹⁰ See **Appendix B** for a quotation of this scene.

execution, unfortunately unaided by fortune. "One may *know* how to conquer without being able to *do* it." (Sun Tzu IV.4)

HAMLET, THE GLORIOUSLY BAD STRATEGIST

Drawing any sort of conclusion on *Hamlet* is both an act of faith, and an act of defiance. Any attempt to follow the path towards the promised Hamletland will always be inevitably met with the need to step on the tracks of four centuries of travellers, all with the same destination, and most, better equipped for the long trip. This is by necessity discouraging and exciting at the same time: what could possibly be said about *Hamlet* that has not been said before? In this brief and fragmentary work, we have dared attempt what might perhaps constitute a less conventional take on one of the most widely known and analysed works in history. Reading the play as the story of a war—and in particular, reading the Dane as a General—has proved for us a voyage of profound and exciting interest, some of which we hope has carried into these pages. Our final thoughts on Hamlet's poor offices as General may not be as flattering for the character as perhaps some deeply-enamoured authors would prefer; we do not believe this is a fault. Quite on the contrary; it is only the tragic flaw that runs along Hamlet that allows us to call him a hero—and it is the sheer beauty of that flaw that attracts us back to him, time and time again.

APPENDIX A. Movements and martial events

	Hamlet	Claudius
Movement 1: Repose (I.i-iii)	I.i	
	I.ii	Inactive. He takes on Horatio as his second.
	I.iii	Polonius instructs Claudius's troops (Laertes). Polonius and Laertes secure Ophelia, a weak spot.
	I.iv-v	He receives his mission in most explicit terms from his Sovereign.
Movement 2: Appointment	I.v	He adopts his first tactic (antic disposition).
	II.i	Polonius takes steps to obtain intelligence of his own army (Laertes). Ophelia (as inward spy) provides intelligence on Hamlet.
	II.ii	Claudius recruits new troops: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. External affairs: possible invasion from Norway forthcoming. Testing the field: plans to use Ophelia as bait. Minor skirmishes: Hamlet-Polonius, Hamlet-Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Diversion tactics: the Players.
	III.i	Hamlet recruits mercenary troops (the Players) and prepares them for a test attack to reveal the true position of the enemy (the Mousetrap).
Movement 3: Plotting (I.v-IIIii)	III.i	Minor skirmish: Hamlet-Ophelia, which provided useful information on the true state of Hamlet. Plans to dispose of Hamlet. A new battle is arranged: Hamlet-Gertrude.
	III.ii	Hamlet sets up his second as a scout on the battle. Test attack (the Mousetrap): successful. Retreat.
Movement 4: Test attack	III.ii	Claudius withdraws in the face of the attack, leaves the battlefield.
	III.iii	Spies / ambassadors sent (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Polonius) to the enemy camp. Preparations for counter-attack. Bait: Gertrude undefended. Intelligence points at the convenience to dispose of Hamlet.
Movement 5: Refraining (III.ii-iii)	III.iii	Attack aborted due to superstition (Hamlet decides against killing a praying Claudius). Weakening in the defence due to superstition (Claudius kneels to pray).
	III.iv	Strengthening the defence of the bait (Polonius instructs Gertrude). Gertrude attacks, following Strategy 13. The counter-attack takes the fight back to her camp, she tries to retreat but fails. She calls for reinforcements (Polonius) but they are wiped out quickly. The show of brutality weakens the troops. On the point of defeat, she resorts to diversion tactics (she cries).
Movement 6: Secondary attack	III.iv	Hamlet weakens but receives unexpected reinforcements (the Ghost) and wins a strong position (Gertrude), keeping the war spoils as bait (Polonius's body).
	III.iv	On leaving the battlefield, the winner claims the spoils (he takes Polonius's body) to use them as bait and lure Claudius out of his strong position.
Movement 7: Luring (III.iv-IV.i-iii)	III.iv	

	IV.i		Gertrude (now surviving spy) returns with intelligence about Hamlet's state, and the bait. Claudius sends ambassadors (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) to reclaim the spoils. Plans to recruit new troops (telling a select few what has happened)	
	IV.ii	Skirmish: Hamlet-Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.		
	IV.iii		Claudius's new troops arrive.	
Movement 8: Surrender (IV.iii-IV.v approx.)	IV.iii	Result of lure: preliminary battle Hamlet-Claudius. Hamlet, defeated, surrenders; he gives back the spoils and is sent to England under custody.		
	IV.iv			Fortinbras, under the guise of marching to Poland, studies the terrain and prepares his attack on Denmark.
	IV.v		Claudius faces two separate rebellions from the Poloniads: Ophelia (maddened), who threatens with information disclosure; and Laertes, heading an open popular revolt. Both are quelled. Laertes becomes Claudius's lieutenant.	
Movement 9: Escape and return (IV.v approx. V.ii)	IV.v?	Hamlet escapes from his custody.		
	IV.vi	(Q1: Horatio and Gertrude, who has switched sides after Movement 6, plot to prepare the ground for an attack.) Hamlet announces his return to the battlefield.		
	IV.vii		Claudius and Laertes prepare a final attack, led by the latter, in three stages (blade-poison-poison). Gertrude brings intelligence on the end of the other faction (Ophelia's suicide).	
	V.i	Hamlet returns to Denmark. Preliminary skirmishes: Hamlet-Laertes (at Ophelia's funeral).		
	V.ii	Hamlet narrates his defeat of Claudius's troops (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern).		
Movement 10: Open battle	V.ii		Claudius lures Hamlet into battle.	
		Hamlet, against his lieutenant's advice, accepts the challenge.		
		Open battle: ~Hamlet's first partial victory (hit)	Claudius prepares an indirect manoeuvre (poison).	
		~Hamlet's second partial victory (hit)	Gertrude is caught in the indirect manoeuvre.	
			~Laertes's first partial victory (hit). Scuffle, exchange of swords.	
		~Hamlet poisoned.		
		~Hamlet's third partial victory (hit).	~Laertes poisoned. ~Gertrude, collateral damage to the indirect manoeuvre.	
		Hamlet claims the battlefield (orders to lock the doors). Hamlet obliterates the enemy (kills Claudius) in two stages (sword-poison) and remains victorious.	Claudius's troops surrender (Laertes confesses, asks for forgiveness, forgives, blames Claudius, dies).	
Movement 11: Victory		Hamlet arranges for his remaining troops (Horatio) to exit the battlefield safely and appoints them to safeguard his glory (by telling the story). Hamlet arranges for his successor (Fortinbras). Hamlet dies.		
				Fortinbras invades, claims the throne, praises the memory of Hamlet as a fallen victorious prince-general.

APPENDIX B. First Quarto, IV.vi

Enter Horatio and the Queene.

Hor. Madame, your sonne is safe arriv'de in *Denmarke*,
This letter I euen now receiv'd of him,
Whereas he writes how he escap't the danger,
And subtle treason that the king had plotted,
Being crossed by the contention of the windes,
He found the Packet sent to the king of *England*,
Wherein he saw himselfe betray'd to death,
As at his next conuersion with your grace,
He will relate the circumstance at full.

Queene Then I perceiue there's treason in his lookes
That seem'd to sugar o're his villanie:
But I will soothe and please him for a time,
For murderous mindes are always jealous,
But know not you *Horatio* where he is?

Hor. Yes Madame, and he hath appoyntd me
To meete him on the east side of the Cittie
To morrow morning.

Queene O faile not, good *Horatio*, and withall, commend me
A mothers care to him, bid him a while
Be wary of his presence, lest that he
Faile in that he goes about.

Hor. Madam, neuer make doubt of that:
I thinke by this the news be come to court:
He is arriv'de, obserue the king, and you shall
Quickely finde, *Hamlet* being here,
Things fell not to his minde.

Queene But what became of *Gilderstone* and *Rossencraft*?

Hor. He being set ashore, they went for *England*,
And in the Packet there writ down that doome
To be perform'd on them poynted for him:
And by great chance he had his fathers Seale,
So all was done without discouerie.

Queene Thankes be to heauen for blessing of the prince,
Horatio once againe I take my leaue,
With thowsand mothers blessings to my sonne.

Hor. Madam adue.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ANONYMOUS. *Thirty-Six Strategies*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. September 18, 2006. September 22, 2006. <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Thirty-Six_Strategies&oldid=76371887>.
- BEAUFRE, A. (1965) *Introducción a la estrategia*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Struhart & Cía. Trans. L.P. Pérez Roldán.
- BEAUFRE, A. (1982) *Estrategia de la acción*. Buenos Aires: Pleamar. Trans. J.T. Goyret.
- BLOOM, H. (1998) *Shakespeare, the Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- GILES, L. *Sun Tzu on The Art of War*. Illinois: Project Gutenberg Association. 1910. November 22, 2003. September 22, 2006.
- LIDDEL HART, B.H. (1984) *Estrategia. La aproximación indecisa*. Buenos Aires: editorial house unknown. Volumen 719.
- MARTÍNEZ ARANCÓN, A. (1988) "Estudio preliminar". In Maquiavelo, N. (1996) *El príncipe*. Barcelona: Ediciones Altaya.
- SHAKESPEARE, W. (2002) *Hamlet*. Wordsworth Classics edn., ed. Cedric Watts. Kent: Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- SHAKESPEARE, W. *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke. The First ('Bad') Quarto*. Illinois: Project Gutenberg Association. 1603. October 2005. September 22, 2006. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/9077>>.
- SPENCER, T. (1942) *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*. Lowell Lectures, 1942. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- SPURGEON, C. (1965) *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- TILLYARD, E.M.W. (1943) *The Elizabethan World Picture*. London: Penguin Books.
- WORLD LIBRARY, INC. (Ed.) *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Illinois: Project Gutenberg Association. January, 1994. September 22, 2006. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/100>>.