Hamlet, Prince of Wit; Hamlet, Prince of Death

by

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A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

September, 2003

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Abstract

Hamlet, Prince of Wit; Hamlet, Prince of Death argues that, contrary to much critical opinion, Hamlet is a man of action. Hamlet is a self-conscious character, an actor acting the revenge hero's role; his action is his acting. As the actor-as-hero, Hamlet performs two roles, the role of the Prince of Wit and the role of the Prince of Death, which comprise an interpretation of the revenge hero's role. Hamlet's acting is an act of defiance against the inevitable consequences of a situation that calls for revenge. His acting is the means by which he defies death.

Acknowledgement

With deepest respect, for his kindness, his patience, and his wisdom, I thank my supervisor, Dr. M. Ian Cameron.

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Hamlet, Prince of Wit; Hamlet, Prince of Death

POLONIUS. What do you read, my lord?

HAMLET. Words, words, words. (2.2. 191-92)

Hamlet

To say that Shakespeare conceives of life in terms of the theatre may be to state the obvious; to an analysis of *Hamlet*, however, the implications of such a statement are elucidating. More than mere metaphor, the correspondence between life and theatre functions, in *Hamlet*, in three ways. First, because the conception of life as play is conveyed to the audience or to the reader, while the drama represents a facet of life, it also is a reflexive work: it is a drama that calls attention to its own staging. Second, because the play's self-conscious protagonist has a lively interest in the theatrical, his relationship to dramatic display serves both a representative and an interpretative function and complicates, thereby, readings of the play. Third, because the boundaries that distinguish life from the dramatic representation of life are drawn and erased, the correspondence between life and theatre is more than merely figurative: it is representative. Thus, *Hamlet* is a play about itself as a dramatic work, it is a play about the nature of revenge tragedy, and it is a play about life as a process of dramatic representation. Moreover, the interrelationship of life and theatre is amplified to the point whereat, for *Hamlet*'s central figure, its tragic hero, Hamlet himself, performance is a means of being.

Because, for Hamlet, theatrical performance is not only a means of being but also a mode of action, before examining his performance and before commenting on his

function within the play, it is necessary to deal with the matter of his much-discussed inaction. In *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*, John Kerrigan notes of revenge tragedy that “its characteristic drive towards punishment makes it complicit with the energies of a form whose name, in most European languages, derives from the Greek verb *dran*, ‘to do’” (4). As he goes on to observe, even “the most cerebral and perplexed of revenge plays cannot escape from action as a principle” (4). Because revenge tragedy is characterised by a “drive towards punishment” (Kerrigan 4) and because, in *Hamlet*, this punishment is ambiguously, if not unsatisfactorily, achieved, a great deal of *Hamlet* criticism revolves around explaining Hamlet’s seeming inability to act. From the outset it is essential to conceive of Hamlet’s inaction specifically as delayed revenge, for although inaction and delay are linked, delay is based in the presupposition of an *expected* action. Arguments that assume or conclude that Hamlet is a man of inaction begin with the premise that revenge is the only action possible; to act, therefore, Hamlet must kill Claudius and thereby avenge his father’s murder. Critical focus was not always so.

Discussing criticism of *Hamlet* in the eighteenth-century, which he describes as “didactic and moralizing,” Paul S. Conklin notes that “there was a most definite tendency to dwell upon Hamlet’s words because they exhibited virtue, wisdom, and beauty,” a tendency which resulted, therefore, in “undramatic interpretation” (45). Charting a perceptible shift to dramatic interpretation of the play, Conklin considers 1770 “as the turning point in *Hamlet* criticism” and notes, amongst other obvious trends, the “development of the procrastination motif” (63). A motif that persists, the idea of Hamlet’s delay permeates conceptions of the play to the extent that it is possible to observe, as a result, a *theme* of Hamlet analysis—that is, repeated attempts to *explain*

Hamlet—in *Hamlet* criticism. Any such explanation follows in the tradition established by Aristotle in his *The Poetics* and is the result of the search for “some great flaw” (47) to which Hamlet’s delay might be attributed.

In his introduction to the Norton edition of the play, Stephen Greenblatt observes that “[i]n the nineteenth century, following a suggestion by the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, critics frequently argued that Hamlet has within him the soul of a poet, too sensitive, delicate, and complex to endure the cruel pressures of a coarse world” (1660). Hamlet is, therefore, ill-equipped for revenge. Characterising Romantic conceptions of Hamlet, such as Goethe’s, as “sentimental” (101), A. C. Bradley also notes the tendency, during the period, to see *Hamlet* as a “tragedy of reflection” (104), in effect, to explain that Hamlet delays because “the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought” (3.1.83-84). In either case, the result is a portrait of Hamlet as a man of inaction. One problem with seeing Hamlet as a man of inaction, inaction which results from a particular characteristic, however, is the inconsistency in character that one must then confront. A. C. Bradley attempts to patch up the differences by seeking for the Hamlet of “before his father’s death” (108) and by suggesting that character and “a state of mind quite abnormal and induced by special circumstances” (108)—melancholy—combined, prevent appropriate action.

What Bradley performs is akin to a pathology of Hamlet and not unlike the psychoanalytic interpretations that Greenblatt remarks upon: “In the twentieth century, following a suggestion by the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, many critics have speculated that Hamlet has within him an unresolved Oedipus complex” (1660). Although more character analysis than psychoanalysis, the critical perspective taken by

T. S. Eliot, in his well-known denunciation of the play "Hamlet and His Problems," is similar to Freud's notion of Hamlet and, again, paints the hero as the afflicted. In Eliot's consideration, Hamlet is overwhelmed by feelings of "disgust" for his mother's behaviour, these feelings of "disgust" cannot be "objectified," and the feelings, therefore, "obstruct action" (125). Arguing against Freud's interpretation but continuing the psychoanalytic approach to readings of the text, John Russell in his 1995 publication *Hamlet and Narcissus*, examines his patient's narcissism. Arguments such as these, which elaborate an illness to explain Hamlet's delay, however interesting, are perceptually preclusive and lie too much outside of the play.

Although also an attempt to explain delay, Friedrich Nietzsche's comparison of Hamlet to the Dionysian man, who has experienced the satyric chorus of Greek tragedy, has more conceptual scope: "the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge*, and nausea inhibits action; for their actions could not change anything in the eternal nature of things" (60). Beginning with Nietzsche there is a tendency, in some criticism, to see Hamlet as a privileged being, "a superman among men" (Knight 38). An example of more recent criticism in this vein is Linda Charnes's "Dismember Me: Shakespeare, Paranoia, and the Logic of Mass Culture," wherein she provides the following analysis of Hamlet:

Hamlet [. . .] offers the first fully *noir* text in Western literature, and Prince Hamlet the first *noir* detective. Or, rather, the first *noir* revenger. Situating a plot-driven classical revenge tragedy within the recursive circularity and ethical indeterminacy that characterize *noir*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is modernity's inaugural paranoid text. By "paranoia," however, I

don't mean an individual pathology [. . .] but, rather, paranoia in the literal Greek sense as a form of "overknowing," of surplus knowledge that leads, paradoxically, not to discovery but to undecidability. (4-5)

As the reference to "undecidability" suggests, Charnes subscribes to the view that "Hamlet cannot act" (5). Although, in the shift of critical perspective that originates with Nietzsche, Hamlet morphs from a being of extraordinary intelligence into one all-knowing, what he knows is not good: "He has seen the truth, not alone of Denmark, but of humanity, of the universe: and the truth is evil" (Knight 38). There is, therefore, nothing that he can do.

Thus, whether he thinks too much or *knows* too much, the end result is the same: criticism is shaped by the idea that Hamlet delays. Explications of delay tend to seek for the "real" Hamlet, to find him in his soliloquies, and, then, to offer elaborate analyses based on the hypothesised nature of this "real" Hamlet. While it may certainly be said that, in context of his time, Shakespeare does something extraordinary with character (for his dramas seem to be less focused on "types" in action and more on the qualities of being human in relationship), he remains, nonetheless, a dramatist who must consider dramatic necessity. In "Shakespeare's Art of Characterization: An Unambiguous Perspective," Robert Ornstein emphasises the need to see drama for what it performs rather than for what might rest in the silences outside of the performance, and, thus, he insists that "[r]ather than a master of oblique revelations, Shakespeare is a masterful creator of dramatic transparencies" and that "when interpretations of character become extremely subtle and involuted [. . .] criticism has lost its way" (249). It is not, therefore,

who Hamlet might be, that is at issue. What is at issue is nicely put in John Holloway's observation in *The Story of the Night*:

In nearly all of Shakespeare's major tragedies the hero, the protagonist, has a very great and indeed peculiar prominence. [. . .] [T]his prominence is not rightly seen in terms simply of character.

It is rather, that we make contact very directly with the *experience* through which the protagonist passes in the course of the play. The issue is not, what kind of man Hamlet *is*; but what he *does*. (Holloway 22)

The problem, then, is that interpretations based in delay, in explaining the delay, tend to confuse delay with inaction.

One approach to arguing that Hamlet is a Hamlet of action, however, is offered by two critics. In *The Court and the Castle: Some Treatments of a Recurrent Theme*, Rebecca West observes that "[a] host of [. . .] people [. . .] misread the character of Hamlet in exactly the same way. They see him as a symbol of irresolution" (7), and Eric S. Mallin, in "'You Kilt My Foddah': or Arnold, Prince of Denmark," speaks of "[t]he common misprision of Hamlet [. . .]: the notion that, at best, the prince is a frustrated and frustrating temporizer, a waffler" (129-30). Hamlet does act, in the conventional sense, and these two critics note his capacity for decisive action under certain circumstances, in context of a willingness to kill. Arguments such as these, while they do make a distinction between delay and inaction and while they do refute the "sentimentalist" or, more broadly, the Romantic view of Hamlet, one which sees him as *unable* to take revenge, do not refute the *fact* of the delay and do not sufficiently explore what makes Hamlet heroic.

Situating his synthesis of criticism regarding Hamlet's delay in the context of Hamlet's heroism, John Russell notes that

the number of approaches to the play's crux of contention, Hamlet's delay, can without distortion be reduced to two, the irrationalist and the rationalist. Each of these approaches can be further subdivided, the irrationalist into the 'disillusioned idealism' approach [. . .] and the 'family conflict approach' [. . .], the rationalist into the 'authenticity of the Ghost' approach and the 'morality of revenge' approach. (183)

He later notes that "[f]or the irrationalists, Hamlet achieves an ideal heroism by accepting the destruction of his immature ideals. For the rationalists, Hamlet achieves an ideal heroism by submitting to the ultimate Ideal" (220). What is important to take from Mallin's survey is the fact that each of these approaches attempts to establish Hamlet as an ideal hero, and, to do so, each begins with the assumption that to murder Claudius is to act. Because all other actions constitute a failure to commit *the* act, in essence the entire play waits for Hamlet to act like a hero.

Never mind that if Hamlet were to kill Claudius at his first opportunity there would be no play, critics persist in explaining Hamlet as if he were an ideal but tragic hero whose sole function is to murder. The impetus for this line of thinking likely stems from a reaction to the play that displays the particular logic that follows: if Hamlet had killed Claudius sooner, none of the terrible events of the play would have had to happened; no other characters would have had to die; Hamlet himself would have lived. The search for an explanation for his death begins, the search discovers delay, delay presupposes an expected event, and presupposition shapes interpretation. The line of

inquiry follows: if, according to the tradition established by Aristotle, the tragic hero must necessarily have a tragic flaw, and if delay is the reason that Hamlet dies, what, then is his tragic flaw that causes this delay? The problem with this line of thinking is that a clear cause-effect relationship between delay and death is difficult to substantiate, and approaches that situate explanations of Hamlet's heroism in the context of his murdering his uncle obscure the action that he takes all along.

To understand how it is that conceptions of Hamlet rooted in delay obscure the action that he takes, it is helpful to consider some characteristics of revenge tragedy of the period. In *The Revenger's Madness: A Study of Revenge Tragedy Motifs*, Charles A. Hallett and Elaine S. Hallett observe that "those conventional elements of the Elizabethan stage—the ghost, the madness, the delay, the play-within-a-play, the multiple murders, and the avenger's death" appear "with such surprising frequency in the revenge tragedies as to be particularly characteristic of them" (8). What the Hallet's statement suggests is that there is something like convention at work in *Hamlet*, and, if one wishes to know why Hamlet delays, one might well ask why Hieronimo, of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, hesitates. It is simple enough to comprehend a purely theatrical purpose in delay, for delay—for whatever reason—forms part of the action of the play. Delay, then, is not a problem but a necessity, and the search to explain Hamlet's death and, thus, to discover his tragic flaw must, therefore, begin elsewhere.

A. C. Bradley offers a useful point from which to begin the search for Hamlet's tragic flaw. Characterising Shakespeare's tragic heroes, he remarks that, "[i]n the circumstances where we see the hero placed, his tragic trait, which is also his greatness, is

fatal to him” (21). To discover Hamlet’s greatness, critics often begin from a perspective like the one articulated by Holloway:

[T]ragic protagonists occupy the pinnacle of Fortune’s wheel in a special way. They are not merely at the height of prosperity or greatness. They are “the observed of all observers”, the man sought by everyone, the saviour of the state, the centre of its ceremony, the central figure of the court, the senate, the battlefield, the throne in the market-place. (122)

Such a perspective causes difficulty because there is very little about Hamlet’s behaviour within the play to suggest that he is the kind of man described above, what is offered is but a glimpse, and it is offered only as description. One piece of evidence is provided by Claudius when he explains why he cannot hold Hamlet accountable for Polonius’s death, “He’s lov’d of the distracted multitude” (4.3.4), and the other, the greatest piece of evidence, is given in Ophelia’s description of her encounter with Hamlet’s mad-acting:

O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!
 The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s, eye, tongue, sword,
 Th’ expectation and rose of the fair sate,
 The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
 Th’ observ’d of all observers, quite, quite down! (3.2.150-54)

What is given here is a portrait of Bradley’s Hamlet-as-hero “before his father’s death” (108), and because the Hamlet described, who fits expectations of the tragic hero, is little part of the Hamlet experienced by the audience, there is some struggle in reconciling the two.

One approach to reconciling these two conceptions of Hamlet is, as noted, to locate some vestige of the heroic Hamlet in his soliloquies and to begin the cycle of explaining why his heroism falls short of expectations by focusing on reasons for his delay in taking revenge, to which his soliloquies make some allusion. This approach, however, does not sufficiently resolve the contradictions that Hamlet's behaviour brings forth. It is essential, instead, to see the whole Hamlet, the Hamlet of *after* his father's death, the Hamlet as he is *within* the play. While it may be impossible to describe a synthetic Hamlet, it is possible to describe Hamlet as he is within the play, and it is possible to see this Hamlet-as-he-is-within-the-play as a heroic Hamlet. In "Hamlet and Our Problems" Michael Goldman captures the spirit of Hamlet's heroism when, in answer to the question "what is an actor," he replies, "[a]n actor is a man who wants to play Hamlet" (43), and notes that this desire has less to do with the difficulty of the role and more to do with the range of expression required: "Hamlet strikes us as somehow unique in requiring and displaying the actor's art" (43).

This display of the "actor's art" (43) is not simply a requirement of the role, it is the essence of the role, for if he is, at any time, the Romantic, Oedipal, existential, or paranoid Hamlet, he is, at all times, the theatrical Hamlet: he is Hamlet the player. Whether he is mourner, madman, or architect of the play designed to "catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.605), Hamlet's greatness and his undoing is his penchant for dramatic representation. Therein lies the action of the play. Hamlet, who is the actor-as-hero, acts by acting.

Casting the hero of a revenge tragedy as actor-as-hero is a logical progression that follows a tendency inherent in the genre. To understand this tendency one must begin by

considering the dramatic potential that the necessity for revenge itself offers. John Kerrigan describes the dramatic potential in the following manner:

Imagine two actors on an open stage, with no props, no text, and, as yet, no character traits. The simplest yet most fraught way to mesh them is through injury and retaliation. One exchange simultaneously connects the players and sets them in opposition. A dramatic situation emerges. (4)

Revenge tragedy exploits the dramatic potential of situation that is inherent in revenge. It exploits it such that, as Charles A. Hallett and Elaine S. Hallett remark, “[r]evenge tragedy is noted (or notorious) for its theatricality” (3). In *Hamlet*, the tendency toward theatricality inherent in the genre is not only exploited for effect, it is also carried one step further and used to reveal a dramatic awareness: that is, *Hamlet* is, at once, histrionic and reflexive. If one looks beyond the particular events of *Hamlet* and looks to the way in which the play makes use of the theatricality inherent in the genre, a reading of *Hamlet* as actor-as-hero becomes compelling.

A reading of *Hamlet*-as-actor-as-hero is supported by the many references to and uses of theatrical representation in the play. Moreover, the many references to and uses of theatrical representation contribute to the play’s reflexivity. Readings of *Hamlet* that deny its reflexivity deny a fundamental impulse of the play; reflexive moments, while they may seem simply metaphorical, in fact highlight the artifice of the drama. For example, Hamlet’s response to Gertrude, that his shows of grief “indeed seem, / For they are actions that a man might play” (1.2.83-84), draws attention to the actor who is playing the part of Hamlet at the moment that the words are spoken. Again, when Hamlet provides direction to the players, “Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounc’d it to you,

trippingly on the tongue, but if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as live the town-crier spoke my lines" (3.2.1-3), his words reflect on the quality of his own speeches as performance. Moreover, Hamlet's acting of the director's role, here, reminds the audience that there is also an actor acting the Hamlet who is acting the director. Hamlet's speaking of a speech from the Fall of Troy, too, is a reflexive gesture because, when he stops with an indication to the player to finish the speech, "So proceed you" (2.2.465), Hamlet's acting gives way to reveal Hamlet, who could, in turn, give way to reveal the actor acting Hamlet. Such moments as these highlight the play's artifice.

Another instance of reflexivity, the play-within-the-play, calls attention to the play-without and, thereby, highlights the artifice of *Hamlet-as-play*. For example, Hamlet's commentary on the play-within-the-play, "'A poisons him i' the garden for his estate" (3.2.261), not only speaks of the events in "The Murder of Gonzago," but it also speaks of the events preceding and having an impact upon *Hamlet*. Hamlet's commentary on the play-within-the-play affects interpretation of *Hamlet*, and, thereby, acknowledges that the audience of *Hamlet*, while watching the-play-within-the-play, performs an act of interpretation. Speaking of the play-within-the-play, Robert Weiman, in "Mimesis in *Hamlet*," notes that "[s]uch mimesis of mimesis *dramatically* helps to establish the links between dramaturgy and theme" (279). References to theatre and the "mimesis of mimesis," then, are instances of reflexivity integral to the construction of *Hamlet*; moreover, these instance of reflexivity are integral to the construction Hamlet himself, for Hamlet is, at once, the essential figure of dramatic action and *the* vehicle of reflexivity in the play. Remove Hamlet and *Hamlet* becomes purely mimetic.

Weiman remarks that “[t]he mimesis of mimesis is deeply built into the play at large” (282) so that it is possible to

distinguish as least half a dozen differing uses of mimesis which Hamlet relates to. These involve (1) his role as theoretician, in which he recommends the *imitatio vitæ* topos to the players, and (2) that as theater critic, in which he artfully reviews the production of that unpopular neoclassical play [. . .], together with those altogether different practical activities by which Hamlet himself pursues the business of (3) dramatist, (4) director, (5) chorus, and, of course, (6) actor. (283)

Hamlet’s relationship to mimesis is reflexive: it reminds the audience of the play that it is watching, of the fact of the play-as-work-of-art. Hamlet sustains the play’s reflexivity by expounding upon the methods of representation employed in drama, by drawing parallels between life and theatre, and by critiquing his creation, the play-within-the-play. In this way, he also performs a kind of interpretation of *Hamlet* itself.

Another result of Hamlet’s relationship to the “mimesis of mimesis” is that his role as the tragic hero of a revenge tragedy is repositioned. Consider “the *imitatio vitæ* topos” (Weiman 283) in Hamlet’s advice to the players:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature. (3.2.17-22)

At the moment that Hamlet speaks these lines he is not only the centre of attention and, therefore, of the dramatic action, but he is also offering a criticism of performance that

reaches beyond the confines of any dramatic action performed by the players and turns back upon his own performance of these same lines. As a result, the play challenges the very advice that Hamlet gives, challenges “the whole neoclassical theory of representation as a strategy of verisimilitude, in accordance with which Hamlet would serve purely as a character or role, never as an actor, always as the *product* of characterization, never as a *process* of bringing it out” (Weiman 282-83).

The following chapters, then, discuss Hamlet in the process of characterising himself, discuss Hamlet-as-actor. The chapter entitled “The Prince” examines Hamlet’s motivation to act, a motivation that derives from his suspicion that he is the hero of a tragedy and his discovery that the tragedy is, in fact, a revenge tragedy. Conceiving of himself as an actor in a dramatic situation, Hamlet mediates himself through the two facets of the revenge hero’s role, the Prince of Wit and of the Prince of Death. The function of each role is elaborated below in the chapters “The Role of Wit” and “The Role of Death.” “The Role of Wit” examines the play’s concern with rhetoric, representation, and interpretation. “The Role of Death” explains the means by which the play breaks down the barriers between actor and audience. The conclusion, “Hamlet, Prince of Wit; Hamlet, Prince of Death,” reveals how deeply the play, in combining the two roles, plays with conventions of revenge tragedy.

The Prince

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare takes an innovative approach to revenge tragedy by combining elements of the genre with those of tragedy in general. David Scott Kastan believes that *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's "most intellectually engaging and elusive" (3) tragedy. *Hamlet* might, equally, be described as an engaging and elusive *revenge tragedy*, for, in innovating, Shakespeare not only extends the conventional limits of oeuvre but also those of genre. Shakespeare's innovations are focused in *Hamlet*'s central character, Hamlet himself. Hamlet is a self-conscious character with an interest in theatre and an impetus to act. Perceiving, at the outset of the play that he is in, the tragedy of his situation, Hamlet begins to perform as the tragic hero. As the play progresses, however, Hamlet realises that he is the hero of a *revenge tragedy*, and he is uneasy with the demands of the role. His theatrical interest and his awareness of role cause him to take on a kind of acting that observes yet disturbs the pattern of revenge tragedy and that fulfils yet questions the requirements of the tragic hero's role.

Before considering *how* Hamlet acts, it is necessary to understand *why* Hamlet acts, to understand his motivation, to understand why taking on the actor's role is a logical response to his situation. Hamlet's motivation is best explained by tracing the characteristic of revenge tragedy that Shakespeare enlarges, the one which proceeds from the pattern of evolution from the tragic to the revenge hero. The characteristic derives from the fact that, for both the tragic hero and the revenge hero, a general role exceeds the particular. John Holloway, in writing of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, explains the general role:

[T]he experience of the protagonist is not the deployment of a determinate character, but the assumption, and then the enactment, of a determinate *rôle*. *Rôle* predominates over character, because once it is assumed by an actor, it will be much the same whatever his nature may be. It overrides that nature: the play is its acting out. (26)

For the protagonist of a revenge tragedy, “the assumption, and then the enactment, of a determinate *rôle*” (26) is histrionic. As Kerrigan notes, heroes of Renaissance revenge tragedy exhibit an awareness that “as revengers in an imposed scenario, they resemble actors in a play” (15). Shakespeare imbues Hamlet with self-consciousness by enlarging Hamlet’s awareness so that it includes not only knowledge of his “determinate *rôle*” as hero of a tragedy, and of the histrionic potential of the role, but also an awareness of himself as a character in a play.

Consider Hamlet’s situation at the beginning of the play, given his self-consciousness. His father, the king, has died and his uncle has married his mother and ascended the throne. In this situation, Hamlet perceives a tragedy and perceives that he has the qualities of a *tragic* hero, perceptions which stem from his mourning and his sense that all is not right in the realm. After the news from the ghost, however, Hamlet comes to understand that the tragedy that he is hero of is a *revenge tragedy*. It is a situation from which he cannot escape and a role that he does not want; Hamlet is, nonetheless, confined to the parameters of the play that he is in. Hamlet’s self-consciousness, then, manifests itself in two ways. First, his awareness of role prompts his acting, which is a response to the situation in which he finds himself. Second, the acting is an artistic gesture through which he may enact a critique of the situation in which he

finds himself. His conception of his situation and his rejection of this situation provide the motivation for his acting, and his acting is a means of interpreting his “determinate *rôle*.”

Hamlet acts by taking on two roles, the Prince of Wit and the Prince of Death, which reflect aspects of the revenge hero's role. The Prince of Wit is Hamlet the madman and Hamlet the fool. The role arises naturally from Hamlet's suspicion that all is not right in the realm and becomes tactical following the ghost's exhortation to vengeance. The Prince of Death is Hamlet the princely mourner and Hamlet the revenger, who is also Hamlet the architect of the play-within-the-play. The role naturally arises from Hamlet's grief over his father's death and, soon, necessarily transmutes itself into that of revenger. It is essential to realise that, although the two roles are here described separately, they unite as well as divide, for madness may be considered a logical conclusion of the deep grief felt for the murdered and also a practical necessity for committing murder to avenge the violation, and Hamlet, in his acting, makes use of these relationships. To understand why Hamlet takes on the two roles, one must consider his situation in context both of the requisites of revenge tragedy and the characteristics of the tragic hero's role.

Because, in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare combines elements of revenge tragedy with elements of tragedy in general, to understand what Hamlet perceives in his “determinate *rôle*,” it is useful to begin by looking to where the characteristics of revenge tragedy and the requisites of the tragic hero's role intersect. Although a distinction may be made between revenge tragedy and tragedy in general, the revenger's role could also be that of the tragic hero, as it is in Hamlet's case. If the characteristics of revenge tragedy are “the

ghost, the madness, the delay, the play-within-a-play, the multiple murders, and the avenger's death" (Hallett and Hallett 8), then it is clear that the "avenger's death" (Hallett and Hallett 8) is the point at which this intersection occurs, for, as John Holloway observes of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, "a recurrent *motif* in the tragedies. [. . .] is the ordeal of the great and alienated who are pursued by life until they are sacrificed" (120). An event essential to the construction of the tragic hero is his inevitable and untimely death, and, by convention, so too for the revenge hero. Thus, whether he is in a tragedy or a revenge tragedy, what Hamlet perceives, in his situation, is the threat of his inevitable and untimely demise.

While it is clear that Hamlet "recognizes the inevitability of his own death, as his fideistic or fatalistic speech on the fall of a sparrow shows" (Kerrigan 189), the point at which he first recognises the inevitability of his own death is his first scene. It is a recognition, not simply of the inevitability but of the imminence of his death, and it is reinforced through the play's interest in teleology (as understood as a plan or purpose being worked through events), evidenced by the many references to fate, fortune, and foreboding. These references heighten the sense of doom that permeates the play. The first of such references is Horatio's remark on the appearance of the ghost: "This bodes some strange eruption to our state" (1.1.69). After this comes Hamlet's presentiment concerning the marriage of his mother and his uncle, "It is not, nor it cannot come to good" (1.2.158), which is followed by his response to the ghost's story of murder: "O my prophetic soul!" (1.5.40). Hamlet's declaration, in the last act, "There's divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (5.2.10-11), demonstrates that the play's interest in teleology combines with ethical concerns. Moreover, the teleology put

forth is a religious one, one which forms the crux of the ethical dilemma debated in the play, a debate that combines Old and New Testament attitudes concerning revenge.

Teleological concerns, alone, pertain to Hamlet's inevitable and untimely death, but where teleology and ethics combine, the revenger's dilemma is revealed, and this too, following the ghost's call to vengeance, becomes part of what Hamlet perceives in his "determinate *rôle*." The link between teleology and ethics arises from the inescapable and logical consequences of a crime that calls for revenge. It does not matter that Claudius is a competent-seeming king, that Polonius might simply be a fool, or that Ophelia is beautiful; each is complicit with the corruption in the realm that has as its origin King Hamlet's murder, and, by reason of revenge, so too is Hamlet. Rebecca West declares that "[i]t is Shakespeare's contention that the whole of the court is corrupt: society is corrupt. There is a flaw running horizontally through humanity wherever it is gathered together in space. [. . .] [T]he flaw runs vertically also; it runs through time, into the past" (27). It also runs into the future. Hamlet's position, as revenger, is, thus, predetermined and ethically vexed.

It is clear that part of the interest of the play, as Nietzsche argues, is Hamlet's knowledge of the ethical tension inherent in revenge. Hamlet comprehends his situation; he recognises that if he traces the repercussions of the crime, he too is implicated in the corruption, for either he kills Claudius and commits regicide or he does not kill Claudius and condones regicide (in this case also fratricide). Recognising his "determinate *rôle*" as prince-in-mourning in a court corrupted by regicide, he is aware that, if he takes on the role of the revenger, he too, inevitably, will be drawn into death. Hamlet, unlike

Oedipus, can conceive of his fate only too well, and, as Charles A. Hallett and Elaine S. Hallett explain,

The tragedy in *Hamlet* is a tragedy of situation [. . .]. Hamlet must kill Claudius; no one but Hamlet can bring him to justice. [. . .] [I]n doing the deed Hamlet will doom himself; he no more than Claudius can commit murder and live. The tragedy lies in the situation and in Hamlet's awareness of it. (213-14).

Immanent corruption suggests imminent death.

Hamlet's perception of the role that has been thrust upon him prompts him to take on both the Prince of Wit and the Prince of Death roles; he takes on the Prince of Death role, however, in direct response to his recognition of the inevitability of his death, a recognition which, later, forms part of the revenger's dilemma. Hamlet's Prince of Death role is, ultimately, a response to death itself, to the death of his father, to the murder that he must perform, and to his own death. Hamlet, in the Prince of Death role, begins as the princely mourner. As the princely mourner, he expresses the grief that he feels at the loss of his father. It is a grief that, as the opening lines of his first soliloquy demonstrate, reveals a will to join the beloved: "O that this too too sallied flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!" (1.2.129-30). With the call to vengeance, however, Hamlet incorporates an element of the revenger into the role of the Prince of Death, an element exemplified in his rally-cries of "Now could I drink hot blood" (3.2.390) and "My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (4.4.66). The expansion of the Prince of Death role can be detected in the shift in the tone of Hamlet's remembrance. In his first

soliloquy, he bemoans the pain that memory inflicts when he cries “Must I remember?” (1.2.143), but after the call to vengeance, he embraces it:

Remember thee!

Yea, from the table of my memory

I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,

[.....]

And thy commandment all alone live

Within the book and volume of my brain,

Unmix'd with baser matter. (1.5.97-104)

Although it is a role that he takes on, self-consciously, as an aspect of his role-playing, the role of revenger is a role that Hamlet does not want. John Holloway alludes to Hamlet's reluctance: “At least twice, Hamlet refers explicitly to his having taken on (albeit unwillingly) the task of the revenger” (26). In the first of such avowals, “The time is out of joint—O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right” (1.5.188-89), there is the use of the word joint, in this case as a part of the phrase “out of joint” (1.5.188), which harkens to Claudius's use of “jointress” (1.2.9) and later “conjunctive” (4.7.14) to describe Gertrude's relationship to himself and which compares with Fortinbras's assessment of Denmark's “state to be disjoint” (1.2.20) following the death of King Hamlet. The repetition of “joint” in Hamlet's phrase suggests that what needs to be set right is that which has been joined. Hence, part of Hamlet's concern is Claudius, but part, also, is his mother.

In the second avowal, “heaven hath pleas'd it so / To punish me with this, and this with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister” (3.4.173-75), there is, again,

evidence of the supposition that a religious teleology is at work through Hamlet. Further, Hamlet's describing himself as "scourge and minister" (3.4.173-75) taps into the ethical dimension of revenge. The two terms suggest not only what Hamlet must do but something of the quality of what he must do. He must be an agent of retribution, but it is a retribution that, while it is just, is purifying only in extreme. Given the revenge context in which Hamlet finds himself, there are only two possible outcomes, revenge in perpetuity, as in Icelandic saga, or purgation. That purgation is the likely outcome is acknowledged in Rosencrantz's concept of kingship which, although he applies it to the usurper Claudius, might well be considered in context of King Hamlet:

The cress of majesty

Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw

What's near it with it. Or it is a massy wheel

Fix'd on the summit of the highest mount,

To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things

Are mortis'd and adjoin'd, which when it falls,

Each small annexment, petty consequence,

Attends the boist'rous ruin. Never alone

Did the King sigh, but with a general groan. (3.3.15-23)

Given this, then, it is clear that, with his father's murder, Hamlet, too, is fated to attend "the boist'rous ruin" (3.3.22), for the "massy wheel" (3.3.17), which here symbolises the king, is also Fortune's emblem. Thus, Hamlet, despite his acting as the Prince of Death, cannot escape the consequences of his "determinate *rôle*."

It is essential to remember that, because Shakespeare combines elements of revenge tragedy with elements of tragedy in general, Hamlet's perception of his "determinate rôle" is not confined to that characteristic of tragedy that intersects with revenge tragedy. Although the primary focus of the preceding discussion is of Hamlet's position as revenge hero slated for demise, part of what prompts him to acting is his initial sense of himself as a tragic hero, his sense that he has the *qualities* of a tragic hero. While both the revenge hero and the tragic hero share the necessity of untimely demise, if a revenge hero is, more fully, a tragic hero, there are, as Holloway's observation "great and alienated" (120) suggests, two qualities that he too must exhibit: he must be both central and alien. Hamlet's death needs no further discussion; it is a fact given. What needs discussion are the two qualities of the tragic hero and Hamlet's relationship to them, for these two qualities, which Hamlet recognises in himself, also prompt his acting, and, while the Prince of Death role is clearly a response to death itself, as expressed in mourning and vengeance, Hamlet's taking on the Prince of Wit role is best elucidated by his sense of being, at once, central and alien.

Holloway argues that Claudius's first address to Hamlet "shows Hamlet's central position" (24). In fact, Hamlet is central before this. In the first scene of act one, although he is not present, the guards on watch draw attention to his importance when they say that he must be told of the ghost: "Let us impart what we have seen to-night / Unto young Hamlet, for, upon my life, / This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him" (1.1. 169-71). Hamlet's importance, his centrality, is clear, for repeatedly he is focal; even when he is not in a scene, he is its subject. Although it is clear that Hamlet is central, there is, however, something curious in his centrality, a curiosity best understood in

context of his alienation. Holloway argues that “[a] part of Hamlet’s experience, over the play, is to pass from one of these extreme positions to the other: from centrality to isolation” (Holloway 26). This, however, is inaccurate, for while it may be the case for many a tragic hero, it is not so for Hamlet. If, as Holloway would have it, “tragic protagonists occupy the pinnacle of Fortune’s wheel”(122), then *Hamlet* is, in fact, a revenge tragedy that begins in *medias res*; Shakespeare introduces Hamlet already a victim of the downward motion of the wheel. What is curious about Hamlet, then, is that he is, from the play’s beginning, at once, central *and* alien, and these are the qualities that he recognises in himself. Shakespeare, in combining these two qualities in Hamlet at the outset of the play, increases Hamlet’s ambiguity as hero, for there is little about Hamlet, as he is within the play, that fits with the conventional portrayal of the tragic hero.

Ophelia’s description of Hamlet provides a means for comprehending both his centrality and his alienation. Because Hamlet is “Th’ observ’d of all observers” (3.2.154), all eyes turn to him, all ears listen. If Hamlet is watched and listened to by everyone, he is, necessarily, in the centre. No matter where he is, eyes and ears adjust so to keep him in their line of observation. No matter how he observes others, the way that the play has been constructed, he is its focus. In the second scene of act one, however, from his first entrance, Hamlet—in his black mourning garb—is both focal *and* set apart. Although the Hamlet of “before his father’s death” (Bradley 108) is central, as in Holloway’s conception of the tragic hero, his centrality is shunted to the periphery when Claudius becomes king, and it is from this position that he is presented in the play; the reason for his being “Th’ observ’d of all observers” (3.2.154), therefore, also shifts.

Observation acquires an insidious aspect, an aspect that indicates difference as well as prominence, centrality and also separation.

The observation that results from Hamlet's position in the play is the unobserved observation of spying. Although scene one of act two may seem innocuous enough, a humorous interlude following the intense drama offered by the visitation of the ghost, it reveals something of the nature of the court. Following the description that he provides to his servant of the best method for discovering secrets, Polonius admonishes the man to "[o]bserve" (2.1.68) Laertes, his son. When Ophelia, later, enters and describes her encounter with Hamlet, Polonius remarks, "I am sorry that with better heed and judgment / I had not coted him" (2.1.108-09), of which the Riverside text notes, "**coted:** observed" (1152), and what is revealed is that Polonius has been applying his suggested tactics to the prince himself. Thus, whether he suggests being "seeing unseen" (3.1.32) at the encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia or being "plac'd (so please you) in the ear / Of all their conference" (3.1.184-85) at the meeting between Hamlet and the Queen, Polonius practices court politics based in tactical deception. Claudius too participates in these politics when he, at the behest of and along with Polonius, observes the encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia. While the reason given for the spying is to discern whether the cause of Hamlet's madness might be that his love has been rebuffed by Ophelia, what prompts the inquest is the threat that Hamlet presents. In Hamlet's case, his centrality is not an indication of his greatness but of his threat to the centre.

Because Hamlet is a threat he is also threatened. It is this threat that Hamlet perceives in his situation, this threat that he recognises in his simultaneous centrality and alienation, this threat that is the threat of death. Although Hamlet takes up two roles in

response to his situation, whereas the Prince of Death role is a response to death itself, the Prince of Wit role is a response to the fact of being threatened. Hamlet's disguise as the Prince Wit has two aspects, one which Shakespeare borrows from the pattern of revenge tragedy and one, if Jonathan Baldo is correct in what he argues in *The Unmasking of Drama: Contested Representation in Shakespeare's Tragedies*, which he borrows from his own earlier works:

One possible response open to a Shakespearean character [. . .] who is particularly sensitive to the threat of social or personal dis-integration is to resist theatricality, to refuse to play a part. [. . .]

Another possible response to dis-integration for a tragic character is the comic or antic one: to try to play *every* part. (54-55)

Of the options that his position permits, Hamlet chooses performance. In the role of the Prince of Wit, he employs the "antic disposition" (2.1.172) which is, in part, the revenge convention of "madness" (Hallett and Hallett 8) and which is also the role of the fool. Again, Shakespeare combines elements of tragedy with revenge tragedy to effect a unique result. Because the two aspects of the Prince of Wit role are, by theatrical convention, interrelated, distinguishing one aspect from the other is unnecessary; the kind of language that characterises the role, however, is exemplified by such riddling speech as is captured in Hamlet's warning to Polonius: "Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to't" (2.2.184-86).

Madness offers immediate protection, but because madness is tied to the revenger's role, it is also tied to Hamlet's inescapable end. Christy Desmet's remarks, in *Reading Shakespeare's Characters: Rhetoric, Ethics, and Identity*, suggest that there is,

in Ophelia's praise of the Hamlet of "before his father's death" (Bradley 108), an element of foreshadowing that links Hamlet's madness to his demise:

Ophelia's speech, defining Hamlet's character at the moment when he ceases to be himself, belongs to epideictic rhetoric; epideictic is that branch of classical rhetoric that deals with praise and blame and is particularly appropriate to ceremonial occasion. Long before Fortinbras delivers his judgment over Hamlet's dead body, then, Ophelia has offered her own eulogy. (12).

Ophelia's military metaphor, "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! / [. . .] / quite, quite down!" (3.1.150-54), which paints Hamlet "as if dead" in his madness, links Hamlet's madness, seemingly, to his eventual demise.

Although Hamlet dons madness as protection following the ghost's exhortation to vengeance, he employs it, tactically, for counter-espionage. Because he is spied on, his mad-acting draws more attention to him. It increases the threat that he presents. The increased threat that Hamlet presents is revealed in Claudius's observational language, which begins with his seemingly magnanimous request that Hamlet "remain / Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye" (1.2.115-16) but which turns wary after he sees Hamlet in interaction with Ophelia: "Madness in great ones must not unwatch'd go" (3.1.188). There is, thus, an irony in what Hamlet does, for, despite his awareness, no matter how he performs, he cannot escape his situation.

It is not only the court that watches Hamlet with increasing interest and concern; the audience of *Hamlet*, similarly, watches Hamlet. Because Hamlet is a self-conscious hero, an actor acting the hero's role, and because he reflexively reveals the artifice of the

play that he is in, his performance “dissolves the lines separating audience and actor, real and unreal” (Mallin 134). Remarking on the ways in which *Hamlet* extends the theatricality of the revenge genre, Eric S. Mallin explains that “[t]he play’s investment in the theory and practice of playmaking and performing extends from the intense faulty self-consciousness of the hero [. . .] to the traveling players and the constant observational paranoia at Elsinore” (Mallin 134). While one might argue the point about the “faulty self-consciousness of the hero,” it is worth making a closer examination of the idea of “the constant observational paranoia at Elsinore” (Mallin 134), for there are two levels on which spying operates. The first level of spying takes place within the confines of the play, and it is the spying that takes place at court. The second level of spying that takes place, however, takes place outside of the play, and it is the spying that the audience enacts. Jonathan Baldo explains that the watch of the guards in the first act of the play, and of the various characters that spy on Hamlet throughout the play, is part of “the watch that we, the members of the audience have undertaken, one that doubles and participates in all the others” (149). Hamlet is aware that the audience is always spying, omnisciently, and his acting is in relationship to the audience of *Hamlet* as much as it is in relationship to the court.

Because critics, too, are a part of the audience of *Hamlet*, Hamlet’s relationship to the audience affects critical perception, particularly perception of his character. Because Hamlet’s theatrical representation of himself functions as a form of characterisation, because he is, in effect, an actor in the process of characterising himself, seeking for coherence in character is misleading. In the search for the “real” Hamlet, the search for coherence in Hamlet’s character, any distinction made between what is role and what is

real is always an arbitrary imposition. Making the distinction between what is role and what is real is the critics' dilemma, where there should be no dilemma. Hamlet is an actor; what is role is real; what is real, role.

There is, in both the Prince of Wit and the Prince of Death roles, an element of Hamlet as he *is*, an element of Hamlet as he *conceives himself to be*, and an element of Hamlet, at the conjunction of being and conceiving, as he represents himself to be. The roles exemplify two facets of the role of the tragic hero of a revenge tragedy, and through them Hamlet plays out the requirements of his "determinate rôle." Nonetheless, the roles come, more and more, as artistic gesture, to represent Hamlet himself. Still, whether Hamlet is the Prince of Wit or the Prince of Death, critics have difficulty perceiving the performance. In either case, the difficulty has to do with, mad or mourning, how convincing Hamlet is. It is essential, therefore, to establish theatrical awareness in Hamlet's conception of himself, to demonstrate his self-consciousness in each of his two roles.

While it may seem, upon first inspection, that the Prince of Wit role is one taken on, whereas the Prince of Death role is the "real" Hamlet, both are, in fact, acted. The difference is that, whereas the Prince of Wit role is theatrical in the sense of over-the-top, by necessity of the requirement to convey madness, the Prince of Death role is donned for the purpose of distinction and is subtly theatrical. Although Hamlet's performance is most fully realised in his speaking part, each of the two roles is represented visually as well as orally. When the second scene of the first act opens, Hamlet's impact is entirely visual. Amongst the splendour of the king's audience, he is garbed in "nighted color" (1.2.68). Later, Ophelia's narrative of Hamlet's appearance at her closet evokes a

striking image of his other role “with his doublet all unbrac’d, / No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled, / Ungart’red, and down-gyved to his ankle” (2.1.75-77). Such purposeful posturing may be *seen*, that is interpreted, in two ways. Dressed in black, Hamlet is the princely mourner, but his black dress also prefigures his role as “scourge and minister” (3.4.173-75). Dressed in disarray, Hamlet is the madman who reveals, also, a glimpse of the unruly jester.

In the case of the Prince of Wit role, the problem with conceiving of Hamlet’s acting revolves around his intent. Although his mad-acting is never thought the “real” Hamlet, his mad-acting is, oftentimes, mistaken for real madness. Paul S. Conklin notes, beginning in the 1770s, “a growing inclination to see Hamlet as really close to madness, or as actually mad” (64). It may seem curious that criticism would tend this way, but criticism’s concern with Hamlet’s madness is nothing less than a reflection of the concern at court. In response to court concern regarding Hamlet’s madness, critics-as-audience adjust accordingly. Madness is, after all, a logical conclusion of deep grief; it does help to explain Hamlet’s ruthless behaviour; it is, in effect, a convenient excuse. Unfortunately, the excuse overlooks Hamlet’s intention.

Hamlet’s statement of intent is made to Horatio and Marcellus when he has them swear that they will betray neither the purpose nor the fact of his mad-acting:

Here, as before, never, so help you mercy,
How strange or odd some’er I bear myself—
As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on—
That you, at such times seeing me, never shall,

[.....]

[...]

note

That you know aught of me. (1.5.169-79)

It must be emphasised that Hamlet is, most certainly, mad by intent. He reiterates his intention when he says to Gertrude, "I essentially am not in madness / But mad in craft" (3.4.187-88). Arguments that favour Hamlet's being mad overlook the issue of intention. Acknowledging Hamlet's intention is essential to understanding Hamlet, for Hamlet is not unlike his dramatic predecessor, Hal, who also reveals his intentional performance. It is the very issue of intention, which complicates readings of the Henry IV plays and inspires the debate as to whether Hal is Machivellian prince or noble hero, that resurfaces here in *Hamlet*. Hamlet's mad acting is a performance, and while his acting may, in fact, be convincing not only to those on stage but to those off, at no time must the fact of his intention be lost.

Hamlet's intention, then, clarifies one issue: Hamlet is not mad. While he may grieve the death of his father, Hamlet is not, as a result of his grief, mad, and at no point does he become mad. Or does he? That Hamlet's intention can be lost suggests both a will to exonerate him and a willing suspension of disbelief in the face of a true performer. If intention is acknowledged, however, there remain, still, some barriers to conceiving that Hamlet's madness is *entirely* acted. Again, the depth and the extent of the interest, at court, in Hamlet's madness goes some way toward blurring the distinction: "though we know that Hamlet feigns madness, we submit emotionally to the repeated suggestion that Hamlet is no longer himself" (Hallett and Hallett 194). As well, given the fact of Hamlet's intention, a problem arises. What of Hamlet's interaction with the ghost? The

interaction precedes his statement of intent. What of his “wild and whirling words” (1.2.133)? Is there not some hint of madness here? Hamlet’s behaviour in this scene with the ghost, is such as to make many a critic suspect that Hamlet’s mad-acting is only partly or not at all an act.

It is all act. Hamlet’s mad-acting, in fact, begins as purposeful posturing, and it begins with his first appearance on stage. By tracing the comic function of Hamlet’s madness, it is possible to discern, in Hamlet’s first act of defiance, the origin of the Prince of Wit role. Given his simultaneously central and alien position within the court, Hamlet conceives of and employs the antic function—defiantly. The act of defiance, which suggests that the performance precedes the expression of intention to perform, is the first thing that Hamlet says. His first words, “A little more than kin, and less than kind” (1.2.65), are in the form of an aside, and, as Peter Davidson, in *Hamlet: Text and Performance*, remarks, the aside is a “device as typical of comedy as the soliloquy is of tragedy” (32). Thus, before Hamlet declares his intent, he has already exhibited traits associated with madness. It is not until his expression of intent, however, that Hamlet employs madness more fully as counter-espionage: that is, as an attribute of the revenger.

While the problem of conceiving of Hamlet’s acting in the Prince of Wit role revolves around his intention, in the case of the Prince of Death role, the problem with conceiving of Hamlet’s acting revolves around an intersection of two perspectives. The first is contrast. Whether Hamlet’s madness is feigned, not feigned, or only partially feigned, critics determine that the Prince of Wit is not the “real” Hamlet or that, if it is the “real” Hamlet, it is a Hamlet experiencing “a state of mind quite abnormal and induced

by special circumstances” (Bradley 108), and, therefore, not *really* Hamlet. What typically follows, from either supposition, then, is that the “real” Hamlet is the Hamlet of the soliloquies and of the serious interchanges. The second perspective derives from Hamlet’s own words and concerns the distinction between seeming and being.

In the following exchange between Hamlet and Gertrude, concerning Hamlet’s mourning aspect, Hamlet makes the distinction between seeming and being himself:

QUEEN. Why seems it so particular with thee?

HAMLET. Seems, madam? nay, it is, I know not “seems”

’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,

Nor customary suits of solemn black,

Nor windy suspiration of forc’d breath,

No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,

Nor the dejected havior of the visage,

Together with all forms, moods, shapes, of grief,

That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,

For they are actions that a man might play,

But I have that within which passes show. (1.2.75-85)

From Hamlet’s, “Seems, madam? nay, it is” (1.2.76), and, “I have that within which passes show” (1.2.85), critics, then, suppose that the “real” Hamlet may be found in those serious moments of the play. Such a supposition is too easily reached. It is useful, therefore, not only to consider the implications of the statement in isolation but also to consider it in context.

“I know not ‘seems’” (1.2.76) is a charged statement. There are two ways of comprehending Hamlet’s pointed rejoinder, and, from the second, two avenues of possibility result. The first and most immediate means of comprehending “I know not ‘seems’” (1.2.76) is to take it as Hamlet expressing the idea that he does not pretend his grief. Second, the rejoinder suggests that Hamlet recognises pretence. The first possibility that follows from this is that, because Hamlet recognises pretence, the statement can be taken as an indictment of the whole court. The second possibility is that, because Hamlet recognises pretence, he comprehends it sufficiently to employ it to effect: that is, Hamlet’s statement is a contradiction. There is support for this interpretation of Hamlet’s rejoinder, for, following the line “I know not ‘seems’” (1.2.76), Hamlet describes very clearly those elements of seeming that might be recognised as mourning. Given this last possibility, there are, then, two things to consider concerning Hamlet’s response to Gertrude that suggest that Hamlet is just as much being to seem as he is seeming to be.

First, in the exchange with Gertrude regarding his mourning, Hamlet is conscious of pose. Although he says that his grief exceeds mere outward expression, there is still an element of show to consider. What, after all, is the implication of his black clothing? Hamlet, in the initial court pageant, sets himself apart as the princely mourner, sets himself in contradistinction to the others, by wearing black. Some proof that Hamlet’s habit signifies such an intention comes, later, in his bitter exchange with Ophelia concerning the death of his father:

HAMLET. What should a man do but be merry, for look you how
cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within’s two hours.

OPHELIA. Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord.

HAMLET. So long? Nay, then let the dev'l wear black, for I'll have a
suit of sables. O heavens, die two months ago, and not forgotten yet?

(3.2.126-31)

The implication in his response is a recognition of his dress. The devil can wear black, for Hamlet will have a richer, perhaps an even darker, suit of mourning for persisting in remembering his father. It is such defiance as these lines capture that is captured with his first appearance. Note that, from the very beginning, Hamlet is not merely in mourning: he is defiantly in mourning, as his visual appearance foreshadows, as his aside suggests, and as his responses to Claudius and Gertrude demonstrate. When Gertrude describes Hamlet's garb as "nighted color" (1.2.68), she draws attention to the distinction that Hamlet has—purposefully—created.

In his exchange with Gertrude, Hamlet is not only conscious of pose, he is also comparing himself to a player, an actor. This is not the only time that Hamlet makes such a comparison. The very image of the grief that Hamlet demonstrated at the beginning of the play is, later, reflected back to him by the player who completes the recitation from the Fall of Troy that Hamlet begins. In this instance of the "mimesis of mimesis" (Weiman 279), Hamlet sees an image of what his "reality" should be:

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all the visage wann'd,

Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
 A broken voice, an' his whole function suiting
 With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing,
 [.]
 [. . .] What would he do
 Had he the motive and the cue for passion
 That I have? (2.2.550-61)

In this soliloquy, Hamlet is not only comparing himself to a player, but he is using a player as the model for appropriate action. In both instances, in his exchange with Gertrude and in his "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" soliloquy, Hamlet's awareness of himself is theatrical. Although he says that he has "that within which passes show" (1.2.85), he, nonetheless, conceives of himself in context of a particular role, a role that comes to combine those aspects of mourning and vengeance. The difference between the two comparisons that Hamlet makes between himself and an "actor" or someone who is merely playing a part is that, in the first instance, he is confident of his acting ability, of his ability to "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (3.2.17-18), and so on, confident that he is playing his part well, and, in the second, he is not.

That Hamlet compares himself to the player, "What would he do / Had he the motive and the cue for passion / That I have?" (2.2.559-61), demonstrates that he perceives of his role as revenger is just that—a role—and that he perceives of it as the logical conclusion of his role as princely mourner. In comparing himself to the player-revenger, he causes a moment of reflexivity in which the audience too may compare his

role with that of the player and may consider, in fact, Hamlet's acting as well as his action. That Hamlet perceives of his role of revenger as a role becomes clear in his "'Tis now the very witching time of night" (3.2.388) soliloquy. A comment that applies to this soliloquy, in which Hamlet exclaims, "Now could I drink hot blood" (3.2.390), is one made by John Holloway of the scenes where the tragic protagonists are seen "proposing to divide the kingdom, enlisting under the powers of evil, invoking maledictions upon the whole of Nature, or being, by well-marked stages, isolated from the other *dramatis personae*" (139). Holloway observes,

The formalized and ritualized quality of the scenes [. . .] was important because it helped the audience to see those scenes as not issuing by simple and all-directing causality from 'character', but as representing the more or less deliberated choice by the protagonist to live his life henceforth on a pattern which in part overrides character: to assume a rôle. (Holloway 139-40)

What this soliloquy is, then, is another, albeit histrionic, statement of intent, one that also arises from Hamlet's determination to act as revenger.

There is purpose in Hamlet's behaviour whether he is mad or mourning, and the purpose is manifested through performance. The Prince of Wit role and the Prince of Death role comprise the performance and each is an act of defiance. Hamlet's role-playing is self-conscious, for he not only exhibits and expresses theatrical awareness, but this awareness is integral to his self-conception and is evidenced in his self-representation. That he represents himself defiantly and that his defiance is expressed through theatrical convention and display suggest that, although Hamlet expresses his

intent to act after the apparent behaviour, his acting precedes the expression of his intention.

Because his defiance originates with his first appearance, Hamlet, from the outset of the play, acts. In response to his situation he takes on the two roles, those of the Prince of Wit and of the Prince of Death. The two roles are facets of the prince that Hamlet represents himself to be and are an elaboration—a playing out—of the requirements of revenge tragedy's tragic hero. As the Prince of Wit, he begins as the antic and as the Prince of Death, the princely mourner. His initial conception of himself comprehends what his performance manifests as the two roles. With the call to vengeance, however, his acting becomes more fully an act of defiance within his “determinate *rôle*” as revenger. The nature and the fullness of the revenge required explains Hamlet's reluctance to play the revenger, but, by making full use of both the Prince of Wit and the Prince of Death roles, Hamlet finds opportunity both for linguistic subterfuge, which aims to address the corrupt use of language at court, and for the expression of the ontological concerns, which are tied both to mourning and to the ethical dilemma inherent in the call to vengeance. Hamlet, as the actor performing the hero's role, is also the actor in the act of interpreting that role. Although he cannot escape his situation, Hamlet's acting, his interpretation of his “determinate *rôle*,” is genuinely heroic.

The Role of Wit

In the role of the Prince of Wit, Hamlet demonstrates the subversive potential of the revenger's madness. Theatrically representing himself as the madman who is also the fool, he contests the corruption at court by playfully disturbing the relationship between speaking and signification. He does so through word-games that call into question the stability of representation through language. Such questioning is an act of defiance against false representation, for language, at court, is used duplicitously, rhetoric employed to smooth over the signs of corruption. Hamlet provides a critique of speech as a representative act, and, thereby, he shows that language is a mask that may reveal or conceal. By refusing to acknowledge intention in signification, he demonstrates the power of interpretation to alter perception and to challenge the representational power of rhetoric.

Because *Hamlet* is a play about the use of rhetoric as a mode of representation and of speaking as a species of action, there is, throughout the play, a sustained interest in language. To chart the progress of words in *Hamlet* and to understand Hamlet's function as the Prince of Wit, begin with the queen's pragmatic response to Polonius. When he fails to get to the point of his remarks, she demands, "More matter with less art" (2.2.95), and, in this demand speaks of the two components of language: its art and its matter. The art of language is its technical or rhetorical deployment, in this case its form rather than its content. The matter of language is its substance, which depends upon its meaning, in this case its content rather than its form.

The function of language, however, is to have an effect on the listener, and speech, as a mode of action, can have an effect through its art and its matter, for the

speech-act comprises the will to communicate and the potential to fashion or to manipulate. Thus, at the level of speech, to act and to fashion are joined, matter and art, to create an effect. Gertrude's response to Polonius demonstrates the distinction between the art and the matter of language and suggests that, whether artfully used or not, speech has substance—"matter"—and also that speaking artfully can obscure the substance of what is said. Gertrude's response does not, however, address the fact that a further distinction arises from the act of speaking, and that is the distinction between the meaning of a speech and the particular effect that results. If speaking is also considered as a mode of representation, the two previous distinctions hold, but yet another distinction must be made: the distinction between words and deeds.

These distinctions relate both to the speaker's intention and also to the listener's perception, the listener's ability to verify what is said and, therefore, to discern what is real or true. These distinctions are an important element of *Hamlet* because, at base, *Hamlet's* (and Hamlet's) interest in language stems from a concern with falsity and truth in representation. Robert Weiman argues that "[t]here is, in *Hamlet* [. . .] a deeply disturbing gulf between what is represented and what is representing" (277). *Hamlet* is a study of representation; it is a demonstration, especially, of the interstices that lie between "what is represented and what is representing" (Weiman 277). The distinctions that are inherent in representation through speech reveal those interstices, and those interstices arise from the disjunction of speech and intention. The results of disjunction are three: speaking artfully can obscure the substance of what is said, the meaning of a speech may conceal the desired effect, and words may be divorced from deeds.

Hamlet's interest in and relationship to theatre are tied to the concern with falsity and truth in representation, for theatre is a mode of representation that holds "the mirror up to nature" (3.2.22) but is not nature's self, and it, thereby, offers a means of looking at representation as a construct that derives from intention. References to theatrical representation elucidate, therefore, those interstices that result from the disjunction between speech and intention. For example, the concern with the disjunction of words and deeds can be linked to allusions to audience. Emblems of the audience, "the very faculties of eyes and ears" (2.2.566), provide the means by which theatre has its impact, as Hamlet notes in his soliloquy expounding the player's art, where he suggests a definition of drama that comprises aural and visual representation (with both appearance and motion understood to comprise the visual aspect). Although given in context of theatrical performance, this definition of action extends, beyond theatre, to any act of representation. References to sight and sound proliferate in the text, and the play's interest in the two faculties is best explained by a concern with the relationship between representation and perception.

Returning to Hamlet's advice to the players, consider, then, the implications of "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (3.2.17-18). Here Hamlet suggests that, with the best acting, the two modes of representation are in *conjunction*, and, as the lines continue, "the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (3.2.17-22), the result is verisimilitude. If word and action are perceived to accord, then the acting is good. Extending this idea beyond the confines of dramatic representation to any form of representation, when sight and sound represent, veracity is verified in their conjunction. The issue of veracity, in context

of the conjunction of perception via the two faculties, surfaces with Horatio's comment after he sees the ghost, "Before my God, I might not this believe / Without the sensible and true avouch / Of mine own eyes" (1.1.56-58), and, again, when he describes having seen the ghost while on watch:

And I with them the third night kept the watch,
Where, as they had delivered, both in time,
Form of the thing, each word made true and good,
The apparition comes. (1.2.208-11)

The conjunction of the art and the matter and of the meaning and the effect of language similarly substantiate the veracity of what is said. The examination of the disjunction of speech and intention, at all three levels of distinction that occur when speaking represents, pertains to the play's interest in matters of truth and falsity.

A part of Hamlet's heroic action is this very examination. Given the art, the matter, and the effect of language and given that speaking is a species of action and a mode of representation, consider, again, Hamlet's situation. At the end of his first soliloquy, after speaking of the corruption of the world, his sorrow at his father's death, his anger at his mother's forgetfulness, and his ill boding at the marriage of his mother and his uncle, he bemoans: "I must hold my tongue" (1.2.159). Although, in retrospect, the thought of Hamlet holding his tongue seems ironic, he must indeed; what initially is bemoaning, by act two becomes accusation when he berates himself because he "can say nothing" (2.2.569). It is true that Hamlet cannot say anything against the marriage of his mother and his uncle, and he, most certainly, cannot accuse Claudius of murder, for such declarations could be construed as treason. Claudius may be a pretender king, but he is

king nonetheless, and, as he assures Gertrude, “There’s such divinity doth hedge a king / That treason can but peep to what it would, / Acts little of his will” (4.5.124-26).

Claudius’s statement is affirmed in the final scene of the play when Hamlet stabs him and the cry erupts: “Treason! treason!” (5.2.323). Although Hamlet never directly accuses Claudius, he does make the accusation to his mother.

QUEEN. As kill a king!

HAMLET. Ay, lady, it was my word. (3.4.30)

His use of “word” here emphasises the play’s concern with words, with language.

Although Hamlet cannot commit a treasonous speech-act, he *can*, nonetheless, use language for a purpose.

To understand how Hamlet uses language and for what purpose, it is necessary to consider madness as a representational act, to consider it as a element of the stage. First, when Hamlet plays mad, “two separate conventions are involved. There is the ‘antic disposition,’ which, technically, must be understood in terms of the disguise convention” (Hallett and Hallett 190), and the madness itself: “the disguise and the madness motifs in revenge tragedy are closely related [. . .] [.] [B]ecause the particular disguise that Hamlet chooses is that of lunacy, the antic disposition must be considered in any discussion of the madness” (Hallett and Hallett 191). Second, there is a relationship between madness and the role of the fool. Robert Weiman, in “Mimesis in *Hamlet*,” makes the connection:

[O]n the Elizabethan stage madness not only constitutes an *object* of representation but also forms a (nonclassical) *mode* of representing, as

associated with the element of clowning, punning, and 'impertinency,' the tradition of topsy-turvydom and the 'mad' nonsensical Vice. (278)

In "Telmahs: Carnival Laughter in Hamlet," Robert Barrie elaborates on those traits that Hamlet, in his "madness," displays:

Setting aside his high blood's royalty, Hamlet shares with the Fool/Vice such attributes as an association with the devil, improvisational wit, special speech and body languages, and association with music and dancing, cynicism regarding women, and roles Presenter, Chorus, plotter, and swordsman. (83)

In his mad acting, then, Hamlet combines the element of disguise with the theatrical potential of the fool.

Perhaps the best means of elucidating the effect that Hamlet achieves by this combination is to think about the functions of the antic role in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The first function is exemplified by Gloucester's son Edgar in his Tom o' Bedlam disguise. In this case, the antic role is that of madness, which offers, to Edgar, a kind of protection, and incoherent language is part of the disguise that provides the protection. Lear's fool offers an example of the second function of the antic role. Lear's fool, who is the court jester, is a kind of advisor, a wise fool. His riddling speech has a logic and a corrective thrust but is such that it can be overlooked as mere madness; thence, in this case, madness acts as the disguise. The connection between disguise and madness and between madness and the role of the fool permits, therefore, speech of a treacherous kind—a revelatory kind.

Although Hamlet's soliloquies offer a kind of revelatory speech, their effect is of a different nature, and to determine that the "real" Hamlet is the Hamlet of the soliloquies is to hear only half of what he says. For example, portrayals of Hamlet, such as in Olivier's film version, use the soliloquies to characterise him as the melancholy Dane. These portrayals comprehend only one aspect of Hamlet's intelligence and overlook the other. Peter Davidson elaborates on that lively aspect of Hamlet's intelligence as expressed through jest:

Hamlet's humour is properly to be termed wit, and that word 'wit' should be considered not solely as a word for a kind of comedy but as retaining something of its original Anglo-Saxon meaning: "intelligence", from the verb *witan*, "to know". (33)

Rebecca West, again, makes the connection when she explains the function of Hamlet's wit: "All through the play Hamlet speaks with a quick, springing harmony recognizable as the voice of physical and mental splendor; his mind travels like lightening yet strikes below the surface, and is impulsive not in surrender to folly but in search of wisdom" (29).

The association between wit and wisdom is made in the play itself. In Polonius's advice to Reynaldo, wherein he describes verbal tactics for revealing dishonour, there is a clear link between "wit" and wisdom. He begins, "I believe it is the fetch of wit" (2.1.38) and then ends, "thus do we of wisdom and of reach, / With windlasses and with assays of bias, / By indirections find directions out" (2.1.61-63). Because, of his "antic disposition" (1.5.171-72), Hamlet says, "I essentially am not in madness, / But mad in craft" (3.4.187-88), rather than thinking of his madness as anything less than intentional,

rather than searching for “the cause of this effect” (2.2.101) or “the cause of this defect” (2.2.102), consider what the effect of this defect is.

While rhetoric is certainly a means of creating an effect, even the illogical language of madness may act upon the hearer. Its effect is to challenge power structures based in meaning, and it is this fact that explains how Hamlet, as the Prince of Wit, is dangerous. For example, of Ophelia’s madness, the gentleman says: “Her speech is nothing, / Yet the unshaped use of it doth move / The hearers to collection” (4.5.7-9). Laertes, too, comprehends the potency of Ophelia’s ranting: “This nothing’s more than matter” (4.5.174). As for Hamlet’s madness, Claudius calls it “turbulent and dangerous lunacy” (3.1.4), and, after the play-within-the-play, when he perceives more fully the threat that Hamlet presents, he remarks, “I like him not, nor stands it safe with us / To let his madness range” (3.3.1-2), for he realises that the danger the madness presents is proportional to social position: “Madness in great ones must not unwatch’d go” (3.1.188).

Because Hamlet’s mad acting makes him a threat and is part of what, eventually, leads to his death, and because it is not possible that Hamlet should intend his own demise, critics perceive that Hamlet’s madness controls Hamlet rather than the opposite. T. S. Eliot’s comments that “[t]he levity of Hamlet, his repetition of phrase, his puns, are not part of a deliberate plan of dissimulation, but a form of emotional relief” (125), and in *Hamlet: A Tragedy of Errors* Weston Babcock argues that, in effect, Hamlet’s tragic flaw and the “main line of irony in the play” (39) is “his inability to control his words” (75). Hamlet, however, is very much in control of his words; he, in fact, uses language intentionally, defiantly. In John Russell’s view,

Like Pyrrhus, Hamlet is the son of a dear father murdered. But unlike Pyrrhus, a son-avenger who pursues and achieves his fatal purpose with irresistible and hellbent momentum, Hamlet pursues his victim perversely, not with a sword but with words. (106)

Language is Hamlet's weapon, and the greater part of his mad acting includes deliberate linguistic play. Margaret W. Ferguson describes the effect of Hamlet's verbal tactics:

Hamlet frequently uses language to effect a divorce between words and their conventional meanings. His rhetorical tactics, which include punning and deliberately undoing the rhetorical figures of other speakers, expose the arbitrariness, as well as the fragility, of the bonds that tie words to agreed-upon significations. His language in dialogues with others, though not in his soliloquies, produces a curious effect of *materializing* the word. (292)

Hamlet speaks in riddles because riddles are open to multiple interpretations; similarly, he disturbs patterns of signification to draw attention to the variety of interpretation possible. By using the multiplicity of meaning to disrupt the interpretative act, Hamlet requires the audience to reconsider representation through language.

Hamlet's madness offers new ways of looking at speaking. It is, therefore, no coincidence that Polonius's description of Hamlet's descent into madness takes the form of a grammatical act:

And he repell'd, a short tale to make,
Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,

Thence to a lightness, and by this declension,

Into the madness wherein he now raves. (2.2.146-50)

Note that here the declension—which is simultaneously “[t]he process or state of declining, or sinking into a lower or inferior condition” (OED I.3.) and also “[t]he action of declining, *i.e.* setting forth in order the different cases of, a noun, adjective, or pronoun” (OED II.4.c)—of Hamlet’s madness ends with his raving, or uncontrolled speaking. Hamlet’s speaking, however, is hardly uncontrolled: it is intentional.

Polonius himself draws attention to this very fact when, in an aside, he remarks, “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t” (2.2.203-04), and, when he elaborates on the rhetorical logic of Hamlet’s mad-speaking, he captures the subversive potential of the revenger’s madness: “How pregnant sometimes his replies are! a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be deliver’d of” (2.2.208-11). Because the disguise element and the function of the fool combine in the role of the madman, Hamlet can say things “which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be deliver’d of” (2.2.210-11). Thus, for Hamlet, madness offers a means of defiance as well as defence.

Hamlet uses his madness as a means of defiance because, at court, language is used duplicitously; it is used to conceal. There is a rhetorical dexterity at work at court that is evidenced even by such a lesser character as Osric, that is more pronounced in Polonius, and that is most developed in Claudius. While those who are part of the corruption at court speak double to placate and to deceive, Hamlet uses double-speaking to disturb and to reveal. Hamlet’s verbal play, by calling into question the stability of

representation through language, upsets the power-structures based in the false use of language. In essence, disguised as the unknowing one, Hamlet effects a counter-attack.

Hamlet's response to the initial act of physical poisoning is to administer an emblematic poison of his own. In the following exchange regarding "The Murder of Gonzago," Hamlet simultaneously provides an interpretation of his role as the Prince of Wit and takes a well-aimed thrust at Claudius:

KING. Have you heard the argument? is there no
offense in't?

HAMLET. No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest—no
offense i' th' world. (3.2.232-35)

Poison is Claudius's murder device, and the poison jest is Hamlet's response. (Ironically, in the end of the play, in a scene contrived by Claudius, it is Claudius's poison that does the work.) Moreover, although the ghost's description of his murder is literal, "And in the porches of my ears did pour / The leprous distillment" (1.5.63-64), it has symbolic relevance, for, certainly, the act of poisoning begets the necessity of false representation through language, which the ghost's insistence to Hamlet suggests:

Now, Hamlet, hear:

'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
A serpent stung me, so the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forged process of my death
Rankly abus'd. (1.5.34-38)

Further, as the ghost's lines suggest and as the exchange between Hamlet and Horatio affirms,

HAMLET. But what, in faith, make you from Wittenberg?

HORATIO. A truant disposition, good my lord.

HAMLET. I would not hear your enemy say so,

Nor shall you do my ear that violence

To make it truster of your own report

Against yourself. I know you are no truant. (1.2.168-73)

the ear is abused by a lie. Poison in the ear may, thus, represent false speaking because lying is a violence to the ear.

That lying is a concern of the play is evidenced by Hamlet's assessment of truth. In one instance, he says to Polonius, "to be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man pick'd out of ten thousand" (2.2.178-79). In another,

HAMLET. What news?

ROSENCRANTZ. None, my lord, but the world's grown honest.

HAMLET. Then is doomsday near. But your news is not true. (2.2.236-38)

Here, Hamlet's verbal play redoubles the impression that truth is a rarity. Moreover, in an instance of fine rhetorical play, Hamlet offers a politic version of honesty when he talks about the "[s]landers" made of "old men" (2.2.196-97). As Stephen Booth notes,

Part of the joke here is that these slanders are true. When Hamlet finishes his list, he seems about to continue in the same vein and to demonstrate his madness by saying something like "All which, sir, though . . . , yet are lies." Instead, a syntactical machine ('though . . . yet'), rhetorical

emphasis ('powerfully and potently'), and diction ('believe') suitable for the expected denial are used to admit the truth of the slanders. (34)

His comment, "though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down" (2.2.201-02), has in it a suggestion of court-speaking with its element of flattering deception.

Guildestern's probing of Hamlet exemplifies the verbal deception practised at court, and Hamlet's response to it draws a metaphor to explain how the deception works. The exchange begins with Hamlet asking, "Will you play upon this pipe?" (3.2.350), follows with Guildestern's refusal, Hamlet's response, "It is as easy as lying" (3.2.357), and Guildestern's repeated refusal, and ends with Hamlet's retort:

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much more music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be play'd on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you fret me, yet you cannot play upon me. (3.2.363-72)

Hamlet's allusion to lying is deeper than the simple logic that lying is easy and therefore flute-playing is easy. To play upon is to have an effect on, and the way that language is used at court makes Hamlet feel that he is being played upon, in other words, manipulated.

Hamlet is keenly aware of language use and, therefore, of its effect. When he, holding Rosencrantz and Guildestern each by the hand, says, "Hark you [. . .] at each ear

a hearer” (2.2.381-82), his phrase doubles the aural impact because the two hearers are each within access of Hamlet’s auditory members. In two other instances, moments during his interchange with Guildenstern, Hamlet draws attention specifically to aspects of language:

GUILDENSTERN. Good my lord, voutsafe me a word with
you.

HAMLET. Sir, a whole history. (3.2. 296-97)

Here Hamlet moves from the single word to language’s capacity for narrative, which results when many words are put together. Later, Hamlet does the reverse,

GUILDENSTERN. Good lord, put your discourse into some
frame, and start not so wildly from my affair.

HAMLET. I am tame, sir. Pronounce. (3.2.308-10)

when he reduces discourse to its auditory units.

These instances are not the only in which Hamlet plays with language. More direct responses to flattery, hypocrisy, and rhetorical trickery are evidenced in his response to Osric, Polonius, and Claudius. Each of these three are guilty of auricular abuse. The least of them, Osric, speaks to flatter, and his sycophancy offers one example of the kind of speaking that occurs at court. Aware of Osric’s tendency, Hamlet plays it to the fullest by demanding contradiction:

OSRIC. I thank your lordship, it is very hot.

HAMLET. No, believe me, ’tis very cold, the wind is
northerly.

OSRIC. It is indifferent cold, my lord, indeed.

HAMLET. But yet methinks it is very sultry and hot
for my complexion.

OSRIC. Exceedingly, my lord, it is very sultry—as
'twere—I cannot tell how. (5.2.94-102)

Hamlet's remark to Horatio, "'Tis a chough" (5.2.87), of which is noted, "**chough**: jackdaw, bird that could be taught to speak" (1182), nicely captures the inexperienced means by which Osric attempts to ingratiate himself with the prince.

In Polonius's case, the meaning and the intention of his speaking are distinct, oftentimes divorced. Although he is sometimes read as a rather harmless rambling fool, he is, in fact, a hypocrite, and Hamlet, therefore, has much fun at his expense. In the following exchange Hamlet's verbal play achieves two things:

POLONIUS. What do you read, my lord?

HAMLET. Words, words, words.

POLONIUS. What is the matter, my lord?

HAMLET. Between who?

POLONIUS. I mean, the matter that you read, my lord. (2.2.191-95)

Stephen Booth explains one result of the exchange:

In his first question Polonius assumes that what he says will have meaning only within the range appropriate to the context in which he speaks. In his second he acts to limit the frame of reference of the first question [. . .].

On his third try Polonius achieves a question whose range is as limited as his meaning. (Booth 33)

Another result stems from the repetition. Although A. C. Bradley attributes Hamlet's "habit of repetition" (148) to character, it may be attributed to theatrical necessity. Consider that the repeated word or phrase may be used to heighten the audience's experience of what is being said. Given these two aspects of the exchange, Hamlet, then, while emphasising the units of language, forces Polonius to say, very exactly, what he means.

Another jab that Hamlet takes at Polonius follows an exchange not unlike the one between Hamlet and Osric, the one which highlights Osric's flattery. In the exchange that precedes Hamlet's parting thrust, Hamlet demands of Polonius a verbally dextrous sort of flattery:

HAMLET. Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in
shape of a camel?

POLONIUS. By th' mass and 'tis, like a camel indeed.

HAMLET. Methinks it is like a weasel.

POLONIUS. It is back'd like a weasel.

HAMLET. Or like a whale.

POLONIUS. Very like a whale. (3.2.376-82)

Having had Polonius repeat his comments, Hamlet then says, in response Gertrude's request of his presence, as conveyed by Polonius, that he "will come by and by" (3.2.384-85). To which Polonius responds "I will say so" (3.2.386). The jab that Hamlet then takes plays with Polonius's tendency to verbosity and follows as a further challenge of his ability to repeat. Hamlet's "'By and by' is easily said" (3.2.387), and it suggests both

that repetition is an simple task and that “by and by” (3.2.385) will not be all that is said by Polonius to the queen.

Although Osric’s flattery and Polonius’s hypocrisy are examples of auricular abuse, Claudius’s verbal tricks are, by far, the most poisonous for they are the most pleasing. Clearly an indictment of the new monarch, Hamlet’s “He that plays the king shall be welcome—” (2.2.319) suggests something of Claudius’s success in the role as well as something of the nature of that success; the king of the corrupt court, Claudius is also its master rhetorician. In Claudius’s case, what is concealed by rhetoric is not only meaning or intention but also the deed that begot the corruption, the original, physical act of poisoning. Following Polonius’s comment “that with devotion’s visage / And pious action we do sugar o’er / The devil himself” (3.1.46-48), Claudius bemoans:

How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!

The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plast’ring art,

Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it

Than is my deed to my most painted word. (3.1.49-52)

Here he not only admits to the disjunction between his words and his deed but he also recognises the quality of his rhetorical style.

Using “With mirth in funeral, and with dirge in marriage” (1.2.12) as an example, Stephen Booth discusses those elements of Claudius’s speaking style that hide corruption: “Claudius uses syntactical and rhetorical devices for equation by balance [. . .] to smooth over any inconsistencies whatsoever” (26). He notes that by employing such devices, “Claudius makes unnatural connections between moral contraries” (26).

One example of such is Claudius's first address to Hamlet: "now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son" (1.2.64).

Hamlet's response to the address "is a caricature of Claudius' equations by rhetorical balance" (Booth 27), which, rather than joining, disjoins. On a purely linguistic level, "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (1.2.65) is an impossibility, as there is only one letter that separates the two words. The response suggests something of the impossibility of the relatedness that Claudius fashions. What is also interesting about Hamlet's response is that it "is spoken not to the king but to the audience" (Booth 26-27). While the audience may have been made somewhat uneasy at Claudius's meaning, it was also soothed by his rhetoric. In demonstrating the impossibility of the relatedness that Claudius fashions, in revealing, to the audience, the source of its uneasiness, Hamlet acquires the audience's support of his verbal assault.

Robert Barrie believes that "the festive, carnival discourse of *Hamlet* has been largely suppressed or co-opted, and few have explored very far how Hamlet's Fool aspect (as opposed to Hamlet's madness) might be seen to influence the play's meaning" (84). He argues that examinations of Hamlet as fool have tended to "support the commonly held humanist assumption that *Hamlet* reinforces some hierarchical structure of moral order upon which the stability of the official culture (then and now) rests, and upon which the seriousness of tragedy depends" (54) and contends that, in fact, "the merger of Hamlet with the Fool turns all official hierarchies topsyturvy" (85). Although, in the role of the Prince of Wit, Hamlet uses verbal tactics to assault court rhetoric, his assault is more profound than merely an assault of the corruption that reveals itself in rhetoric. As the madman who is also the jester, Hamlet assaults the stability of language itself.

Because Hamlet cannot accuse Claudius of murder, because he cannot address the word-deed disjunction that is at the base of the corruption at court, he plays word games to reveal the corrupt use of language. The hint that the disarray of his visual fashioning of his madness makes comes to fruition in the unruly jesting by which he assaults court rhetoric. Disguised as the Prince of Wit, Hamlet reveals that there is, at court, disjunction between the art and the matter of language and between the act and the effect of speaking. By doing so he demonstrates that artful speaking can obscure what is said and that the meaning of a speech may conceal the desired effect. Most significantly, however, Hamlet also demonstrates that the matter, the substance, the meaning of a spoken word is subject to interpretation, and that, because intention in verbal representation may be disturbed by interpretation of what is represented, the mutable relationship between speaking and signification is a source of power for both the speaker and the auditor. By disturbing the relationship between intention and signification, Hamlet, as the Prince of With, destabilises representation through language to such an extent that nothing remains privileged except his own speaking.

The Role of Death

In the role of the Prince of Death, Hamlet furthers the privileged position of his speaking part. Theatrically representing himself as the princely mourner and the revenger, he elucidates the revenger's problematic relationship to revenge.

Communicating a concern with ontology through soliloquies of remembrance and ethical consideration, Hamlet forges an intimate connection with the audience that is in contrast to the murdered relationships at court. This connection provides the audience with the context for viewing that fruit of the call to vengeance, the revenger's play-within-the-play, daringly interpreted by Hamlet, himself. Through the process of delay and through the play-within-the-play, Hamlet demonstrates that speech is a mode of action as essential to revenge tragedy as is the violence inherent to the genre.

Although revenge tragedy, because of "its characteristic drive towards punishment" (Kerrigan 4), is a genre typified by physical action, verbal action, nonetheless, forms part of the drama. John Kerrigan notes that it is in the nature of revenge tragedy that the revenger's "predicament is imposed on him, and to know this is part of his plight" (12) and that, as a result, there is, along with violence, "a dialectically fraught verbalness" (29). He explains that revenge tragedies are "machines for producing ethical deadlock: moments of trial within and beyond character in which rhetoric is, in the liveliest sense, an agent of action" (29). In the Prince of Death role, Hamlet—the actor acting the hero—not only employs rhetoric as "an agent of action" (Kerrigan 29), but he also demonstrates that this action is as essential to the dramatic action of the play as any physical act.

The means by which Hamlet demonstrates that rhetoric is an “agent of action” (Kerrigan 29) is “the delay” (Hallett and Hallett 8) convention of revenge tragedy. That part of Hamlet’s intention, in acting, is in prolonging this delay is implied in the selection that he chooses for the player’s recitation, for Hamlet strikingly maintains what might be termed the Pyrrhus pose, which derives from “Pyrrhus’ pause” (2.2.487) in the speech from the fall of Troy:

Pyrrhus at Priam drives, in rage strikes wide,
 But with the whiff and wind of his fell sword
 Th’ unnerved father falls. The senseless Ilium,
 [.]
 Takes prisoner Pyrrhus’ ear; for low his sword,
 Which was declining on the milky head
 Of reverent Priam, seem’d i’ th’ air to stick.
 So as a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood
 And, like a neutral to his will and matter,
 Did nothing. (2.2.472-82)

As the lines reveal, the dramatic potential mounts and then, abruptly, stops. The result, then, of Hamlet’s maintaining the Pyrrhus pose is that an emphasis is placed on the cessation of physical action, an emphasis that is achieved through verbal action. Time and again, Hamlet effects this kind of pause in his consideration of and hesitation to take revenge.

Michael Goldman explains Hamlet’s Pyrrhus pose when he argues that a species of theatrical inaction permeates the play and discusses Hamlet’s hesitation as “an

important technical device [. . .] ‘stop-action’ [. . .], that is, where one or more players is stopped in mid-gesture and the action is frozen in a variety of ways” (45). Stop-action makes an audience “conscious of the fine line between genuine intensity and pose” (Goldman 46). It is also plays with “one of our most fundamental theatrical appetites: the desire for action that makes sense, especially for action that seems complete and resolved” (Goldman 44). Given Goldman’s remarks on stop-action, it is useful to consider John Kerrigan’s comment that “Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* [. . .] revolves around the question, what might action be?” (4). An answer seems to lie in the effects that Hamlet’s Pyrrhus pose achieves in the play.

In *Hamlet*, the Pyrrhus pose achieves three things. First, it serves a reflexive function, for it draws attention to the artifice of a particular dramatic moment; it draws attention to Hamlet’s self-consciousness theatricality. Goldman, discussing the pause at the transition from lines “Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!” (2.2.581) to “Why, what an ass am I!” (2.2.582) in Hamlet’s “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I” soliloquy, remarks that, here, the audience is

made conscious of the fine line between intensity and pose. Indeed, there is no line [. . .]. Hamlet is throwing himself into the role of the revenger. But by interrupting himself at the height of his outburst, by freezing the pose, Hamlet draws our attention to his theatricality of gesture and language. (46)

Not only does Hamlet draw attention to “his theatricality of gesture and language” (Goldman 46), but he also, in this moment, reconsiders the dramatic quality of his outburst, reconsiders his ability to “Suit the action to the word” (3.2.17). The soliloquy

begins with Hamlet critiquing the player's performance, noting that the player could so "force his soul" that "his whole function"—visage, tears, aspect, voice—could suit "[w]ith forms to his conceit" (2.2.553-57); after pausing, however, Hamlet critiques his own performance and berates himself for unpacking his "heart with words" (2.2.585) alone. The Pyrrhus pose reveals that Hamlet not only conceives of himself as a performer but recognises the theatrical quality of his soliloquies.

Second, the Pyrrhus pose creates a space for the contemplation of that most desired act, the act of vengeance. By playing with expectations for completed physical action, Hamlet's Pyrrhus pose requires the audience to consider, along with Hamlet, the nature of revenge, a consideration that is as much a part of the action of revenge tragedy as is the act of vengeance itself. For example,

Now might I do it pat, now 'a is a-praying;
And now I'll do't—and so 'a goes to heaven,
And so am I reveng'd. That would be scann'd:
A villain kills my father, and for that
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.

Why this is hire and salary, not revenge. (3.4.73-79)

In these lines Hamlet captures the essence of revenge: for revenge to be effected, there must be retaliation; the revenger must mete out a punishment equal to that of the original crime. The lines, moreover, reveal with special clarity the rhetorical quality of Hamlet's soliloquies. The transition from "And so am I reveng'd. / That would be scann'd" (3.4.75-76) to "this is hire and salary, not revenge" (3.4.79) demonstrates the logic of all

of Hamlet's soliloquies. Not mere ranting, as Stephen Greenblatt observes, "Hamlet's soliloquies are carefully crafted rhetorical performances" (1661). Moments of arrested physical action (that is, the revenger's delay), they offer an opportunity for rhetorical display and, thereby, highlight Hamlet's verbal action, a large part of which is consideration of his role as revenger.

That consideration is in part consideration of his delay in taking revenge. Instances wherein Hamlet berates himself for his delay, such as, "I do not know / Why yet I live to say, 'This thing's to do'" (4.4.43-44), remind the audience of the impetus to physical action demanded by the call for vengeance. By taking up and maintaining the Pyrrhus pose and by, then, commenting on the pose, Hamlet draws attention to and therefore reinforces any sense of incompleteness that the pause, effected by the pose, may have upon the audience. Hamlet is not merely a vehicle of "stop-action." Hamlet is an intentional stop-actor.

Robert Ornstein asks an important question: "Hamlet is by critical reputation the hesitator nonpareil [. . .]. But would there be hundreds of articles and books that explain why Hamlet delays taking revenge if he did not accuse himself of inaction?" (254). Certainly there is not the same impetus to *explain* why Kyd's Gieronimo delays. Just as Hamlet's alteration of the text of the play-within-the-play and his commentary on the performance affect interpretation of the play and of *Hamlet-as-play*, his comments on himself, on his delay and his inadequacy as a hero, encourage a tendency to see him from the perspective of his delay. That Hamlet draws attention to his seeming inaction sustains the dramatic action of the play; it even enhances that action, part of which is the consideration of the revenger's role.

Finally, although Goldman believes that “in *Hamlet* action is constantly losing its name” (47) and it loses its name for a purpose, the purpose of drawing the audience’s attention to its desire “for action that seems complete and resolved” (44), it serves a greater purpose. The Pyrrhus pose draws attention to the drama that lies in those moments that precede it. It is drama that is more intense than completed physical action because it lacks resolution. Think of drama as that moment of tension that combines doubt and certainty, that contrasts the known and the unknown, that moment that effects a state of suspense and anticipation, and it is clear that *Hamlet* never loses “the name of action” (3.1.87). Arguments that assume or conclude that Hamlet is a man of inaction overlook his dramatic function. In pausing his physical action to highlight his verbal action, in taking up the Pyrrhus pose, Hamlet heightens the dramatic action of the play.

One example of the way in which Hamlet maintains the action of the play is in his most brilliant rhetorical performance. Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” soliloquy exemplifies the Pyrrhus pose, and it does so to effect a dramatic shift:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
 And thus the native hue of resolution
 Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
 And enterprises of great pitch and moment
 With this regard their currents turn awry,
 And lose the name of action.—Soft you now,
 The fair Ophelia. (3.1.82-88).

Just after he has finely considered life, death, and, perhaps most significantly, “the name of action” (3.1.87), Hamlet’s words crescendo and then, “Soft you now” (3.1.87), turn

quiet. All of the action that preceded “the name of action” (3.1.87) dissipates; the direction of his verbal action changes and prompts an unexpected new interest.

In demonstrating that rhetoric is an “agent of action” (Kerrigan 29) via the Pyrrhus pose, Hamlet emphasises his speaking-part. The nature of this emphasis deserves explanation. Although both of Hamlet’s roles emphasise speaking as a species of action and although both roles establish Hamlet as a “truth-teller,” the means by which these results are effected in the Prince of Death role are different from those of the Prince of Wit role. The difference is suggested in the distinction that Margaret W. Ferguson makes. She notes that Hamlet’s use of “language in dialogues with others [. . .] produces a curious effect of *materializing* the word” (292); she notes, however, that this is not the case “in his soliloquies” (292). While in the Prince of Wit role, Hamlet uses verbal play to reveal the instability of representation through language and, thus, privileges his speaking-part, in the Prince of Death role, Hamlet uses revelation to stabilise representation through language, and, thus, privileges his speaking-part.

To understand how Hamlet privileges his speaking-part through revelation, one must consider the role of the audience of *Hamlet in Hamlet*. Again, Eric S. Mallin notes that “theatricality spins *Hamlet*’s wheel; this preoccupation dissolves the lines separating audience and actor” (134). Understanding how Hamlet makes use of theatricality to dissolve “the lines separating audience and actor” (134) is essential to understanding how he privileges his speaking-part, for, from the outset of the play, Hamlet’s most significant relationship is not with Horatio but with the audience, and this relationship begins with Hamlet’s first words, “A little more than kin, and less than kind” (1.2.65), which are spoken aside. Stephen Booth comments:

With that line Hamlet takes the audience for his own, and gives himself to the audience as its agent on the stage. Hamlet and the audience are from this point in the play more firmly united than any other such pair in Shakespeare and perhaps in dramatic literature. (27)

As a piece of “theatrical convention” that comprises “a few words or a short passage spoken in an undertone or to the audience” (Cuddon), an aside is, by definition, reflexive. It is a form of commentary or a means by which the artifice of a play might be acknowledged. Thus, the aside establishes Hamlet’s intimacy with the audience—as an observer of the action on stage. That intimacy is established with the audience, suggests something of how Hamlet might enact his soliloquies. Contrasting two different approaches taken to the soliloquies, using Richard Burton’s 1964 Hamlet and David Warner’s 1965 Hamlet, Peter Davidson illustrates how performance, in effect, offers alternative interpretations:

It was remarked by the theatre critic Alan Brien that David Warner *did* directly address the audience. His appeals were ‘for our support and understanding and established an intense rapport which is rarely obtained by more fluent and sonorous Hamlets [. . .].’ Burton—fluent and sonorous *par excellence*—seemed positively to avoid looking in the direction of the audience, and the effect was quite artificial. (note 36)

The difference implied here, between Hamlet speaking his soliloquies to the air versus to the audience, is more than one of nuance.

The difference is important because it illustrates the effect that two of Hamlet’s remarks, when taken as together, have upon the audience. The first is the first aside, for

in it Hamlet is, in essence, critiquing Claudius's rhetorical performance. Its effect, in conjunction with his response to Gertrude a few lines later, "Seems, madam? nay, it is, I know not 'seems'" (1.2.76) helps to establish Hamlet's soliloquies as a kind of "truth-telling." The audience hears "I know not 'seems'" (1.2.76) and is ready to respond to the first soliloquy (and the next and the next) as a moment of truth-telling set against the falsity at court. Thus, there are two means for truth-telling in the play: the speech of madness tells the truth through verbal tricks, whereas the soliloquies of the princely mourner and revenger tell the truth through internal revelation, through revealing "that within which passes show" (1.2.85).

Nevertheless, the soliloquies are more than internal revelation. They are integral to the dramatic action of the play, and it is important to consider what they effect dramatically. While they are certainly a type of philosophical introspection, they are also a form of public appeal. Although Hamlet begins his "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" with "Now I am alone" (2.2.549), he exhibits a consciousness of the actor/audience relationship when he offers up the player for the comparison that he is about to make. Indicating "this player here" (2.2.551), Hamlet gives the soliloquy the quality of a formal demonstration. He also points to the dramatic potential of speech, for he notes that the player, in circumstances similar to his, would "cleave the general ear with horrid speech" (2.2.563), an image that evokes the startling impact that the spoken word may have. Hamlet recognises the theatrical quality of his soliloquies, and he employs them to break down the boundary between himself and the audience. His soliloquies require the audience's involvement, the audience's participation in his plight.

Hamlet's plight is encompassed by those two facets of the Prince of Death role, at first the mourner, and then the mourner/ revenger. With the addition of the revenger, the tone of the soliloquies changes. The first soliloquy combines grief, "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (1.2.133-34), anger, "Fie on't, ah fie!" (1.2.135), and mournful resignation, "It is not, nor it cannot come to good, / But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (1.2.158-59). After the meeting with the ghost, the grief remains, so too the anger, but the resignation disappears, and a tension replaces it: "O fie, hold, hold, my heart, / And you, my sinews, grow not instant old, / But bear me stiffly up" (1.5.93-95). It is this tension that distinguishes mourner from mourner/revenger. With vengeance comes the ethical aspect of Hamlet's soliloquising, the debate, the "dialectically fraught verbalness," (Kerrigan 29).

Whether he is mourner or mourner/revenger, however, part of Hamlet's plight is that aspect of mourning that manifests itself in remembrance. John Kerrigan observes that "[t]he language of the play is full of 'memory' and its cognates" (182). Although Kerrigan maintains that "[r]evenge is [. . .] stifled by remembrance" (186), an argument that derives its proof from the speech of the player king, "Purpose is but the slave to memory, / Of violent birth, but poor validity" (3.2.188-89), remembrance is necessary to revenge. The expansion of Hamlet's Prince of Death role from mourner to mourner/revenger, as revealed in the shift in tone from "Must I remember?" (1.2.143) to "Remember thee! / Yea" (1.5.97), demonstrates that remembrance is integral to the revenger role, for, while the tone changes, the remembrance remains. As the shift in tone suggests, however, the remembrance of the revenger differs from that of the mourner. First, the revenger's call to remembrance comprises both the call to memory *and* the call

to murder. Second, the remembering of the revenger has that active quality that “Remember thee! / Yea” (1.5.97) captures, a quality which is linked to the impetus to physical action that revenge requires. The ghost’s parting command, “Adieu, adieu, adieu! remember me” (1.5.91), echoes through the play, in Hamlet’s “It is ‘Adieu, adieu! remember me.’ / I have sworn’t” (1.5.111-12) and in the ghost’s later, “Do not forget!” (3.4.110). The echoes remind the audience that the necessity of the revenger’s task stems from the memory of the lost one.

To understand the importance of memory in the play, consider the issue of Hamlet’s eyes: that is, consider how Hamlet, “of all observers” (3.2.154), perceives the court, and consider his response to the court in context of his perception. In the second scene of act one, Gertrude says to him,

Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off,
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
Do not for ever with thy vailed lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust. (1.2.68-71)

In Gertrude’s “for ever” “vailed lids” (1.2.70) is an image of Hamlet’s sorrow. It is a sorrow that does not abate, for Hamlet’s mourning eyes do not simply search for his “noble father in the dust” (1.2.71), but they discover him there and, having found him there, are no more consoled. Neither is Hamlet consoled by what he sees of Denmark. He cannot “look like a friend on Denmark” (1.2.69) because wherever he looks he finds corruption: “’tis an unweeded garden / That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely. (1.2.135-37). All substance turns to baseness before his mind’s eye. Matter is the matter and, by extension, so too human beings, as his remarks

to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern suggest: "What a piece of work is a man," "this quintessence of dust?" (2.2.303, 308). Hamlet's conundrum is that what lives is rotten, what is great dies and decays. The only means of preserving greatness, then, is through memory, through remembering, and this is the stand that Hamlet takes against the court. Hamlet's stand is, initially, purely visual, but, following the call to vengeance, becomes verbal.

When the play opens, Hamlet has yet no indication of his role as revenger but positions himself as the princely mourner, dressed all in black. His mourning contrasts with the court's celebration, and, by association, his remembering with the court's forgetting. Consider Claudius's speech as an exemplum of forgetting, which the entire court is complicit with and which Hamlet challenges—visually:

Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death
The memory be green, and that it us befitted
To bear our hearts in grief, and our whole kingdom
To be contracted in one brown of woe,
Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
That we with wisest sorrow think on him
Together with remembrance of ourselves. (1.2.1-7)

Although Claudius's words have a formal seriousness appropriate to mourning, remembrance, here, is reserved for the living. In contrast, Hamlet reserves remembrance for the dead, and although he bemoans, "Must I remember?" (1.2.143), he decries, to the audience, in a soliloquy that extols his father's virtues and that questions his mother's speedy marriage, the court's forgetfulness.

The importance and the ephemeral quality of remembrance is a preoccupation of Hamlet's, and his cherishing of memory goes some way to explaining his relationship with Ophelia. Many critics have difficulty with Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia, but the fact that she returns his "remembrances" (3.1.92) may be more significant than is usually assumed. The ghost's injunction, "remember me" (1.5.91), combined with Ophelia's, "My lord, I have remembrances of yours / That I have longed long to redeliver" (3.1.92-93), prompts Hamlet's demand "are you honest?" (3.1.101). It is not insignificant that the return of remembrances follows the ghost's injunction, for the returning of remembrances implicates Ophelia in the court's falsity, as Hamlet's demand suggests.

The change in Hamlet's stand against the court, from visual to verbal defiance, follows the call to vengeance. The fact that Hamlet is the only one to whom the ghost will speak suggests something of his importance as vessel of memory; moreover, it suggests that truly to remember, Hamlet himself must speak. When the ghost appears during Barnardo's narration of its earlier appearances, Horatio takes the position of challenging guard: "By heaven I charge thee speak!" (1.1.49). He continues, "Speak, speak, I charge thee speak!" (1.1.51), and again later in the scene he repeats the charge "speak" (1.1.129, 132, 135, 139). The ghost leaves and Marcellus notes: "'Tis gone, and will not answer" (1.1.52). Yet, of Hamlet, the guards are certain: "This spirit dumb will speak to him" (1.1.171). The repetition of "speak" affirms Hamlet's privileged position. Further, his encounter with the ghost reveals that the transmission of memory through speech is of utmost importance:

O, answer me!

Let me not burst in ignorance, but tell

Why thy canoniz'd bones, hearsed in death,
 Have burst their cerements; why the sepulchre,
 Wherein we saw thee quietly inurn'd,
 Hath op'd his ponderous and marble jaws
 To cast thee up again. (1.4.45-51)

Here, in Hamlet's exhortation, is the image of a speaking mouth, and it is part of his role, as revenger, to be that vehicle of speech.

It is through the play-within-the-play that Hamlet acts as that vehicle of speech, acts as the speaking mouth of the tomb casting up his father's ghost. The play-within-the-play is more than simply an act of memory, however; it is an enactment of the revenger's role in its entirety. Hamlet, in fact, through the play-within-the-play, stages his transformation, as revenger, from vessel of memory to agent of murder. The transformation can be charted in and is, in a sense, framed by his soliloquies "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" and "'Tis now the very witching time of night." In the first, Hamlet compares his acting of the mourner/revenger role unfavourably to a similar performance of the player and is "prompted by revulsion at his own playacting to use a much more elaborate piece of theatricality to catch the conscience of the King—the play within the play" (Goldman 46). In the second soliloquy, Hamlet enacts a formalised dedication to revenge.

Having established an intimacy with the audience of *Hamlet* through his soliloquies, Hamlet then stages a play. Beginning with his conference with the players, Hamlet's hand in the performance of "The Murther of Gonzago" (2.2.537-38) is clear. First, he has "a speech of some dozen lines, or sixteen lines" (2.2.541-42) inserted into

the text. Then, he decides on the particular content of the dumb show: "I'll have these players / Play something like the murder of my father / Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks" (2.2.594-96). Next, he provides the players with acting direction: "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounc'd it to you, trippingly on the tongue" (3.2.1-2). Finally, he commissions Horatio to "Observe my uncle" to see "[i]f his occulted guilt / Do not unkennel in one speech" (3.2.80-81). Hamlet, thus, sets the stage for his most daring piece of acting.

Speaking of the play-within-the-play, Robert Weiman notes that "[s]uch mimesis of mimesis *dramatically* helps to establish the links between dramaturgy and theme" (279-80). The crux of the dramatic action of *Hamlet*, the play-within-the-play, also affirms a reading of Hamlet as actor, for by mediating himself through play-within-the-play, Hamlet acknowledges the play without. He acknowledges *Hamlet-as-play* by replicating, through the play-within, a scene of an audience watching a play. The replication itself is not sufficient to support a reading of Hamlet as actor; the fact that Hamlet stages his transformation from vessel of memory to agent of murder, however, is. By staging his transformation, Hamlet provides an interpretation of *Hamlet*. In "The Conscience of the King: Oedipus, Hamlet, and the Problem of Reading," Leroy F. Searle remarks that "'The Murder of Gonzago,' suitably modified by Hamlet by adding the dumb show to present the anterior action informing Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, obviously bifurcates attention: *which* play—Shakespeare's or Hamlet's—is 'the thing?'" (335). The answer to Searle's question is, of course, not either or but both.

To fully comprehend Hamlet's Prince of Death role, it is important to look to how he employs—or deploys—the travelling players at court. The court that has been

watching Hamlet, “Th’ observ’d of all observers” (3.2.154), is now engaged, by this same Hamlet, in looking at itself—by watching a play. The audience is also looking at itself, for, in staging a play, Hamlet creates a mirror into which the audience of *Hamlet* may look to see itself watching and interpreting *Hamlet*. Because of the relationship that Hamlet has established with the audience, the audience watches the performance of “The Murder of Gonzago” in the context of Hamlet’s commentary, a context that returns the focus of the play-within-the-play to *Hamlet-as-play* much as clues in a mystery provide information about the crime.

Although Hamlet orders Horatio, “Observe my uncle” (3.2.80), a direction that would suggest that the audience of *Hamlet* should, also, observe Claudius, the interest of the play remains with Hamlet. The audience has multiple points of interest to concern itself with as it watches the play, and yet, Hamlet’s critical commentary on it insistently draws the focus to him so that the audience needs must watch Hamlet watching the play and watching Claudius. Hamlet is the focal point of both images: the court spies on Hamlet, the audience of *Hamlet* spies on the court and on Hamlet, and Hamlet provides both the court and the audience of *Hamlet* with an interpretation of his play, and because Hamlet is not simply the architect of this play, because he is also its critic, its interpreter, the play-within-the-play complicates how the audience perceives the play that is *Hamlet*. As Michael Goldman argues, “Interpretation is one of the necessary questions of *Hamlet*; to an important extent it is something the play is ‘about’” (44). Hamlet’s jibe to Ophelia during the play, “I could interpret between you and your love, if I could see the puppets dallying” (3.2.246-47), suggests as much.

The play-within-the-play is as much Hamlet's commentary on it as it is its own action. While the players are, on surface, the vehicle of accusation, "The players cannot keep counsel, they'll tell all" (3.2.141-42), Hamlet's commentary on their performance provides an interpretation of what is performed such that an accusation becomes a threat. In the play that Hamlet stages, past and future collide. The play-within-the-play purports to represent "The Murder of Gonzago," but it, in fact, represents the murder of King Hamlet, and, as a result of Hamlet's commentary, it also represents the murder of Claudius. To understand how this is effected, think, again, of Hamlet's "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I," wherein he compares himself to the player, for, in commenting on the play-within-the-play, Hamlet does just what he believes the player, in his circumstance, would: that is, "cleave the general ear with horrid speech" (2.2.563).

The moment that he declares, "This is one Lucianus, nephew to the king" (3.2.244), Hamlet performs, in commenting on the players' performance, his transformation, as revenger, from vessel of memory to agent of murder. The physical performance of the player in the dumb-show reveals Claudius's word-deed disjunction, "*Anon come in another man, takes off his crown, kisses it, pours poison in the sleeper's ears, and leaves him*" (1163), and acts as an act of remembering. When the initial act is replicated, "*Pours poison in his ears*" (1164), it takes on new meaning, for, with Hamlet's declaration, an act of remembering is transformed into an act of retribution. Moreover, Hamlet's declaration suggests not only that there are two equally valid interpretations of the play-within-the-play but that the two interpretations are linked. Through his declaration, Hamlet reveals, to Claudius, the ethical and teleological implications of his poisoning of his brother the king.

As Terence Hawkes observes that “[i]t is not insignificant that, at the play’s most recursive moment, in the performance of another play, the murderer (Lucianus) is clearly and coolly presented as a nephew, murdering his uncle” (317), and it is Hamlet himself who makes this clear when he interprets the physical action watched by the court: “This is one Lucianus, nephew to the king” (3.2.244). Claudius’s reaction to the play results from his recognising two things. He recognises, in the first act of poisoning, his poisoning of his brother. In the second act of poisoning, Claudius, again, recognises his own act of poisoning; he also recognises that the second act of poisoning is “a threat against his life made by this nephew of his” (Babcock 18), for Hamlet not only provides an interpretation of the play that acts both elements of the revenger’s role (memory and murder), but, in that interpretation/threat combats the rhetorical trickery of Claudius’s first address to him, “my cousin Hamlet, and my son” (1.2.64), by emphasising their original familial relationship.

That there is a play-within-a-play in *Hamlet* is not exceptional of Shakespeare’s work nor is it exceptional for revenge tragedy; what is exceptional is the use to which the play is put. While “[i]n a majority of revenge tragedies, the play-within-the-play occurs in the concluding moments of the action” and is the space wherein “the protagonist kills his enemies” (Hallett and Hallett 201, 202), in *Hamlet* this is not so. Although Shakespeare prolongs Claudius’s life beyond the conventional dénouement of revenge tragedy, what happens within Hamlet’s play-within-the-play has, nonetheless, some quality of vengeance. Revenge, to be fully effected, must include not only retaliation but also recognition. Speaking of the kind of recognition that “[r]evenge plays specialize in,” John Kerrigan notes that “The object of retribution does not suffer from what is done to

him but from perceiving in what is done to him what he did to his victim" (6). Revenge is, at its best, a revenge of conscience. In *Hamlet*, the play-within-the-play is the site of a recognition that is achieved not *in* retaliation but *in the threat of* retaliation.

Although the fact is often overlooked, Hamlet's play has the effect that he says that he wants it to: Claudius confesses to "A brother's murther" (3.3.38). Ironically, the confession is not to the court but to the always omnisciently spying audience of *Hamlet*. The play has a second effect. Although Hamlet's mad acting prompts Claudius's wariness, it is not until after witnessing Hamlet's play that Claudius's concern regarding Hamlet manifests itself as a will to be rid of an enemy, for the play-within-the-play, which does more than merely "catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.605), prompts Claudius to have Hamlet killed. The play-within-the-play is, thus, an extraordinary piece of heroic action for, through it, Hamlet achieves a scene of recognition without retribution, thereby prolongs the revenger's delay, and increases the dramatic tension of *Hamlet* by putting himself further in danger.

Leroy Searle argues that Hamlet is unaware of what he has performed in the "Murder of Gonzago":

The play within the play should [. . .] have caught the conscience of the Prince, had he noticed that by presenting what *he* was about to do, namely kill his uncle, it put him in the position of his uncle, the murderer, rather than in that of the virtuous avenger of his father. [. . .] [T]he play within the play shows him that if he kills his uncle, he kills Hamlet—as both his figured father, and ultimately himself. (337)

This is not so, for Hamlet is completely aware that, because the act of revenge requires retribution, the revenger can never be virtuous. In staging his intention to avenge his father's death, Hamlet knows that he puts himself in danger. He knows, also, that by taking revenge he "will become another Claudius" (Searle 338), for the logic that links them is expressed through the play-within-the-play in the repeated act of poisoning. Hamlet not only knows that he must kill Claudius, he knows what the act implies.

These facts, of the necessity to kill and of its implication, are also a part of Hamlet's plight. They are a part that Hamlet expresses with such "dialectically fraught verbalness" (Kerrigan 29) as to make him, in Robert Ornstein's view, "the most philosophical of revengers" (253). The epitome of Hamlet's philosophising, his "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, captures the essence of revenge tragedy. Linda Charnes, although she supports the view that "Hamlet cannot act" (5), identifies that essence when she typifies Hamlet as the "*noir* revenger" (4) who "is less concerned with historical events—with what *happened*—than he is with ontologies—with the way things *are*" (5), for Hamlet's debate, in his "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, transcends the ethics of vengeance and becomes a contemplation of being.

That, in delaying, Hamlet considers "To be, or not to be" (3.1.55) rather than "to do or not to do" demonstrates how profoundly he comprehends his situation. His "To be, or not to be" soliloquy explores those two avenues of consideration open to the prince-in-mourning, those of murder and suicide. Murder, obviously, pertains to the revenger's role. The idea of suicide is more complicated. While it captures some quality of the mourner's remembrance, the mourner's grief, it also speaks of the revenger's dilemma. Remarking on the logic of the soliloquy, Stephen Booth notes that

Hamlet has hesitated to kill Claudius. Consideration of suicide has seemed a symptom of that hesitancy. Here the particular form which Hamlet's conclusions about his inability to act derive is his hesitancy to commit suicide. The audience hears those conclusions in the context of his failure to take the action that suicide would avoid. (39)

Just as being and non-being unite, so too murder and suicide, for murder—vengeance—would be a kind of suicide: “As the speech goes on [. . .] ‘to be’ and ‘not to be’ become less and less distinguishable” (Booth 37). This is, truly, the revenger's dilemma: the essence of revenge tragedy is that the act of vengeance, necessarily, leads also to “the avenger's death” (Hallett and Hallett 8).

Although the willed-for suicide of Hamlet's first soliloquy,

O that this too too sallied flesh would melt,

Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!

Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd

His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! (1.2.129-32)

is not unlike the “consummation / Devoutly to be wish'd” (3.1.62-63) of “To be, or not to be,” it reveals a will to escape the confines of the flesh, “How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me the uses of this world!” (1.2.133-34), where the other exhibits a dialectical tension. It does so by contrasting,

To die, to sleep—

No more, and by a sleep to say we end

The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to (3.1.59-62),

with “in that sleep of death what dreams may come / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, / Must give us pause” (3.1.65-67). The suicide that the revenger commits has not the certainty, the comfort, of the willed-for union with the beloved, for the certainty is counterbalanced by a consideration of “the dread of something after death” (3.1.77). The necessity of an act of murder causes Hamlet to hesitate, in hesitating he considers the possibility that death is not a release, and, in considering such, he hesitates to commit either murder or suicide.

Although Hamlet hesitates, he, nonetheless, dedicates himself to the revenger’s role, and it is for this reason that Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” soliloquy should be considered in the context of the play-within-the-play. Hamlet speaks the soliloquy *after* he has decided to stage the play, and one effect that it has is to reveal that Hamlet is aware that, in performing the play, he brings himself closer to death. Although Hamlet hesitates, in the soliloquy, to commit either murder or suicide, he has, in determining to stage the play, already determined to do both. Because Hamlet demonstrates, through this soliloquy, that he is aware of the implications of staging the play-within-the-play, wherein he plays-out his transformation from vessel of memory to agent of murder, his performance in the Prince of Death role is truly heroic.

A counterpoint to his dazzling verbal play in the role of the Prince of Wit, Hamlet’s Prince of Death role is one of rhetorical splendour. By employing the Pyrrhus pose to, at once, halt and sustain the action of the play, Hamlet demonstrates the dramatic potential of the revenger’s delay. That delay provides the audience with the opportunity to consider the act of vengeance, a consideration that is as much a part of the dramatic action of revenge tragedy as is the act of vengeance itself. Hamlet, after forging an

intimate relationship with the audience through his soliloquies of remembrance and ethical consideration, stages a theatrical representation of the revenger's role that is as deep a consideration of the act of vengeance as any that his soliloquies perform.

Moreover, delaying the revenger's delay by staging, through the players' performance of and his commentary on the play-within-the-play, a scene of recognition without retribution, Hamlet demonstrates that the act of speaking is not only a mode of action as essential to revenge tragedy as is the physical act of vengeance, but it is also equally heroic.

Hamlet, Prince of Wit; Hamlet, Prince of Death

In the role of the Prince of Wit, Hamlet demonstrates the subversive potential of the revenger's madness, and in the role of the Prince of Death, he demonstrates the dramatic potential of the revenger's delay. Where the two roles unite, however, it is clear that Hamlet's acting achieves something beyond that which the individual roles allow. An analysis of the graveyard scene, wherein the two roles come most fully together, demonstrates the highest achievement of Hamlet's acting, and, in doing so, it substantiates a reading of Hamlet-as-actor. By reading Hamlet as an actor acting the part of the tragic hero of a revenge tragedy, one may then comprehend, as the last scene of the final act of the play comes to its close, that—for Hamlet—performance is a means of being.

First, however, cast aside Hamlet's performance and contemplate the play in which he performs. Above all, *Hamlet* is a play about death. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the first scene of the last act of the play opens in a graveyard. Given the proliferation of death in the play and given that the last act itself moves toward a final, grisly tableau, it is appropriate that the act begin in a place that reminds the audience of mortality, of the inevitability of death. It is also no coincidence that this is a scene that sets itself up as comic. While there are any number of instances of humour, even comedy, in the scenes that precede (interpretations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern often make these two roles comic), an audience would immediately perceive the scene, despite the graveyard setting, to be the first to have a comic function. The reason for this is that the gravediggers are "class-types," and Shakespeare uses "types" from the lower class of society as a comic element in his plays.

To understand the significance of *Hamlet* as tragedy, one must not overlook its comedy. Linda Charnes comments that “[t]he play clearly inherits, deploys, and satirizes certain elements of Senecan and classical tragedy. At the same time, *Hamlet* has been read through centuries of critical reception as breaking with that tradition” (3). While satire of a genre, by definition, implies a break, how this break is effected is at issue and is hinted at in the play itself. When the travelling players appear at court, Polonius’s description of their dramatic range, “Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light”(2.2.400), is not only amusing, it is suggestive, for it is just this commingling of genre that is effected in *Hamlet*. That the comic and the tragic elements combine within the play is not extraordinary, but that they also combine in the tragic hero himself and that they combine without producing parody permits the play further dramatic reach.

Exempla of the comic and tragic elements, Hamlet’s Prince of Wit role and Hamlet’s Prince of Death role, respectively, combine in the graveyard scene, and it is here, in this scene, that one may begin to discern how Shakespeare plays with the dramatic limits of revenge tragedy. The graveyard scene is not, however, the first instance in which the two roles combine. Earlier in the play, Hamlet, providing an explanation that is as melodramatic as it is ironic, suggests to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that his mental status is questionable: “I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth” (2.2.295-96). He, then, details his ontological perspective: that is that “man” (2.2.304) “the paragon of animals” (2.2.307) is but the “quintessence of dust” (2.2.308), the highest state of being, but dust’s dust.

The two roles also combine when Hamlet makes a kind of death-jest in his comments to Polonius. Here he, in a sense, externalises the internal actions of his soliloquies—sardonically:

POLONIUS. Will you walk out of the air, my lord?

HAMLET. Into my grave. (2.2.206-07)

The word-play is purposeful, for following this, he substantiates the belief that the logical conclusion of his grief is a pervasive melancholy which could lead to suicide (a belief that is later supported by Ophelia's inadequately explained drowning):

POLONIUS. My lord, I will take

my leave of you.

HAMLET. You cannot take from me any thing that I

will not more willingly part withal—except my life,

except my life, except my life. (2.2.213-17)

There is also Hamlet's bitter yet riddling remark to Ophelia on the nature of memory, which forms part of his ontological reflections:

Then there's hope a great man's memory may outlive his life half a year,

but, by'r lady, 'a must build churches then, or else shall 'a suffer not

thinking on, with the hobby-horse, whose epitaph is, "For O, for O, the

hobby-horse is forgot. (3.2.131-35)

Finally, a gruesome jest made at the expense of the murdered Polonius, "This counsellor / Is now most still, most secret, and most grave" (3.4.213-15), is of double import, for "secret" suggests silence as much as the pun on "grave" suggests death.

In these instances, Hamlet's ontological concerns marry with his wit with very pointed intent. Two other instances of word-play that tap into his ontological exploration clearly reveal his conception of himself and of Claudius, which, when taken together, suggest something of Hamlet's understanding of their respective positions in their relationship as "mighty opposites" (5.2.62). Both of the following exchanges play with the relationship between matter and the question of what makes being:

HAMLET. O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and
count myself king of infinite space—were it not that I
have bad dreams.

GUILDENSTERN. Which dreams indeed are ambition, for the
very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.

HAMLET. A dream itself is but a shadow.

GUILDENSTERN. Truly, and I hold ambition of so airy and light
a quality that it is but a shadow's shadow.

HAMLET. Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs
and outstretch'd heroes the beggars' shadows. (2.2.254-64)

An interesting demonstration of the rhetoric of argument by *reductio ad absurdum*, Hamlet's responses reduce each of Guildenstern's reductive points, but always in opposition, so that a reversal occurs; beggars' bodies become the substance of greatness. Interestingly, the very Hamlet who has, in his "nighted color" (1.2.68), cast himself in a shadowy role, calls himself a beggar following this argument, "Beggar that I am" (2.2.272), a remark which suggests that Hamlet conceives of himself as a being of substance.

In contrast to Hamlet's conception of himself is his conception of Claudius, given in the following exchange:

HAMLET. The body is with the King, but the King is
not with the body. The King is a thing—

GUILDENSTERN. A thing, my lord?

HAMLET. Of nothing, bring me to him. (4.2.27-30)

Here Hamlet, syntactically, reduces the Claudius to "A thing [. . .] Of nothing" (4.2.27-30). If substance is equated with matter and matter, linguistically, with truth, and if the king is nothing, then he is false—a false king. The relationship between Hamlet and Claudius might then be expressed in the following manner: because Hamlet is something and Claudius, nothing, equal and opposite, and because Claudius is false, then Hamlet is true.

Although, clearly, the roles of the Prince of Wit and the Prince of Death unite earlier in the play and to significant effect, the way in which they combine in the graveyard scene is uniquely productive. The first scene of the last act, again, reflects Hamlet's primary concern, the motive force of the play, "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (3.1.55), and the combination of comedy and a graveyard setting is, in many ways, a distillation of the play entire. It is also emblematic of Hamlet's two roles, which come together most fully here. Hamlet's stream-of-consciousness speaking in the scene is very like that of the soliloquies of the Prince of Death role, as is the speculative content of what he says. His approach to the speculation, however, is witty and exhibits the frenetic intensity of the Prince of Wit role. There are several important ideas that the scene conveys.

First, although the scene sets itself up as comedy, the discussion between the two gravediggers, or the “two CLOWNS” (Shakespeare 1177), has a seriousness that cannot be completely overridden by its humour. The discussion has the rhetorical quality of a debate concerning, in its broadest context, the verb “to act,” a debate that the play itself has been having with its audience and a debate that Hamlet has been having with himself. The first gravedigger’s argument regarding an act is worth noting: “an act hath three branches—it is to act, to do, to perform” (5.1.11-12), for, although spoken with pragmatism, the comment contains within it a suggestion of a more complicated conception of “to act,” which includes theatrical performance. Eric S. Mallin’s observation hints at just such an interpretation, when he says of *Hamlet* that “the work may be the most theatrically overdetermined in history, exercising the ambiguity of the word ‘act’ to the breaking point, such that every speech becomes a performance, every gesture a mask, all play a Play” (134). The gravedigger’s remark, then, suggests that a reading of *Hamlet* that posits Hamlet as actor is not without the bounds of possibility.

Next, when Hamlet begins to interact with the first gravedigger, a curious thing happens. The gravedigger does to Hamlet what Hamlet did to members of the court in his role as the Prince of Wit: that is, the gravedigger mistakes Hamlet’s meaning and, thereby plays upon the audience’s interpretation of what is being said. The result is that the audience perceives that the prince is fooled, and Hamlet, himself aware of this, remarks, “How absolute the knave is! we must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us” (5.1.137-38). While the note in the texts reads, “**absolute:** positive” (1179), the Oxford English Dictionary includes another definition of absolute that is, given the play’s and Hamlet’s evident interest in rhetoric, equally valid: “Standing out of (the

usual) grammatical relation or syntactic construction with other words" (III.9). This, metaphorically and linguistically, is Hamlet's relationship to the court, reflected back to him in the gravedigger's comic figure.

A further reflection of Hamlet's position occurs when Hamlet enquires after the former identities of the skulls that the gravedigger has disturbed in his digging. It is with the last that the gravedigger introduces Hamlet to "Yorick's skull, the King's jester" (5.1.181). That only one person is identified by name by his remains begs the question: why a dead fool? Part of the answer to the question lies in the emphasis that the scene places on the role of the fool by, in effect, populating itself with fools. The role of the fool or the jester is to supply a critique of the regime that supports his position. With the jester dead, there is no critique. Claudius has no fool. Although Polonius is foolish, he does not fulfil the role of the fool because he, in fact, expresses only that which is most pleasing and offers no veiled critique of the court. Hamlet supplies this want.

Again: why a dead fool? The other part of the answer to the question may be found at the intersection of Hamlet's two roles, for the skull symbolises that other half of Hamlet's concerns, his concern with ontology, a concern that originates with the death of his father, a concern that stems from his position as both mourner and revenger, a concern that has as much to do with the fact of his father's death as it has to do with the inevitability of his own. Thus, in the image of the skull that he holds while he delivers a witty eulogy for the dead fool, Hamlet sees himself. Hence the *dead* fool. Although, in his eulogy, Hamlet calls Yorick "a fellow of infinite jest" (5.1.184-85), Yorick's jest is, by fact of his skull, proved finite. So too Hamlet's.

Finally, the gravedigger scene offers a means by which to read the last scene of *Hamlet*, to read Hamlet's death, and, thereby, to know what makes Hamlet (and *Hamlet*) radical. Consider what happens when the role of the Prince of Wit and the role of the Prince of Death combine in the gravedigger scene. In this scene, the roles of Wit and Death combine to produce an ontological examination that, by this point in the play, is expected of Hamlet—except that the examination is playful this time. For example, beginning with the melancholy statement, “To what base uses we may return” (5.1.202), Hamlet proceeds to reduce his own ontological musing to absurdity by taking his “quintessence of dust” (2.2.308) to a logical, and silly, conclusion: “Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till 'a find it stopping a bung-hole?” (5.1.203-04). This element of playfulness reveals itself in Hamlet's interaction with the gravedigger and in his dissertation on the skulls too. The effect of Hamlet's acting, which is most obvious in this scene, helps to explain what makes him radical, an effect that Jonathan Baldo hints at when he notes that “Hamlet dresses up all those tossed skulls with faces only to unmask them, to show that that faces were already only masks. It is not so much life but death that is unmasked and defeated” (151).

John Holloway, similarly, recognises the vitality of the graveyard scene, and, not only that, he sees something of its importance to the play as a whole:

The world of *Hamlet*, as it declines into tragedy and chaos, yet maintains one part of itself always in a condition of febrile life. Whatever else decays, there remains an incessant play and thrust of frenzied intrigue, of plot and counterplot, and on the surface of this, as its overt counterpart, a scintillating texture of intelligence and wit. Largely, this is the

incomparable contribution of Hamlet himself [. . .]. The grave-yard scene is almost an emblem of this paradox within the play: Hamlet's last and most extravagant ingenuities flash about that universal death [. . .] which is the state towards which the people of the play are heading all the time. (32-33).

The gravedigger scene *is* "an emblem" of the "paradox" (Holloway 33) of *Hamlet*. It also demonstrates the highest achievement of Hamlet's acting. Given that he highlights the corrupt use of language at court and thereby erodes the possibility that language can be used to mean, therefore represent, anything, and, by doing so, reduces language to nothingness, and given that, in his ontological vision, he also reduces life to nothingness, it is extraordinary that Hamlet should so actively, through his speaking part, embrace life. This is the highest achievement of Hamlet's acting.

A play that has generated such a wealth of response cannot simply be dismissed, as it is by T. S. Eliot, as "an artistic failure" (123); if, however, *Hamlet* fails in any way, it fails to provide catharsis. One element of the play that works against catharsis is Hamlet's character. Jonathan Baldo explains that there is a relationship between "the deficiency in rhetoric of reintegration at the end of *Hamlet*" and "critics' tendency to regard the play's characters as puzzles with pieces missing" (62). He notes that "Hamlet's incompleteness is apparent in what many critics perceive as the maddening tendency in nineteenth-century and even some twentieth-century commentary to show an interest in Hamlet as he was before his father's death" (62). What increases this sense of "incompleteness" (Baldo 62), in Hamlet's case, is the fact that other characters reflect aspects of Hamlet's experience.

Linda Charnes believes that *Hamlet* “deliberately generates a *tradition effect* by counterposing Hamlet against other revengers *within* the play (Fortinbras; Laertes; and, in *The Mousetrap*, Lucianus)” (4). The result is to make Hamlet seem, by contrast, inadequate as a revenge-tragedy hero. For example, there is Fortinbras who seeks to gain back the lands lost when his father was killed by King Hamlet. Horatio’s description of him as “hot and full” (1.1.96) describes the very qualities expected of an avenging son. Not only does Fortinbras seek vengeance, but he leads an entire army to do so. Hamlet, in comparing himself negatively to Fortinbras, captures the spirit of daring and courage that a revenger should exhibit:

Examples gross as earth exhort me:
 Witness this army of such mass and charge,
 Led by a delicate and tender prince
 Whose spirit with divine ambition puff’d
 Makes mouths at the invisible event,
 Exposing what is mortal and unsure
 To all that fortune, death, and danger dare. (4.4.46-53)

While Hamlet’s description of Fortinbras speaks of the impetus to physical action demanded of the revenger, the exchange between Claudius and Laertes speaks of the extremity of vengeance expected, an expectation that Hamlet fails to meet:

CLAUDIUS. What would you undertake
 To show yourself indeed your father’s son
 More than in words?
 LAERTES. To cut his throat i’ th’ church.

CLAUDIUS. No place indeed should murder sanctuarize,

Revenge should have no bounds. (4.7.124-27)

Hamlet's concept of revenge, by contrast to Laertes's, seems to have far too many bounds, and although Hamlet's comparison between himself, as revenger who is also son-in-mourning, and Laertes suggests a similarity ("by the image of my cause I see / The portraiture of his" [5.2.77-78]), it seems that, in this case too, the reproduction is better than the original. Moreover, not only does Hamlet seem inadequate as revenger but, when compared with Ophelia, he seems inadequate as mourner too. Because there is always that element of carefully crafted rhetoric in his soliloquies of mourning, nothing that Hamlet says is equal in poignancy to Ophelia's unrestrained grief.

Despite the fact that Hamlet seems never to live up to the expectations of the ideal hero (as he is portrayed in Ophelia's eulogy of him), he maintains a fascination. Alastair Fowler, commenting on the way that other characters in the play reflect Hamlet, notes that "the multiple foci are all on aspects of the protagonist. What they all reflect is Hamlet's experience" (6). The play's interest in mirroring reflects its concern with representation, with representation as an intentional construct, and therefore linked to theatre: "the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (3.2.20-22). Because Hamlet is "[t]he glass of fashion" (3.1.153) and "[t]h' observ'd" (3.2.154), the reflections of Hamlet that the other characters of the play offer return the audience's interpretative action back to Hamlet-as-subject of the play. The reflections, in effect, enhance the audience's experience of the reflected.

Another, more obvious, element of the play that works against catharsis, one which is tied to the sense of Hamlet's "incompleteness" (Baldo 62), is the finale, the final blood bath. If the final scene is the moment wherein vengeance is enacted, Hamlet's seems somehow inadequate or ambiguous. The ambiguity extends beyond Claudius's death to Gertrude's and Laertes's; moreover, it recalls the ambiguity of the four deaths that have occurred earlier in the play. There is something not quite right in "the multiple murders" (Hallett and Hallett 8), a something that provokes the feeling that if Hamlet had killed Claudius sooner neither Hamlet nor any of the other characters would have had to die.

One way to comprehend the death of each of these characters is to consider the play's interest in teleology. There is Laertes's remark upon his own death, "Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe, Osric: I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery" (5.2.306-07); Hamlet's upon his mother's, "Is thy union here?" (5.2.326); Laertes's upon Claudius's, "He is justly served. It is a poison temper'd by himself" (5.2.327-28); and, finally, Horatio's "purposes mistook / Fall'n on th' inventor's heads" (5.2.384-85), which all reinforce the notion that retributive justice is an element of fate, that it is a part of the teleology that the play puts forth. One might, then, say that Polonius's is death by spying, Ophelia's, death through remembrance, that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die by deceit, Laertes by revenge, Gertrude through union, Claudius of his own poison, and, finally, that Hamlet dies by avenging both his father's and—bizarrely—his own death. The explanation is too pat. The teleology is inadequate to express the complexities of what occurs in the play.

A closer look at Hamlet's death reveals that what occurs in the play is not a triumph of retributive teleology but a defiance of it. Eric S. Mallin maintains that, near the play's end, "Hamlet comes to accept his own existence as a role—he is merely an actor in a larger play written by God, a play whose form and content, perhaps whose very plot, has already been written" and that, as a result, "the prince moves to a version of humility, a reconciliation with mortality *derived from* the certainty of his own constructedness and his limited self-authority" (135). There are, certainly, two instances, in the final scene, that could support the notion. In the first case, before his fencing match with Laertes, Hamlet shares his presentiment with Horatio: "Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart" (5.2. 212-13). Although, earlier, Hamlet has made something of his sense of foreboding, here, he dismisses it, "but it is no matter" (5.2. 213), and then he explains why he does so:

If it be now, 'tis not to come; it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come—the readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows what is't to leave betimes, let be. (5.2.220-24)

A similar sentiment ends Hamlet's final address to the audience:

You that look pale, and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death,
Is strict in his arrest,—O, I could tell you—
But let it be. (5.2.334-38)

There is in "let be" (5.2.224) and "let it be" (5.2.338) a tone of resignation or reconciliation; the words, however, echo those that begin Hamlet's ontological debate

wherein life and death, being and non-being, become indistinguishable. The question may well be asked: let *what* be?

Inasmuch as Hamlet resigns himself to his fate, he also, more profoundly resists, as the gravedigger scene suggests. In fact, throughout the play, Hamlet defies the possibility that he has “limited self-authority” (Mallin 135), for in response to an inescapable situation he constructs two roles that embody those contradictions that he sees as inherent in that situation, and, with dazzling brilliance, challenges the limited and limiting nature of his role as tragic hero of a revenge tragedy. Hamlet’s resolve, in the face of fate, is nicely captured in those lines that preface his first instance of “reconciliation” (Mallin 135), for, despite misgivings regarding the fencing match, he says to Horatio, “we defy augury” (5.2.219). It must be made clear; it is not that Hamlet *can* defy augury for, like Fortinbras who is always on the march and then finally arrives, foreboding comes to fruition; nonetheless Hamlet *wishes* to “defy augury” (5.2.219). Granted, Hamlet is prepared for death in the end, as his “the readiness is all”(5.2.222) suggests, but he defies it too.

Eric S. Mallin agrees that Hamlet defies death:

Hamlet’s triumph over or step beyond death is not as well recognized as his extensive consideration of and ultimate submission to it [. . .]. For his part Horatio will conclude, prologue-like, with a repetition narrative that in effect continues or restarts the play [. . .]. Hamlet survives in narrative that, thanks to his friend, will become transformed endlessly into theatre. (146-47).

Mallin is correct in believing that Hamlet defies death; he, however, fails to capture the method by which Hamlet does so. To explain that method, one must make a distinction: through Horatio's account of the events of the play, Hamlet is not "transformed endlessly into theatre" (Mallin 147) but into narrative, into "story" (5.2.349). Understanding this is distinction is essential because it is not through Horatio's account of him that Hamlet defies death; it is in contradistinction to Horatio's account that Hamlet's does so.

To understand how Hamlet defies death, consider what Shakespeare does with convention. John Holloway notes that

[t]he last speech of a hero is not piece of private musing, but a conventional *genre*. It is the moment at which the character has a special privilege of comment: to sum up either his own life or the causes of his death. These conventions are widespread in Elizabethan drama. (55)

Shakespeare, breaking from tradition, however, has Hamlet give Horatio the burden of the final summary: "Absent thee from felicity a while, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story" (5.2.347-49). Although Horatio can tell a tale, as witnessed in his narration of the ghost's appearance, it is his brevity, once again, that offsets Hamlet's complexity, for Horatio's narrative,

And let me speak to th' yet unknowing world
How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause. (5.2. 379-85),

is incomplete, inaccurate, and unsatisfying.

Relating criticism of *Hamlet* to Horatio's summary of events, Kastan remarks: "the truth of the play remains in excess of any telling" (6). The sense that no narrative of *Hamlet* can do justice to an audience's experience of it is echoed by Terence Hawkes's remark on Horatio's summary: "the story which he proposes to recount [. . .] is not really the way it was" (Hawkes 310-11). While it is, perhaps, *superficially* the way that it was, there remains the sense that much has been left out, yet what exactly has been left out is the question. Broadening the discussion, Jonathan Baldo notes that "Horatio's promised summary, described in the most blandly general terms, looks to be highly deficient, a case of generalizing by default or in absence of particulars" (93).

Horatio's story fails in more than just this "absence of particulars" (93): it fails in that it *is* story, for by transforming Hamlet *from* theatre *into* narrative, Horatio fixes the prince. Through narrative Hamlet moves from a fluid state of infinitive "To be" (3.1.56) into one that is past and therefore fixed. Upon his death, the negative infinitive "not to be" (3.1.55) is captured by the absence of his speaking part. With the transformation from theatre to narrative, Hamlet is no longer the speaker but the spoken of. The brilliance of his acting cannot be captured in narrative—narrative is inadequate to the task of representing his speaking part. Narrative is a limiting form of action. It is limiting in that it is finite and fixes, whereas the speaking part is infinite. A sense of incompleteness results because Horatio's narrative is not the living theatre of Hamlet; Hamlet alone is sovereign of the representation of his self (Horatio's story *will* never tell it like it was).

Terence Hawkes notes, of the play, that "[i]t begins without words," and "[i]t ends without words" (Hawkes 310). It is this absence of words that highlights the significance

of Hamlet's speaking part, which is the vitality of the play. To understand what Hamlet's acting achieves, consider the emphasis on this speaking part and the effect that his last words have as a result of that emphasis. Hamlet's killing of Claudius is not his final act. If language is a mode of action, then Hamlet's final act is his exhortation to Horatio, which begins, "So tell him, with th' occurments more and less" (5.2.357), and continues with, "more and less" (5.2.357), a phrase that suggests that Hamlet knows that Horatio's narrative *cannot* capture things as they were. The exhortation ends: "the rest is silence" (5.2.358). It is here, in Hamlet's last words, that it becomes clear that Hamlet's heroic action is his acting.

Hamlet's last words, "the rest is silence" (5.2.358), speak both of reconciliation and of defiance, for Hamlet's last words suggest both that rest is found in the silence of death and that what remains is unknown and unknowable, therefore, silent. The tension and the ambiguity of his "To be, or not to be" soliloquy is captured by his last words. Thus, just as Hamlet reconciles himself to his death, he, more profoundly, resists. To better comprehend Hamlet's resistance and the significance of the play's end in context of Hamlet's last words, consider Terence Hawkes's comments, in his article "*Telmah*" (Hamlet backwards), on *Hamlet*'s "recursive mode" (313). He says that "looking backwards, re-vision, or reinterpretation, the running of events over again, out of their time sequence, ranks, in fact, as a fundamental mode of *Hamlet*" (313). That Horatio's summary, as just such an instance of return, is unsatisfactory provokes, in fact, a more profound return.

By giving Horatio the burden of final summary, Hamlet escapes the inescapable, escapes the confines of his determinate role. The effect Horatio's inadequate summary is

to call the audience to return, to recall the play entire, to remember. In this regard, an argument can be made that Hamlet's description of Yorick, "a fellow of infinite jest" (5.1.184-85), is accurate, that despite fact of skull, Yorick's jest is infinite—in Hamlet's memory of him. In the vision of Hamlet holding and remarking upon the skull is, then, a vision of both Hamlet's fated death and his means to immortality, the means to which is memory. To die, perchance to live again—in memory. Hamlet's final words, "the rest is silence" (5.2.358), then, signify both the cessation of all action in the quietude of death and the termination of speech in face of the impossibility of adequate representation through narrative. Just as the ghost disrupts the narrative of its appearance in the first scene of the play, so too the action of Hamlet throughout the play disrupts the narration of his life's story in the last. The incomplete catharsis and inadequate narrative summary of the final scene call the audience to remember, call the audience to contemplation of what the play is really about, what really happened, and what might, therefore, be left to silence. As his last act, Hamlet's final words are a ghostly reminder of the potency and the vitality of Hamlet's speaking part just as it slips from the auditory grasp of the audience.

Inasmuch as *Hamlet* is a play about death, it is also a play that celebrates life. Although Hamlet is not permitted to escape from tragedy, he is permitted an opportunity to make a grand gesture. As the self-conscious hero, he is offered the opportunity to act in the face of tragedy—which is the face of death—and the action that he takes is his performance, most specifically, his speaking part. It is not delay that makes Hamlet tragic, but it is his capacity for the theatrical; and it is this very capacity that makes him heroic. By perceiving Hamlet as an actor acting the hero in the play that bears his name,

one may then conceive of him not as a man of inaction but as a man of infinite action.

For Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, acting is an act of defiance; by acting Hamlet maintains the infinitive "To be" (3.1.56)—by being an uncertain and corrupt figure in an uncertain and corrupt world—in face of the inevitable "not to be" (3.1.56).

Contrary to much critical opinion, Shakespeare's Hamlet is a man of fascinating action. By casting Hamlet as the actor acting the hero's role, Shakespeare enlarges the scope of dramatic representation. By making Hamlet a vehicle of reflexivity in the play, Shakespeare exposes the artifice of *Hamlet* and challenges the limitations of the role of the revenge hero. By combining elements of revenge tragedy with elements of tragedy in general and by imbuing Hamlet with self-consciousness, Shakespeare creates in *Hamlet*, a complex and complicated dramatic work. Hamlet the self-conscious hero, knowing the implications of the situation in which he finds himself at the beginning of the play that he is in, mediates himself, the actor-acting-the-hero, through the guises of the Prince of Wit and the Prince of Death. In doing so, he performs an interpretation of the revenge hero's role that charts yet deviates from the dramatic conventions of the genre. In the role of the Prince of Wit and in the role of the Prince of Death, Hamlet shifts the play's emphasis to verbal action. When, as the play nears its end, the two roles come most fully together, Hamlet's acting attains its highest achievement, for as the final scene of *Hamlet* reveals, Hamlet sustains not only *his* performance but *the* performance; his spoken-word is the life-force of the play. As the actor acting, Hamlet is able to transcend the greatest limit of the revenge hero's role; he is able to transcend death because he takes the correspondence between life and theatre to its logical conclusion. For Hamlet, life *is* theatre, performance, a means of being.

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