

I ACT THEREFORE I AM  
IDENTITY AND PERFORMANCE IN SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*

A Senior Honors Thesis

by

MEREDITH DENISE MORGAN

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs  
& Academic Scholarships  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE  
RESEARCH FELLOWS

April 2004

Major: English

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## ABSTRACT

## I Act Therefore I Am

Identity and Performance in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. (April 2004)

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The command to "Know thyself," ascribed to Greek wisdom, and further propounded by Socrates' proclamation "the unexamined life is not worth living" suggests that the prerequisite for life extends beyond mere existence to self-reflection. The emergence of selfhood in the Renaissance was due to the artists and thinkers of the time, who in obedience to the command to know thyself, engaged in reflection upon the self and further sought to express this selfhood. Shakespeare's drama *Hamlet* depicts the emergent interiority of the individual, through the character of Hamlet. In the character of Hamlet, Shakespeare gives shape to the struggle of man to apprehend an understanding of himself and his fellow men. Hamlet's emergent identity is in contrast to the drunken revelries of his native Denmark, to the effect that Hamlet experiences isolation from the other characters and frustration as he cannot express his inner self. The Renaissance Man moves beyond the requirements of daily life to become a creator, whether of art, ideas, or scientific experiment. He responds to both internal impulses

and external inspiration to attempt to reflect the cosmos in which he lives. Such creative expression is necessary to bring forth the developing inner self, yet Hamlet is called to be a force of destruction in avenging his father's murder, a requirement quite antithetical to his emergent selfhood. Hamlet's need for creative expression and his duty of revenge prove irreconcilable in the play, as the destiny of the play moves from cosmos to chaos and destruction. *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's most theatrically conscious play, incorporating the language of theater, as well as a play within the play. The arrival of a troupe of players present Hamlet with an opportunity for creative expression as Hamlet acts as both playwright and director to the players. The biblical God asserts, "I am that I am" philosopher René Descartes, "I think therefore I am," and the character of Hamlet "I act therefore I am," suggesting that the developing inner self must find outward expression to be actualized.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	v
CHAPTER	
I    INTRODUCTION.....	1
II   THE ENIGMA OF HAMLET.....	12
III  HAMLET'S INTERIORITY.....	25
IV  THE PLAY'S THE THING.....	38
V   CONCLUSION.....	49
REFERENCES.....	51
VITA.....	53

## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The period in Western history following the Renaissance has been defined as an era “motivated by the idea that a single law underlay the whole universe; that the law was knowable; and that when men brought their lives into harmony with the law, perfection would be reached” (Cross 106). The period preceding the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, is referred to as The Dark Ages, because of the lack of intellectual pursuit and discovery during this time, as well as for the archaic adherence to tradition. What transpired in the Renaissance to move man from a state of relative intellectual contentment to a state of intellectual inquiry wherein an understanding of the entire Universe was pursued?

What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension, how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals-and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me...

(*Hamlet* 2.2.303-309)

In the character of Hamlet, Shakespeare gives shape to the struggle of man to apprehend an understanding of himself and his fellow men. The command to “Know

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thyself,” ascribed to Greek wisdom, and further propounded by Socrates’ proclamation “the unexamined life is not worth living” suggests that the prerequisite for life extends beyond mere existence to self-reflection. The emergence of selfhood in the Renaissance was due to the artists and thinkers of the time, who in obedience to the command to know thyself, engaged in reflection upon the self and further sought to express this selfhood. The Renaissance reflects the struggle between the individual and the community, conventionality and creativity, authority and self-governance, qualitative and quantitative discovery, science and religion, man and the Universe. Innovative art, architecture, political and religious thought as well as other factors contributed to the cultural, intellectual and spiritual climate of this age, allowing these dualities and questions to be expressed and investigated with such vigor.

The Greek philosopher Protagoras (c. 485-420 BC) suggests that “man is the measure of all things,” placing man at the center of all things visible, yet the art of the middle ages had overlooked the visibility of man, and sought to depict the realm of the spiritual and therefore invisible. The art, architecture and literature of a time and place, naturally reflect the ideologies of the culture as an artist is influenced by, and finds subject matter in his surroundings. A transformation occurred in the Renaissance shifting the subject matter of art from the invisible spiritual realm, to the visible physical realm of man. Scientific discovery sought to usurp the authority of the church and replace reason and knowledge as the ultimate authority. The Renaissance reflects an age of seekers, discoverers and creators as the Reformers sought the truth of the

biblical God, apart from the corruption of the church; the artists and the poets sought the dignity of man and knowledge of the self; and inventors and thinkers sought scientific innovation.

The Renaissance represents an age of rebirth, in drawing from the classics of Greece, as well as a maturing of ideas present in medieval culture. Renaissance ideals are distinguished by the classifications of classical humanism, Renaissance individualism and scientific naturalism. These ideologies collectively inform the expressions of Renaissance artists and thinkers. These concepts were not new in their general meanings, but acquired meanings specific to the time and places of the Renaissance. The Italian city of Florence represents the epitome of Renaissance culture as the intellectual and artistic climate provided great impetus to the numerous painters, sculptors, architects and patrons of the arts who lived in and visited Florence.

Classical Humanism was survived in the Roman architecture and sculpture of Italy, reflecting a revival of the classics rather than a new concept. The meanings and implications that were solidified in the Roman remains were reinterpreted and adapted to emerging Florentine culture. The presence of classical culture in Florence was continuous with the past, yet it gave a particular inspiration to the creative and intellectual culture of Renaissance Florence. Florentine artists drew out the past from their surroundings to affirm the new styles of the time. New to Florence was the study of Greek language, and an interest in Plato replaced the authority of Aristotelian scholarship. Marsilio Ficino represented the leader of the scholastic Plato movement,

appearing to reinterpret Christianity through the vision of Plato rather than promoting paganism as is the thought of some scholars (Fleming 283-4).

Scientific Naturalism found invigoration in a new experimental attitude as well as novel conceptions of space. Naturalism embodies an empirical approach in the careful observation of natural events, and the reproduction of objects as seen by the eye. Dissection of cadavers, as performed by Michelangelo, demonstrated the desire for scientific discovery, while mathematical study provided new concepts of space and perspective. The desire for discovery infused the arts as well as science, and furthermore, all progressive areas of the time, from Machiavelli's political and sociological observations to a reassessment of the forms of secular government. Leonardo da Vinci exemplifies the concepts of Scientific Naturalism as he approached painting as a science and sculpture as a mechanical art. His empirical investigations extend beyond the physical and anatomical into the metaphysical and the psychological aspects of human nature.

Advances in painting were characterized by placing figures in a more natural relationship to the space around them and by the incorporation of setting and landscape. The subject matter of medieval art was largely religious and therefore spiritual, resulting in symbolic rather than naturalistic depictions. In the Renaissance however, artistic expression now became more self-aware as artists focused more on technique and aesthetic problems than on the allegory, symbol, or moral lesson to be

depicted in the art. Artists of the 15<sup>th</sup> century explored and expressed the wealth of scientific advances in perspectives, optics and anatomy to the fullest potential (Fleming 285).

Renaissance Individualism was fostered by the conditions of the small city-state, which promoted the close contact between artists and their patrons. The portraits, biographies and autobiographies of the time demonstrate a high regard for personality. Artists and patrons alike possessed a desire for personal prestige, as the present and future distinction of donors was reliant upon having monuments built in their honor and having prominent artists to decorate them. Such pursuits by patrons and artists of nobility and notoriety reflect the increasing concern on the part of the individual for unique identification.

Pico della Mirandola, a Florentine philosopher and author of *The Oration and On the Dignity of Man*, suggests, “There is nothing to be seen more wonderful than man.” He conceptualizes man as the center of the universe, a notion expanded upon as man is:

The intermediary between creatures, the intimate of higher beings and the king of lower beings, the interpreter of nature by the sharpness of his senses, by the questing curiosity of his reason, and by the light of his intelligence, the interval between eternity and the flow of time...

(qtd. in Cross 284)

Mirandola notes in his idea of man as the intermediary, that man has the potential to rise to the divine status of a higher being, or the possibility of abasing himself to the level of a brute beast, expressing a faith in the higher potential of man, which invigorates the work of the humanistic artists Botticelli, Michelangelo, and Raphael (Cross 284).

Michelangelo reflects the Renaissance value of the universal man as he practiced the disciplines of sculpting, painting, and poetry. Much of Michelangelo's work including the *Last Judgment*, *The Pieta* and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel depict biblical themes with artistic innovation. With Michelangelo, "High Renaissance sculpture begins- and ends" (Cross 31). His statue of *The David* represents the Renaissance ideal that "man is the measure of all things," and further, Michelangelo's personal burden of genius as this work surpasses the sculptural techniques of the Romans. The perfect form of *The David* reflects beauty, while the enlarged head represents value placed on reason in this age. Michelangelo's contemporaries referred to his awesome, controlled force as *terribilita*, a quality that allowed him to accept only the authority of his genius. The conflict of his supreme artistic ability with the God of the universe may be seen in the depiction of his St. Peter's *Pieta* and his later, *Pieta Rondanini*. The former reflects supernaturally exalted figures of youth and beauty, while the latter reflects non-classical tensions of pure emotion in its rough, rock form. The first glorifies man, while the second glorifies God, echoing the dualism of the Renaissance (Cross 31-2). Michelangelo's works exhibit the tensions experienced

by the individual during the Renaissance, as discovery and religion often seemed irreconcilable. The shift in his career is noted by his early sculpture *The David*, which reflects his own genius, and his later *Pieta*, which attributes greater significance to the mysteries of God. The depiction of Michelangelo's faith in his own genius reflects the shifting perspectives from a focus on the supernatural power of God to a focus on the temporal virtues and abilities of man. In contrast to Michelangelo's expression of genius and reason, Michel de Montaigne, creator of a new literary form the essay, asserts "*Que sais-je!*" 'I know nothing,' expressing the humility from which man must examine his life.

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), a French provincial landowner, revitalized the notion of the literary self-portrait with his new form of writing. He called this form 'Essays' from the French *essayer*, meaning 'to try,' reflecting the unrefined and original quality of his writing. His preface to his *Essays* of 1580 states:

This, reader, is an honest book...I want to appear in my simple, natural and everyday dress, without strain or artifice; for it is myself that I portray. My imperfections may be read to the life, and my natural form will be here in so far as respect for the public allows. Had my lot been cast among those people who are said still to live under the kindly liberty of nature's primal laws, I should, I assure you, most gladly have painted myself complete and in all my nakedness. So, reader, I am

myself the substance of my book, and there is no reason why you should waste your leisure on so frivolous and unrewarding a subject.

(qtd. in Boorstin 556-7)

Aldous Huxley comments of Montaigne, “by the time he had written his way into the Third Book he had reached the limits of his newly discovered art...Free association artistically controlled-this is the paradoxical secret of Montaigne’s best essays.... [He] develops a central theme and relates it to the rest of human experience” (qtd. in Boorstin 556-7). Montaigne writes of himself:

Amusing notion: many things that I would not want to tell anyone, I tell the public; and for my most secret knowledge and thoughts I send my most faithful friends to a bookseller’s shop...If by such good signs I knew of a man who was suited to me, truly I would go very far to find him; for the sweetness of harmonious and agreeable company cannot be bought too dearly, in my opinion. Oh, a friend!”

(qtd. in Boorstin 564-5)

Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* manifests the individual’s quest for truth and his struggle to discern good and evil within himself and the world. His journey through hell and heaven suggests the question for the individual “Does my journey make a difference?” His work reflects a Renaissance vision of faith as the individual questions the significance of his unique role in the greater scheme of the Universe.

Dante's journey from darkness to light widens the road less traveled for the individual as he offers a subjective view of faith for the individual in contrast to the objective conventions of the Church.

Renaissance ideals opened the door for individual achievement and exploration. Perspective shifted from that of the objective reality proposed by the church to the subjective position of the individual. Shakespeare's emergence in the Renaissance further changed the perception of individuals and the individual personality. The characters he created are not larger than life, as much of the Greek and Roman statuary appears, but are representative of life's largeness (Bloom 4). His characters express a variety of human passions, thoughts, struggles and emotions. One of his greatest works, *Hamlet*, depicts the drama of man's fate in conflict with the universe, within the context of a revenge plot. *Hamlet* is the first play to employ inner dialogue through soliloquy, reflective of Renaissance individualism. Hamlet's hesitation to act in the play and his self-consciousness establish the drama of an increased sense of identity. Bloom suggests that we are virtually unable to think of ourselves without recalling Hamlet whether consciously or unconsciously, as his world is the realm of the developing inner self (405). Hamlet in his uncertainty reflects the emergence of the self in the Renaissance among the conflicts of authority, community, and ideology. Bloom further suggests that even though Hamlet is a hero/villain he is still the hero of Western consciousness (406, 413). The Renaissance opened the door to self-discovery for the individual, simultaneously casting the mold for the modern man.

Bloom writes that, “while Hamlet embodies such a heroic vitalism, he is also the representative of death, an undiscovered country bounded by time. Shakespeare created Hamlet as a dialectic of antithetical qualities, unresolvable even by the hero’s death” (406). Hamlet is the largest self to emerge in the Renaissance, yet his inner dialogue; his conflicts only end in death, in futility. What is Shakespeare conveying to Renaissance culture in regard to the individual through the untimely end of such a large character? Is he saying that the pursuit of self-discovery is futile, or that the road to self-discovery as yet untraveled leads to further undiscovered country? Or possibly echoing the warnings of Greek tragedians to avoid hamartia and acknowledge the will of the gods, present also in the theatrical trope *memnto mori*, plays intended to humble man by reminding man of his ultimate death. The Renaissance presented both a time of conflict for the individual as well as an atmosphere that encouraged inquiry, thus allowing great thinkers and artists of the Renaissance to explore this conflict. The conflict may be described in a myriad of terms whether the conflict between person and the personal ideal as Bloom writes, whether the conflict between man and God, between the individual and the institution of the church.

Present in Renaissance sculpture is the concept of contraposition, in which a figure stands in a position reflecting tension rather than ease. Michelangelo’s *The David* reflects the notion that “man is the measure of all things,” yet Michelangelo’s *Slaves* reflect the tension man experiences in becoming whole as these figures appear in writhing positions, each figure only partially formed from the rock. The

Renaissance presented an opportunity for man to extend beyond mere necessity and survival, and examine his life. Renaissance culture valued such Universal men who sought to examine life exemplified by the presence of such institutions as the *Teatro Academia*, which supported intellectual pursuit, as well as other academies supported by such wealthy patrons as the Florentine Medici family. The character of Hamlet, a university student in Wittenberg, seizes upon the idea of the subjective self and questions what is man's purpose in life beyond survival. The most god-like characteristic man possesses is the ability to create. The Renaissance man moves beyond the requirements of daily life to become a creator, whether of art, ideas, or scientific experiment. He responds to both internal impulse and external inspiration to attempt to reflect the cosmos in which he lives. Such creative expression is necessary to bring forth the developing inner self, yet Hamlet is called to be a force of destruction in avenging his father's murder, a requirement quite antithetical to his emergent selfhood. Hamlet's need for creative expression and his duty of revenge prove irreconcilable in the play, as the destiny of the play moves from cosmos, to chaos and destruction. The body of the play presents, not Hamlet's delay of acting out revenge, but Hamlet's struggle with the duality of man in his potentialities for both good and evil.

## CHAPTER II

## THE ENIGMA OF HAMLET

*T. S. Eliot observ[es] that all we can hope for is to be wrong about Shakespeare in a new way. I propose only that we cease to be wrong about him by stopping trying to be right.*

Harold Bloom *The Invention of the Human*

The play *Hamlet* is highly problematic as well as enigmatic, for critics, actors, directors, readers and audience members, yet it is a coherent dramatic construction, leaving us to surmise that the problems of Hamlet are not Shakespeare's, but our own. As a director, Laurence Olivier chooses to open his film version of *Hamlet* with a viewing and a reading of Hamlet's words to Horatio, Marcellus and Bernardo, in which he states,

By their o'ergrowth of some complexion,  
 Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,  
 Or by some habit, that too much o'er leavens  
 The form of plausible manners- that these men,  
 Carrying, I say the stamp of one defect,  
 Being Nature's livery or fortune's star,  
 His virtues else, be they as pure as gracc,  
 As infinite as man may undergo,  
 Shall in the general censure take corruption

From that particular fault ... (1.4.27-36)

He follows this reading with the narration, “this is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind,” indicating that for Hamlet his defect and overgrowth of indecision overshadows all merits of character he possesses. Olivier, however, comments on his motivation in making this directorial choice that many audience members who would view this film in the Cinema, would never attend the theater, and he therefore had to oversimplify the film in order to give his audience a simplistic understanding of the drama. *Hamlet*, however, is much more than the “tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind,” as the dramatic construction of Elizabethan playwright William Shakespeare, who wrote for the groundlings as well as Queen Elizabeth. *Hamlet* depicts a story of revenge, yet the drama weaves together numerous sub-plots, which contribute depth and significance to the political action of revenge. Actor Richard Burton states that he found new meaning in the play each of the three hundred times he played Hamlet, and that even years later, he would awake at night with a line from Hamlet in his mind and find still more significance. The words Shakespeare has written for Hamlet haunt Western consciousness in the same manner as the words of Christ in the gospels. Harold Bloom questions whether Hamlet may be the intellectual’s Christ (420). Bloom also suggests that we do not read Hamlet, but that Hamlet reads us and that a critical interpretation of Hamlet may indicate more about the critic than Hamlet. Trevor Nunn, Artistic Director of The Royal Shakespeare Company, suggests that playing Hamlet is the test of an actor’s career as the role

requires everything of an actor (*The Great Hamlets*). Interpretations of Hamlet vary from Oedipal psychoanalytic, to a political revenge play, to a “tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind.” I have found The Arden Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* editor Harold Jenkins’ analysis of the play to be the most comprehensive and internally consistent, and use his interpretation as a point of departure.

Jenkins points out that the dual role of Hamlet as both the avenger of his father’s murder, and the object of Laertes revenge of Polonius’ murder, reflects human nature as possessing both good and evil. Hamlet compares the brother kings as “a hyperion to a satyr,” (1.2.140) embodying elements of both good and evil. Hamlet speaks throughout the play of man’s baseness and his potential to commit acts of evil. Jenkins asserts that:

The play itself is aware of the destiny it is preparing for him [Hamlet] and of that larger destiny of which the dual revenge becomes the symbol; and as the play shapes itself in the dramatist’s imagination it is able to communicate to its hero a reluctance – not indeed to kill Polonius, which Hamlet does not show, but to live the life required of him in a world which seems dominated by evil ... the story ... leads the hero towards a destiny which a man who aspires to virtue does not willingly accept. Such a destiny in a tragic play is best suited by a reluctant hero. (Jenkins 146-47).

Hamlet's reluctance to act is the result of indecision, not because he simply cannot make up his mind, but because he fears that he will act out of evil and not virtue. Hamlet's awareness of his own potentialities toward evil are manifested as he dismisses Ophelia and informs her, "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between/ earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all, believe/ none of us" (3.1.124-130). Furthermore Hamlet commands Ophelia to "get thee to a nunnery," (3.1.121) that she may avoid the evils of life, and that she not breed more sinners to enter the world, "for virtue cannot/ so inoculate our old stock" (3.1.117-18). Hamlet recognizes in himself, his inherent sinful state, and his inability to completely overcome this nature. He recognizes the disparity between the potential in humans for virtue, and the inherent evil of humans with, "what should such fellows as I do crawling between/ earth and heaven?" (3.1.129). The notion of man as the intermediary is also reflected in the writing of Pico della Mirandola who suggests that man is, "the intermediary between creatures, the intimate of higher beings and the king of lower beings."

Jenkins also comments on Shakespeare's awareness of dramatic construction as the frame of the play allows for a number of subplots in service of the greater revenge plot. The center of the play portrays the players performing the play-within-the-play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, of which Hamlet exclaims, "The plays the thing/ in which I'll

catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.600-1). The play depicts a dumb show<sup>1</sup> before the actual performance, with a brief narration to the effect that the poisoning of the King is re-enacted twice before the guilty Claudius. Hamlet, however, misrepresents the meaning of this murder scene by whispering to Claudius that “This is one Lucianus, nephew to the King” (3.2.239) as Lucianus pours poison into the King’s ear. Hamlet desires to “catch the conscience of the king” in the scene, by showing the brother to be the King pouring poison in his ear, yet he tells another story to Claudius. This results in Claudius’ perception of the play differing from that which Hamlet seeks to present, as he sees the play as an indication that Hamlet possesses vengeance of which he is the object. After Lucianus pours the poison in the King’s ear Claudius stands and stops the play with the command, “Give me some light. Away,” though whether because of guilt, or Hamlet’s threat of vengeance, the text does not clearly indicate (3.2.263). He proceeds to confession so that he might absolve himself of his sins before he dies, and not risk wandering purgatory if Hamlet kills him. In the act of telling Claudius that Lucianus is one nephew to the king Hamlet seals his fate. Had he not suggested to Claudius that he was going to kill him, by projecting himself onto the character of Lucianus, he would potentially have been permitted to wander Elsinore as a madman. Jenkins asserts that by warning Claudius of Hamlet’s intentions of vengeance, this

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<sup>1</sup> A dumb show is a non-verbal performance of action preceding the play, common to Elizabethan drama. The purpose of a dumb-show might be to present aspects of the play not easily given by dialogue, or to foreshadow events that might be given in dialogue. The dumb-show in Hamlet, depicts exactly the action to be performed in the play (Jenkins 501).

point in the play leads to a number of counter-plots, which culminate in the moment in which Hamlet simultaneously achieves revenge and dies, according much power to the action of the play. Implications arise in according greater impetus to the action in the play than to the psychology of the play, in regard to the character of Hamlet (Jenkins 124).

Jenkins notes Churton Collins' appraisal of *Hamlet* that it "is in relation to its motive and main interest, a purely psychological study, and to that study the whole action of the drama is subordinated," but suggests in turn that the drama may be interpreted in reverse with "the 'action of the drama' pre-eminent in shaping a significant design while the 'psychological' interest of the characters' motivation has a subsidiary importance in giving the action plausibility" (qtd. in Jenkins 124). The perspective from which one analyzes *Hamlet* is crucial in understanding the play as a cohesive dramatic construction. One may use the character of Hamlet for one's own devices, but Hamlet is essentially a character determined by his role within a larger drama and not a psychological case study that happens to sustain one of the greatest theatrical works of history. Although, the character of Hamlet is central to the play, and does inform to a large degree Western Consciousness, it is the dramatic construction of the play and the pervasive sense of destiny within the play, which inform the character of Hamlet. Furthermore, Hamlet remains a character on paper until the drama is actually performed. In theater, actors must find a motivation for their

actions and words; a subtext to the actual text. The psychology of Hamlet supports the actions portrayed, by creating a motivation. Shakespeare creates a number of sub-plots in service of the larger revenge plot, which result in a drama of carefully constructed layers. Jenkins questions, in regard to viewing Hamlet's psychology in submission to the larger plot construction, "What, then, is the relation between hamlet's task of revenge and the universal mysteries of man's being which occupy his mind?" and further regards this question as "the fundamental problem in Hamlet if the play is to be revealed as a coherent dramatic design and its significance understood" (127-8). Jenkins asserts that the basic issue of the play precludes revelation of the revenge plot as well as the ensuing counter-plots with Hamlet's soliloquy on 'To be or not to be', "in which hamlet's personal plight is transcended in the plight of being, man suffering all the 'natural shocks that flesh is heir to', and... whether this is better escaped from or endured" (141). Jenkins proffers that it is in the "dual role of Hamlet's that we may see the genesis of his character. For it is of course, in the dramatization of the Hamlet story, the role that determines the character, not the psychological make-up of the man that determines what he will do" (Jenkins 146). Jenkins asserts a crucial argument that one encounters in approaching *Hamlet* in that Hamlet is not a real person, but a character, and furthermore a character in a work of drama indicating that he is a role for an actor to play. Many critics agree that the revenge play is a mask for a drama of personality, and yet ultimately the story of revenge is larger, and more compelling than the story of the Prince of Denmark; more compelling in the sense that it drives the

story of the play to an end that Hamlet himself cannot. Many writers of literature comment on the writing process that they do not know the end of the stories they write when they begin them, and furthermore, that they do not necessarily know more than the next line they will write. They allow the story to reveal itself to them, and for the characters to tell them what they will do. Authors suggest that sometimes characters even introduce the author to another character they did not even know existed. The course of events for the drama Hamlet were predetermined by Shakespeare when he chose the Danish Amleth legend of fratricide and revenge. Jenkins states that "it is of course, in the dramatization of the Hamlet story, the role that determines the character, not the psychological make-up of the man that determines what he will do" indicating that Hamlet's character is created out of his destiny rather than his destiny determined by the psychological make-up of the man Hamlet. The notion that Hamlet as a psychological entity produces the blood-bath of Act V is contrary to the craft of Shakespeare as a playwright. The outline of the action of the play is given by the revenge story of Amleth, so that as Jenkins states, "the role determines the character," rather than the character determining for the author what action he will take. The work of Hamlet is so comprehensive, even in its omissions, that to implicate Shakespeare in motivations not indicated by the text is to commit a transgression of presumption. That is to presume that without a similar comprehension of pre-Elizabethan literature, as well as a comprehensive knowledge of the works of Shakespeare one might examine a piece of Hamlet and extrapolate the meaning of the entire play. The origins of the

character of Hamlet, therefore are necessarily elusive, and one cannot assert with certainty by what matter Shakespeare created him, whether by self-projection, by the image of his own late son Hamnet, by dust, or by still baser matter.

Hamlet himself seeks in the beginning of the play to dissociate himself from the rotten state of Denmark, yet in Act V he identifies himself with the state of Denmark with, "This is I, Hamlet, the Dane" (5.1.250-1). T. S. Eliot comments on the characters' excess of emotions in the play, which create a dissonance within the drama. He asserts that Hamlet fails to establish an objective correlative for his emotions and concludes *Hamlet* is a dramatic failure (qtd. in Charney 6). It is my contention that Hamlet is not merely overreacting to the events around him, but that his emotional excess is incongruous with the events. This is because the events around him are "most unnatural" (1.5.25) to him and because Hamlet does not accept his identity as a Dane until Act V. Hamlet's role as avenger leads him to question whether the life required of him, is one he desires to live. In the historical period of the drama, revenge was customary, and therefore cannot be viewed with a modern Western sentimentality; and as a normality of the time period, is not the object of Hamlet's fixation. Hamlet's inaction is a result of his reluctance to live the life required of him. Jenkins suggests that the psychology of Hamlet gives the action plausibility. Hamlet's emotions, which are an indication of his interiority, are revealed on one plane, while "Fortune" and the political drama of revenge are worked out on another plane, so that the correlative

between the action of the play and Hamlet's response is not sensible. Furthermore, it cannot be sensible, as Hamlet's sensibilities so overshadow the culture of Denmark that he "must like a whore unpack [his] heart with words" to attempt to reconcile himself to his situation (2.2.581). Hamlet's conflict reflects the common plight of the individual, as a man who is but dust and ashes, in conflict with the entire universe? Hamlet cannot escape what he is, lest he exchange his name, as he suggests to Horatio, "I'll change that name with you" (1.2.163). He carries around his "too too sullied flesh" (1.2.129) so that even from the shadow of his melancholy he cannot escape. Man is assured that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without God's notice - an idea Hamlet recognizes with, "there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (5.2.157-8) - and yet man must be reminded of his end as the biblical King David prays, "Teach us to number our days that we may present to you a heart of wisdom" (*New American Standard Bible* Psalm 90:12). Similarly the theater possesses a style of drama entitled *memento mori*, 'remember your death' to remind man of his mortality, a concept present in Greek tragedy as well, as the players performed with the natural scenery behind them as an indication of the greater cosmos by which fate is determined. Hamlet represents a man aware of the inherent dissonance of man as he questions "what should such fellows as I do crawling between/ earth and heaven?" (3.1.129). Hamlet's awareness of the truth of life, suggests that he is not indecisive, but decidedly nihilistic as he realizes that no action is great enough to 'set right' what is 'most unnatural[ly]' 'out of joint.' Hamlet is the largest personality in the drama, and speaks

the majority of the lines, a great percentage further spoken in soliloquy, alone on the stage. Hamlet is the center of the drama *Hamlet*, in name, presence, intellect, and action. Hamlet may be the center of the play and the strongest personality within the play, but the working out of events, whether by fate, fortune or divinity reflects the fact that Hamlet's personality is still subordinate to an externality greater than himself.

How does he become the hero of Western consciousness if not as the intellectual's Christ? (Bloom 420) Hamlet stands on stage and bears his soul, asking the question "If this is life, do I want to live it?" and then dies by a cruel twisting of fate, or the shaping of a divinity who seems to delight in bitter jest as Hamlet himself; and all for us the audience who sit on the edge of our seat. Twentieth century writer Walker Percy, when asked how he was given faith responded,

The only answer I can find is that I asked for it; in fact, I demanded it. I took it as an intolerable state of affairs to have found myself in this life and in this age, which is a disaster by calculation, without demanding a gift commensurate with the offense. So I demanded it.

(qtd. in Woodley 50)

Hamlet's speeches agree with Walker Percy's analysis of life as "an intolerable state of affairs" and "a disaster by calculation," yet Hamlet stops short of demanding "a gift commensurate with the offense." Hamlet recognizes the duality of human nature, and the mortality of man, yet must resolve himself of the necessity of life. In the

beginning of the play Hamlet struggles with his father's death, not wanting to end his mourning, as his mother has ended hers by marrying his uncle upon the heels of his father's death. Later, Hamlet treats death with great levity in regard to Polonius whom he has killed. In his first soliloquy Hamlet seems to lament that suicide is not a realistic option as God has "fixed/ His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (1.2.31-2) and because afterlife is an "undiscovered country, from whose bourne/ No traveler returns," (3.1.79-80) yet by Act V Hamlet regards death as something that must be accepted, and no longer dismisses life. Hamlet first resolves the problem that all men must die, and then resolves himself of the fact that he must live, and soon after, ironically does die. By Act V Hamlet recognizes that "There's a divinity that shapes our ends" (5.2.10) and that each man must die. When Hamlet kills Polonius he comments on Polonius's physical matter as being that of dust, as we are created from dust and will return to dust when we die. Hamlet treats the death of Polonius with much levity. In Act I Gertrude and Claudius speak to Hamlet about death, in regard to his father, yet their speeches also treat death with an excess of levity. We are prone to side with Hamlet in this scene, as Claudius' words appear to be mere wind, and not wisdom. We realize that the content of Claudius' words are true enough, but that it lacks authority, and Hamlet must discover for himself the nature of our end.

Central to the character of Hamlet is his possession of an inner self, and central to an expression of this interiority is performance. Hamlet is a cast mold that an actor

must fill, and the psychological make-up of the actor becomes the metal to fill the mold. The idea of fate, furthers the notion of Hamlet as a role, and the notion that “All the world’s a stage And all the men and women merely players” (2.7.138-9). Hamlet asks the question, seemingly for the first time in history, “to be or not to be,” which implies great irony for the character of Hamlet, as a choice to live will indicate an acceptance of the role, which is written for him; and consequently the life determined for him to live. The overarching destiny of the drama, however, does not negate Hamlet’s emerging selfhood, but places it within the context of a life lived in a given place within a given era. Harold Bloom comments that:

Elsinore’s disease is anywhere’s, anytime’s. Something is rotten in every state, and if your sensibility is like Hamlet’s, then finally you will not tolerate it. Hamlet’s tragedy is at last the tragedy of personality: The charismatic is compelled to a physician’s authority despite himself; Claudius is merely an accident; Hamlet’s only persuasive enemy is Hamlet himself. (431)

The universality of Elsinore does not make Hamlet the everyman, but as his “to be or not to be” transcends his own circumstances to approach a universality, it does make him the modern man. Shakespeare’s plays were written to appeal to a variety of classes, all of whom understood to some extent the whips and scorns of life, yet the

Elizabethan culture was not prepared for the interiority of Hamlet which pervades Western consciousness today.

## CHAPTER III

## HAMLET'S INTERIORITY

*The individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing, and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole. But whoever is unable to live in society, or who has no need of it because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god.*

*Aristotle, Politics*

The character of Hamlet presents a revolution in interiority succeeding and surpassing the identities of Tyndale, Montaigne, Martin Luther and Dante. Hamlet's personality reflects the emergent humanistic ideas of the period of a subjective self in pursuit of self-awareness, and a development of intellectual and artistic qualities. Hamlet's identity is evidenced by his isolation, his abhorrence of man and his inability to find words to express his inner selfhood.

Selfhood is not all together on the inside, but must move from the outside in. Hamlet's first line in the play responds to Claudius referring to him as a nephew son, "more than kin and less than kind," as an aside to the audience. Hamlet's perception of himself varies from that of Claudius' as Claudius perceives him as his nephew and his son, while Hamlet sees this relationship as unnatural. Hamlet does not speak this truth to Claudius, but instead to the audience. Hamlet responds to Gertrude's inquisition, "if it be, why seems it so particular with thee?" with:

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'.

'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
 Nor customary suits of solemn black...  
 No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
 Nor the dejected haviour 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,  
 These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (1.2.74-86)

Hamlet's response to Gertrude's appraisal that his visage defines him, "tis not alone...the visage...that can denote me truly" indicates that the real Hamlet is signified by much more than appearance. Claudius gives a formulaic appraisal of Hamlet's grievous disposition with his empty wisdom regarding death as a "common theme" (1.2.103) and prays Hamlet "throw to earth/ This unprevailing woe" (1.2.106-7). The rules of society in Denmark are objective as a particular kind of event requires a particular response; whether it murder requiring revenge, or death allowing a specific duration of grief. Hamlet introduces the notion of subjectivity, in that a man's response to an event may be indicated by his interior state and not by exterior dictates. In Renaissance society, a man was defined by his clothing, whether a Lord or a servant. The clothes made the man, as even the servants of a man took the man's name on their clothing (Jones 17-8). Hamlet defies this notion of the clothes making the man, with

his assertion that, “these indeed seem, for they are actions that a man might play” indicating that clothes indeed present one appearance or “seem.” Hamlet suggests that clothes are “actions that a man might play,” indicating that clothing and appearance reflect performance. Hamlet suggests that the outside of a man is a costume, and a costume befits a character. For clothes to be an action that a man might play, the man must make a decision about which clothes he will wear and therefore which actions he will play. Whether conscious or unconscious the clothes selected present the action the man wishes to play. Therefore the outer representation reflects an inner choice, “that within which passes show” according to Hamlet. This early line in the play conveys that Hamlet possesses something within which cannot be detected from the outside, that does not “seem.” The line also suggests that this inwardness will be revealed when, “passes show,” when time passes. In his remarks to his mother, Hamlet establishes in the notion that his visage does not define him, but instead his interiority. Also proffered in Hamlet’s comments is the notion that there is an element of performance to every man, which is suggested by a man’s clothing or costume.

Mary Floyd-Wilson in her study of early modern concepts of humor, entitled *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama*, describes England’s interest in the humors in the Elizabethan age, notably that of melancholy. Wilson cites Aristotle’s *Problems XXX*, as well as early modern writers Marsilio Ficino, Sir Francis Bacon, Jean Bodin, Pierre Charron, and Juan Huarte in depicting the varying attributions of humor, to geography, climate, skin color, and self-fashioning. In the early modern

period, a melancholic humor was associated with a contemplative disposition, Southern climates and dark skin; while Northern Europeans, who possessed light skin color, were associated with sanguine and phlegmatic humors. In Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron the blackamoor ascribes his appearance and his "cloudy melancholy" to the governing influence of Saturn, which establishes a connection between physical appearance and internal temperament (Wilson 71). Wilson offers that one "apeal of melancholia or black bile lies in its constancy and firmness - the very qualities that the English notoriously lacked" (67). Marsilio Ficino interprets melancholia as an indication of a genius within a man, shifting the effect of black bile from the outer skin to the inner man (qtd. in Wilson 71). In examining various writings on the humors, Wilson notes that the origins and meanings of the humors were constantly being rewritten across Europe "to suit national biases" (71). Wilson suggests that Hamlet is "Renaissance England's most renowned case of melancholia" and further that,

When Hamlet makes his celebrated claim to 'have that within which passeth show' (1.2.85), he has acknowledged on a fundamental level that his pale northern exterior fails to denote his internal blackness. It matters, ethnologically, that the Dane's 'inwardness' stands in sharp contrast to Aaron the Moor's complexion, who was able to point to his physical appearance as the most conspicuous sign of his humor. Hamlet concedes that his own external signs of melancholy – his black clothing,

his tears, the ‘shows of grief’ (line 82) – are all plausible affectations. Not only are these the same pretensions that the feigning melancholic would adopt to counter a northern temperament, but they are also the behaviors, that could give rise to actual melancholy. Hamlet, of course, distinguishes himself from those who merely put on the ‘trappings and the suits of woe’ (line 86): he is genuinely mourning his father. Yet grief alone is not enough to generate a melancholy that ‘passeth show.’

(Wilson 77-8)

Wilson’s analysis of Hamlet as “Renaissance England’s most renowned case of melancholia” conveys the notion that Hamlet’s external affectations are an indication of an inward life. Hamlet speaks of the humors in regard to Horatio as he admires Horatio’s indifference to passion; an indifference which he himself lacks, with the comment:

blest are those  
 Whose blood and judgment are so well commeddled  
 That they are not a pipe for Fortune’s finger  
 To sound what stop she please. Give me that man  
 That is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him  
 In my heart’s core, ay, in my heart of heart,  
 As I do thee. Something too much of this. (3.2.68-74)

Here Hamlet depicts a man of even temperament, as his “blood” and “judgment” are so well “comeddled” or mixed. Hamlet suggests that such a man is “blest,” as his fate will not be determined by his excess of passion, but by reason and judgment.

Prior to his father’s death, Hamlet had enjoyed the freedom of intellectual pursuits at the University in Wittenberg, having the security of his father’s kingship and his Parent’s marriage in Denmark. Hamlet returns to Denmark from Wittenberg after his father’s death, but only remains in Denmark to oblige his mother’s wishes. To Hamlet, “Denmark’s a prison” and he would prefer to return to the intellectual climate of the University, and the realm of scholars. When Hamlet returns to Denmark after his father’s death, his melancholic character is manifested by his ontological contemplation, as he questions the purpose of living. Hamlet speaks in his first soliloquy following the first court scene, that he is unable to find anything of purpose in this life with, “How weary, stale, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world!” (1.2.133-4), yet the ghost presents Hamlet him an immediate sense of purpose in commanding revenge. Hamlet accepts this charge and resolves to remember nothing but his father’s command:

Remember thee?

Ay, thy poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat

In this distracted globe. Remember thee?

Yea, from the table of my memory

I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
 All saw of books, all forms, all pressures past  
 That youth and observation copied there,  
 And thy commandment all alone shall live  
 Within the book and volume of my brain,  
 Unmix'd with baser matter. (1.5.97-104)

Hamlet compares his head to a globe and his brain to a library, utilizing scholarly imagery to convey that the knowledge and experiences he has acquired at school occupy his mind, but when compared to the honor of his father these are but, "baser matter." Hamlet's conveys his admiration for his father with, "A was a man take him for all in all;/ I shall not look upon his like again" (1.2.187-8).

Hamlet's interchange with Horatio in Act I demonstrates the disparity between the cultural activity of Elsinore and the University of Whittenberg. Hamlet greets Horatio with remarks that Denmark will teach him to drink, and challenges Horatio to be honest with him as a fellow scholar. Further, when Hamlet joins Horatio on the watch, he explains the revelry of Denmark and how its drunkenness has earned Denmark a poor reputation among other nations. This depiction of Hamlet contrasts the activities of Denmark to he and Horatio's own activities as scholars in order to set himself apart from the nature of Denmark. Hamlet differs from the stock of Denmark, to the effect that Claudius' command to "be as ourself" in Denmark is contrary to Hamlet's sense of identity. Hamlet struggles throughout the play to determine the

cause of such a difference. Hamlet's frustration with the court of Denmark becomes a frustration of selfhood as he exclaims, "O God! God! ... but break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue," implying that the nature of Denmark prevents Hamlet from speaking that which he possesses "within" (12.132,159). For Hamlet's interiority to be realized he must find a form of expressing it, and without speech he cannot bring "that within," without. Established in Act I is the problem of Hamlet seeking outward expression for his inner self.

Hamlet's inability to find expression for his developing selfhood isolates Hamlet from those around him. Royal Shakespeare Company Actor Michael Pennington writes of playing Hamlet, "I was beginning to taste the famous isolation of the part, feeling the emotional tides of a man adrift from the behaviour, the humour, the very language of his neighbours: a disorientation that in some equivalent way was beginning to separate me from colleagues and friends" (Brockbank 125). Actor Richard Burton reflects in an interview upon his own characteristic isolation, explaining that he cannot bear to be touched by others, and has therefore been described as carrying around his own cathedral. He explains that while playing Hamlet on stage, it was as if others only existed in his imagination, and finds this an appropriate parallel to the isolated nature of the character Hamlet (*Great Hamlets*). Laurence Olivier's film version of Hamlet distinctly conveys the isolation Hamlet experiences in Denmark. The film begins at Elsinore with an aerial view of the castle and proceeds to the armed watch witnessing the ghost, indicating that the central

problem in this drama is the ghost. The following scene depicts the court of Denmark as Claudius the King addresses the court about his brother's death and his recent marriage to Gertrude. As the courtiers exit, the camera closes in on Hamlet as a soliloquy is spoken in voice over, portraying Hamlet as a character clearly out of place in the court of Denmark (Olivier). Hamlet's temperament and visage are out of place in the court. He sits alone in a chair, deep in thought, untouched by the drinking and merriment of the court. Neither the words of his mother nor Claudius can move Hamlet from his position, but only his internal monologue spoken in voice over, and his spoken soliloquy, in which he seems to overhear himself, move Hamlet from his seat. The court scene establishes both Hamlet's isolation from the court of Denmark and his possession of an interior life.

Shakespeare ironically alludes to the concept that man possesses an inner self through the shallow nature of Polonius and the deceptive nature of Claudius. Claudius speaks to Laertes and asks if he is like a painting of a sorrow, the face without a heart, while Polonius advises Laertes, "to thine own self be true" (1.3.78). Shakespeare utilizes irony in the words of Polonius and Claudius as they give Laertes seemingly wise advice, yet each man's personal character negates his words. Polonius' words are verbose, yet meaningless as they are the trite sayings of tradition rather than the wisdom of personal experience. Claudius himself is false and therefore ironically reflects the notion that one might present a false image rather than a reflection of an inward identity. The role of Laertes contrasts the role of Hamlet as they are both

young men of integrity whose father's have been killed innocently, yet Laertes does not possess the interiority that Hamlet possesses. Hamlet's reflection on the character of Laertes with, "That to Laertes I forgot myself;/ For by the image of my cause I see/ The portraiture of his...but sure the bravery of his grief did put me/ Into a tow'ring passion" (5.2.76-80) suggests that the two sons possess similar roles in the drama. The similarity of the roles, however, is superficial, reflecting only the objective action of the play, and not the subjective motivations behind it. The superficiality of Laertes' character is made manifest by his acceptance of the empty wisdom of Claudius and Polonius, while Hamlet's more intuitive evaluation of the men leads Hamlet to reject the two men entirely.

Hamlet reflects a philosophical analysis of cognition with "for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so," (2.2.249-51) in reference to his complaint that "Denmark's a prison" (243). Hamlet distinguishes that the subjective perception of something is unique from its objective qualities. To him Denmark is a prison yet he realizes that it is not a prison to the revelers of Denmark. This analysis ascribes greater significance to the subjectivity of thought than to the objectivity of commonly accepted realities (243). Hamlet's implications of subjectivity bewilder Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as their sensibilities do not reflect inwardness, as does Hamlet's. Anthony Low writes that in the early modern period there was "a growing sense that true authenticity comes from within, coupled with a kind of vertiginous fall into the interior self, exemplified by Shakespeare's Hamlet ... new was the sense, the feeling,

the suspicion – sometimes the fear and sometimes the glad conviction – that the world within was more real than the world without” (Preface x). Shakespeare’s Hamlet conveys the notion that “the world within [is] more real than the world without” by suggesting that he could live entirely within his mind, “O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space-were it not that I have bad dreams” (254-6).

Bloom suggests that Hamlet’s heightened consciousness has aged him, as he seems to age years in a matter of weeks during the play, according to the testimony of the gravedigger in Act V (430). The progression in age, an incongruity allowed by the sovereignty of Shakespeare the playwright, reflects Hamlet’s evolution in identity; an evolution foreshadowed by Hamlet’s suggestion in Act I that “I have that within which passes show.” The notion that time will reveal his interiority is initially confounded by the fact that he must hold his tongue and find another means of expressing his selfhood. Laertes speaks of Hamlet that, “his will is not his own,” (1.3.17) a notion confirmed as Hamlet is prevented from returning to Wittenberg by Claudius’ command to “be as ourself in Denmark.” The language employed in the command to “be as ourself” reflects not only the physical constraint of remaining in Denmark, but also the emotional constraint as to “be as” Claudius is antithetical to the true interiority of Hamlet. Hamlet possesses an interiority that the other characters of the play do not, and serving the state restricts him from expressing his interior self hood. Hamlet finds freedom in his mind, in thinking, yet this is restricted by outward circumstances. To

“be as ourself in Denmark,” Hamlet must “hold his tongue” and feign madness. Little freedom remains for Hamlet if the life he must lead is one lived in the mind, yet unexpressed to the outside world. For Hamlet’s thought life to bear fruit, he must express it, yet Hamlet struggles to find means of expression. The fact that his will is not his own, and that he must live according to the will of characters who lack an interior life, indicates that Hamlet must deny “thine own self”.

In a tragedy, the individual must resolve the conflict of the drama and determine his fate on his own. Hamlet is isolated from the body politic of Denmark as the protagonist of the tragic drama. Implicit in Hamlet’s lament, “The time is out of joint./ O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right” (1.5.196-7) is a determinism that Hamlet is fated to resolve the conflict, of a murderous King possessing his native throne and equally fated to an end that is “out of joint.” The notion that the time is out of joint, is further demonstrated by the incongruence of Hamlet’s age, as he is a young student at Wittenberg in the beginning of the play, and has aged ten years according to the gravedigger’s reference to the year Hamlet was born thirty years before. For Hamlet, the passing of time in Denmark is out of joint with the passing of time for his self. The dissonance of time, of that which passes, is implied in Hamlet’s words to Gertrude in Act I when he tells her “I have that within which passes show,” conveying that time will reveal his identity. Hamlet claims that he was born to set right the time that is out of joint, but the task is infinitely large for one man. Hamlet is more real than

men because he is the problem of existence, the “to be or not to be” against the seemingly arbitrary setting of Elsinore’s court.

For Hamlet, the assertion made by Descartes, “I think therefore I am,” is insufficient and must be transposed to “I act therefore I am,” as the mind is a prison and thinking alone is insufficient for a complete self. Hamlet must bring his thoughts outward, and performance presents a *modus operandi* of expression. Nietzsche suggests “that for which we find words is something already dead in our hearts. There is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking,” (qtd. in Bloom 741) evidenced by Hamlet’s lament that he “must unpack his heart with words” (2.2.581). The theater presents an opportunity for Hamlet to ‘act’ despite his delay in revenge and to reflect his interiority. Hamlet’s recognition of his interiority follows upon the writings of William Tyndale and Michel de Montaigne as Stephen Greenblatt notes:

The *presence* in the written word of identity- has its last brilliant flowering in the essays of Montaigne, and by transference from script back to voice, in the soliloquies of Hamlet, words that claim not access to the inner life but existence as the inner life. And the characteristic of these words-as opposed to modern attempts to record the discourse of interiority-is their public character, the apparent impersonality of their rhetorical structure, their performative mode. (87)

Hamlet's developing selfhood possesses a public quality as he expresses his thoughts through soliloquy. This use of soliloquy places Hamlet alone on stage to speak his innermost thoughts and feelings publicly to the audience.

## CHAPTER IV

## THE PLAY'S THE THING

*All the world's a stage,*

*And all the men and women merely players.*

*They have their exits and their entrances,*

*And one man in his time plays many parts,*

*His act being seven ages.*

*As You Like It (2.7.138-142)*

Of all the works in Shakespeare's canon, *Hamlet* is one of the most theatrically aware. Shakespeare includes the play-within-the play as well as several other dramatic elements, which he weaves throughout the text. Shakespeare incorporates the language of the theater throughout the drama *Hamlet*, with the terms 'cuc', 'act', and 'action' recurring throughout the script, according to director John Barton (Brockbank 123). Jenkins remarks on "a kind of theatrical symmetry" created by the court scenes in the beginning, middle and end of the drama, in which Hamlet and Claudius encounter one another in a state of "mutual but undeclared hostility" (128). In Act I Hamlet suggests to Gertrude and the audience that clothes denote a role that a man might play, and does, in fact, turn to performance as the medium for his self-expression. As Hamlet "must hold [his] tongue," he assumes the role of an actor when he feigns madness, speaking through seemingly absurd and cryptic expressions. W.H. Auden examines the notion as Hamlet as an actor with:

Hamlet lacks faith in God and in himself. Consequently he must define his existence in terms of others, e.g., I am the man whose mother married his uncle who murdered his father. He would like to become what the Greek tragic hero is, a creature of situation. Hence his inability to act, for he can only “act,” i.e., play at possibilities.

(qtd. in Bloom 410)

Hamlet also takes on the role of playwright by contributing lines to the play performed by the players. Hamlet attempts to rewrite the script of his life. However, he succeeds only in expediting the untimely end to his story. Hamlet’s brief moments of exaltation in the play, reflect his inclination to perform:

His triumphs are ironically short-lived, yet...as an aspect of comedy these moments are noteworthy. They fit into an idea of comedy as wish-fulfillment; that is, that comedy projects wishes, even far-fetched and impossible ones, that suddenly come true. This endows the protagonist with a sense of magical control over reality; nothing can go wrong for him. But there are moments in the play when Hamlet is high-spirited and exuberant without any ulterior purpose. (Charney 146-7)

Such a moment occurs when Hamlet escapes Claudius’ plan to send him to death in England, and relates the narrative to Horatio. As Hamlet excitedly recounts his sea-faring trials with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Horatio he utilizes the theatrical terms “prologue” and “play” with, “Being thus benetted round with

villainies- or I could make a prologue to my brains, they had begun the play- I sat me down,” (5.2.29-31). Hamlet has escaped one death in England, but in doing so has sealed a certain death for himself at home. Hamlet has won for the moment and believes that “the interim is [his]” (5.2.74). Hamlet’s role as an actor is also revealed by his feigned madness after killing Polonius. Hamlet employs the guise of madness to wittingly convey the dark comedy he finds in death. After Hamlet kills Polonius, Claudius inquires as to Polonius’ whereabouts and Hamlet replies in riddles, demonstrating his comedic play with the matter of death.

CLAUDIUS. Where’s Polonius?

HAMLET. At supper. Not where he eats, but where a is eaten.

A certain convocation of politic worms are e’en at him.

Your worm is your only emperor for dict: we fat all creatures

elsc to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. (4.3.16,18-24)

Hamlet expounds on the irony of life that while alive we make animals fat for our own consumption, but that after we die, as all men do, our own consumption becomes the delight of worms. Hamlet’s seeming madness provides him with the opportunity to issue a cynical rebuke to Claudius in response to the conventional and insincere advice he has given Hamlet concerning his father’s death. Performance

offers Hamlet a better platform to examine the realities of life, than life itself can provide, by allowing Hamlet to speak profound truth through riddles.

The arrival of the troupe of players in Act 2 introduces another theatrical element to the play that greatly contrasts the grave realities of Denmark. Actor Ben Kingsley remarks of *Hamlet* that Hamlet the Prince loves the Players because actors deal in truth. He submits that the level of cultural activity in Denmark is to get drunk every night, but that Hamlet's cultural interests are words (*Great Hamlets*). The players offer a ray of light to Hamlet as he fumbles through darkness with questions such as "What a piece of work is man...man delights not me." Hamlet envisions a play performance as a method of discovering the truth of Claudius' guilt, and therefore embraces the players in service of his vision. The players offer entertainment value and distraction to the populace of Denmark, but to Hamlet they also offer an opportunity and impetus for action. Michael Pennington suggests that:

The chance arrival of a troupe of players at the court not only provokes action in the dramatic narrative sense, a means to catch the conscience of the King, but also precipitates in Hamlet an inquiry into the validity of his own emotions next to the supposedly counterfeit ones of the actors, into his own role as avenger, and into the appearance of his world as against its corrupt reality. (Brockbank 120-1)

As the players provide Hamlet with an opportunity to "catch the conscience of the king," Hamlet experiences brief hope that his delayed story of revenge might move

forward. Hamlet takes aside one of the players and asks him, "You could for a need study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which I would set down and insert in't, could you not?" as he intends to craft the play to reflect his own story of fratricide and revenge (2.2.534-36). The play, to Hamlet, is everything as the outcome of the play will seal his fate. Hamlet does not know whether or not to believe the ghost as it is possible the ghost "abuses [him] to damn [him]", therefore he must have "grounds/ More relative than this" as evidence of whether or not Claudius killed King Hamlet (2.2.599-600). Hamlet remarks, "The play's the thing/ in which I'll catch the conscience of the king," reflecting his awareness of the possibilities the play provides to determine future events (2.2.600-1). Although the play is critical for Hamlet to determine the truth about the death of his father, he thwarts his own efforts in the most critical moment of the play. He writes in lines for the player in order to project his story onto the stage, and further projects his own self onto the character of Lucianus in the play-within-the-play. It is the scene in which Hamlet wishes to catch Claudius in guilt, and yet he alters the meaning by telling Claudius that, "this is Lucianus one nephew to the King," although he intends for Claudius to see himself as Lucianus, one brother to the King. Hamlet exhibits a heightened sense of self-awareness throughout the drama. His self-awareness, however, is manifested as self-focus in the most critical moment of the *Murder of Gonzago* when Hamlet should be focusing on Claudius's reaction to the play. Instead of thinking of Claudius and his guilt, he is thinking of himself and therefore slips in his speech, suggesting to Claudius that he, the nephew,

will Kill Claudius the King . The results of the play are crucial to Hamlet's future, and by his slip of the tongue, he determines his own downfall, as Claudius cannot allow Hamlet to remain in Denmark alive, knowing his intentions of revenge. Hamlet has instructed Horatio to mark Claudius's response to this scene of the play, and yet Horatio never gives report to what he witnesses. Claudius moves from the play to confession realizing that Hamlet will attempt to kill him and not wanting to die unabsolved of his sins.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is simultaneously the most self-conscious and most theatrical of all his plays. Hamlet places a distinguishing mark on the emergence of the self in the early modern Renaissance; due in large part to the performative aspects of the play. Hamlet writes his own story into the play within the play, which the traveling players will perform. He then goes beyond projecting his story into the play, and projects himself as a character in the play at the moment in which he tells Claudius that "Lucianus is one nephew to the King." Hamlet identifies himself with the play and the players. The stage holds a mirror up to nature and allows Hamlet to see himself. For Hamlet, existence is uncertain, yet the theatre is somehow more real than the life he lives. The microcosm of the stage reflects the stage of the world. The stage presents a controllable world, a context in which to act out the passions of life. The stage represents a safe world in which to ask questions, to act out one's intentions. As the nature of Denmark is contrary to Hamlet's inwardness, Hamlet cannot find the space within his native world of Denmark to play out the passions he possesses within.

Hamlet's advice to the players reflects a moment of outwardness and communication that contrasts his communication with all others throughout the play. Hamlet speaks to Polonius, Claudius, Gertrude and Ophelia in wit and riddles, yet speaks honestly and passionately to the players.

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue ... 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 anything 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; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. ... And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them- for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to be considered. (3.2.1-2,16-24,39-43)

In giving his advice to the players, Hamlet acts simultaneously as playwright and director. Hamlet possesses a vision for the theater, similar to his vision of Denmark, which he wishes to be performed with excellence. The throne of Denmark seems irredeemable, but the stage presents a blank slate for creation. Hamlet cannot set right the offenses of Claudius and Gertrude, but he can admonish against offensive

acting. Hamlet as playwright and director emulates “the divinity that shapes our ends” that he speaks of to Horatio.

We do not go to the theatre to learn about other people, we go to learn about ourselves, or to find possibilities of other selves (Bloom 727). Shakespeare writes in Hamlet that the purpose of theatre is to hold a mirror up to nature, but a mirror provides simply a reflection. A reflection is a first step, and is of some benefit, but a magnifying glass, provides a second step, an examination. It is essential that Hamlet is a play and not a novel. Harold Bloom asserts that we do not read Hamlet, but that Hamlet reads us (*preface* xx). The text of a play is words on a page and a character the assembling of these words. A play is not real people or real events, but constructions on paper; performance makes them real. Common advice among actors suggests that one must act between the lines. Therein lies the enigma of Hamlet, the necessity of performing, and the certainty of failure. Hamlet confesses that he “must like a whore unpack his heart with words,” suggesting that even the melancholic contemplations of his seven soliloquies do not express “that within.” Charney asserts that “there is in *Hamlet* a degree of speech-making in the play, with its accompanying bombast and rant, as if to acknowledge that the rhetoric cannot adequately express the turbulence and intensity of feelings that are aroused. There is a gap between language and suffering” (21). Charney’s analysis of Hamlet’s speech-making, or soliloquies, reflects the disparity between Hamlet’s inner selfhood and the words he finds to express it.

The theatrical elements of *Hamlet* heighten the awareness within the play of the void between Hamlet's subjective perception of life and the objective realities of life. Hamlet finds fault in his own character in comparison to that of the Player, as the Player moves himself to tears in speaking lines about Hecuba, while cannot move himself to act out revenge for his father's death:

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!  
 For Hecuba!  
 What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,  
 That he should weep for her? What would he do  
 Had he the motive and the cue for passion  
 That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,  
 .....  
 Yet I,  
 A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak

Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, (2.2.544-556, 561- 563)

He speaks of the player's "visage" as he has "tears in his eyes" noting the visible representation of the interior emotions of the player, as well as speaking of the player's "conceit" which Jenkins relates as "that which is conceived in the mind and may have no external reality" (Jenkins 270). The player "force[s] his soul to his own conceit" "in a dream of passion" to bring himself to tears, without an object in external reality to merit the excess of emotion. Hamlet feels that he possesses an external reality for such emotion, and is yet unable to force his own soul to create an inward emotion that could merit such excess of expression. Hamlet remarks that he is "unpregnant of his cause," indicating that though his motive is to avenge the death of his father, it does not fill him inside as he thinks it should. Hamlet sees more power in the act of playing drama than he does in the action of his own life. Hamlet possesses a great excess of emotions that seem to the other characters without an external object, yet these emotions are not in regard to the "cue of passion," the revenge of his father, to whom Hamlet believes they should find reference. Hamlet has within a conceit, something created in his mind, for which the other characters find no external reality. Charney suggests that:

One of the most striking issues of the play is how life can imitate the theater, or at least how life can be made to seem real without losing its fiction and its dream of passion. The actor in revenge plot is like the

actor in the play: both must await the motive and the cue for passion.

(Charney 21)

Shakespeare introduces the audience to the possibilities of Hamlet's inwardness in Act I, and the notion that time or "passes show" will reveal this interiority. In Act III, however, Hamlet's discourse with the Player indicates that "passes" of time has not "show[n]" Hamlet's interiority, but has instead frustrated Hamlet with inexpression. The Player represents for Hamlet an example of how to express one's interior conceit through acting, yet Hamlet finds frustration in the fact that life is not a dress rehearsal, but the final performance. Hamlet experiences a conflict between thought and action by "thinking too precisely on the event." He is also confronted with the incongruity of his inner selfhood and the superficiality of his surroundings. Rather than moving to action, Hamlet becomes stuck in the mire of emotion and self-evaluation.

The fact that *Hamlet* is simultaneously Shakespeare's most self-aware and most theatrical play reflects the correlation between identity and performance. Hamlet exploits this connection by playing the roles of actor, playwright, and director as he feigns madness, writes in lines to the *Murder of Gonzago*, and instructs the players on acting, respectively.

## CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSION

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has presented an enigma to audiences for over four centuries. The Renaissance was an age of artistic inspiration, innovative thinking and creating, and scientific discovery. The objective realities of the Middle Ages gave way to the subjective explorations of the individual in the name of humanity. William Tyndale's *The Obedience of a Christian Man* and Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*, took the inward thoughts of man and expressed them publicly, acting as predecessors to Hamlet's soliloquies. Dante's *Divine Comedy* examined individuality with one man's journey through heaven and hell, as man asked the question, "does my journey make a difference?" Shakespeare depicts the developing interiority of the individual through the character of Hamlet by giving him numerous soliloquies, a spirit of contemplation and by including various theatrical aspects within the play. Hamlet's enigmatic quality, coupled with the drama's pervasive informing of Western notions of identity and personality, achieve a level of transcendence for the play. Charles Simic writes in regard to Russian poet Joseph Brodsky:

Modernism's most scandalous notion is that it is possible to begin from scratch and be entirely original as if in the arts everything remains in doubt and awaits discovery. Brodsky, on the other hand, was pretty sure that aesthetic values endure, that a poet who wrote centuries ago is still our contemporary.

Indeed, what links the past with the present are poets, the custodians of tradition, who confer with their predecessors as if they were still among us...As for culture, when all has been said about it, its real task may be to provide us with the consolation for our mortality. (Simic 55)

Shakespeare maintains his position as a universal contemporary through the transcendence of the personalities he has created. Hamlet travels to the edge of the “undiscovered country” for the individual, exploring the nature of selfhood and the necessity of expression. Harold Bloom applies Leeds Barroll’s analysis that “Renaissance ideals, whether Christian or philosophical or occult, tended to emphasize our need to join something personal that yet was larger than ourselves, God or a spirit,” to Shakespeare to suggest that “A certain strain or anxiety ensued, and Shakespeare became the greatest master at exploiting the void between persons and the personal ideal” (qtd. in Bloom 6-7).

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