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The Man Who *Would* Be King:

A practical, subjective, but textually supported analysis of the character of Hamlet in production

Sir Laurence Olivier began his 1948 film version of *Hamlet* with the invented prologue, “This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind.” Although much of his active, focused performance contradicts this opening thesis, Olivier’s words touch on a pervasive attitude toward the character of Hamlet in critical work, production reviews, and even actor interviews. Shakespeare’s openness with Hamlet’s inner thoughts invites both a “purple passage” treatment of the text and debates over the true psychoanalysis of the character. Both tendencies remove the character and his language from the dramatic context, potentially inviting preciousness and a series of other disconnections. Character is disconnected from the action of the play, the poetry is disconnected from its present tense expression, the political story is disconnected from the personal story, and so forth. While these pursuits are valid and often fascinating, they do stem from a particular point of view that is not concerned with the practical problems of production. This point of view prefers what Harold Bloom refers to as “the theatre of the mind,” which is esteemed above the nasty business of production where actors and directors can only express the universal through specific choices. These choices naturally exclude other choices, which is where the disagreement begins. Both actors and scholars consider the given circumstances of a play when analyzing the text, but with a distinct difference. The actor must support and personalize the given circumstances with their own imaginary circumstances: the story behind the story.¹ These invented imaginary circumstances are not necessarily true, although they must be textually supportable. For the actor, specific imagined circumstances organize the actions of the character and facilitate access to the

¹ The bedrock of an actor’s script analysis is formed by determining the given circumstances and then mining the text for clues to create a personalized set of imaginary circumstances. This process exposes the skeletal structure of the story and seeks to flesh it out with informed, subjective decisions about the character’s intentions, the obstacles they face – both literal and emotional, and other components of their personality and emotional life.

emotional reality of the dramatic situation. While the scholar's duty may be to illuminate the text with the highest degree of objectivity possible, the actor must experience the story as subjectively as possible. The text keeps the actor faithful to Shakespeare's story and the imaginary circumstances keep the actor faithful to himself. The actor and director have a responsibility to make their invented details plausible within the text while making the most dramatically compelling choices. The compelling choice is the one that maximizes the emotional stakes and effectiveness of each character within the limits of their point of view. This allows each character to be the hero of their own story, ensuring that the colliding forces in a scene are at full strength, which results in the greatest dramatic conflict and the most dynamic telling of the story. Using this logic as a model, this paper seeks to reconnect character and context, language and dramatic action, and the political and the personal. Essentially, I am presenting a case for how I wish to play the role. Specifically, I wish to dispel any psychoanalytic extrapolations or poetic prejudices which characterize Hamlet as passive, indecisive, or inactive by exploring the ambitious, focused, and politically savvy side of a character fighting to set the world right.

Choosing a text is the first unavoidable problem of production. There are three surviving texts of *Hamlet*: the First Quarto of 1603 (or the "bad" quarto), the Second Quarto of 1604-05 (or "good" quarto), and the First Folio of 1623. Even if we largely ignore the authority of the First Quarto we still have two versions with significant discrepancies. Until recently, text editors only offered a single conflated edition that often favored one text or another, based not entirely on evidence, but on a particular paradigm. So, choosing a *Hamlet* edition is also choosing an editor's prejudices. In his article, *Shakespeare in Rewrite*, Ron Rosenbaum exposes the fallacy of objective editing and distills two competing points of view battling over an authoritative *Hamlet* text. The more traditional editors, like the late Harold Jenkins, believe in the "Lost Archetype". For them, multiple texts represent various corruptions. By selecting and conflating the text, the action of their editorial choices becomes an "attempt to discern, beneath that error-

riddled veil, the true face of Shakespeare – to divine, from the fragmentary evidence, traces of the one true text.” (Rosenbaum 70) This point of view on their task leads them to favor the longer and fuller Second Quarto, largely because the idea of Shakespeare cutting his own text is inconceivable. The newer faction of editors called, “The Revisers”, do not accept that the existence of multiple versions is necessarily proof of textual corruption. Instead, they view it as possible evidence of different drafts of a text being shaped and cut for the stage. Because the First Folio is more streamlined, “cutting” passages that slow down the action, The Revisers tend to make a claim for its authority based on their new paradigm. Without concrete evidence on either side, the only option left is to choose an editor whose beliefs and prejudices best ally with your own. The imagined story of Shakespeare, the actor/writer/company shareholder, trimming and revising a long play to better suit a paying audience simply makes intuitive sense to me as a theatre practitioner. I have chosen the Oxford Edition of *Hamlet*, edited by G.R. Hibbard, which heavily favors the First Folio text. I prefer word choices like “solid” (from the Folio) instead of “sullied” or “sallied” in the opening line of Hamlet’s first soliloquy because the former creates a more concrete, tangible image, while the latter two create a sense of a wallowing self-focus or self-disgust that I find harder to activate. The Second Quarto passages absent in (or possibly cut from) the First Folio are all scenes and speeches I would cut for production. Particularly, I would cut Hamlet’s seventh soliloquy (“How all occasions do inform against me”), which is a very long speech that brings the action of the play to a halt, uses repetitive phrases and images (a kind of ‘greatest hits’ soliloquy), and prompts me as an audience member to wonder along with Hamlet why he does “...live to say this thing’s to do.” In short, this soliloquy contradicts my thesis, so naturally, I favor the Folio.

The opening lines of the play reveal counterintuitive and disconcerting behaviors which establish a dangerous, disrupted world. Francisco, a sentinel, stands guard alone on stage. The

logic of this picture would suggest that the soldier on duty would cry out, “Who’s there?”² to anyone approaching his guard station. Instead, Barnardo, the soldier who is *relieving* Francisco and who is knowingly approaching an occupied guard station makes this verbal demand. Francisco must then insist that the exchange be done the proper way: “Nay, answer me.”³ Not until they have carefully confirmed each other’s identities can Francisco truly let go: “For this relief much thanks. ‘Tis bitter cold, / and I am sick at heart.”⁴ This is the first of many images of sickness that accumulate to ultimately form a description of the nation’s health. A state of high alertness is suggested by the behavior of everyone in this first scene – except for Horatio. Shakespeare uses Horatio the way he uses Casca in *Julius Caesar*. After establishing Casca as a shrewd, cool and calm character, Shakespeare legitimizes the danger of the foreboding storms and other ominous signs on the eve of Caesar’s assassination by featuring a Casca wracked with fear (i.e. the boy who *never* cried wolf). When Horatio, the scholar skeptic, converts from flippant dismissal to utter amazement, the audience is allowed to believe through “the sensible and true avouch”⁵ of his eyes that this Ghost “bodes some strange eruption to our state.”⁶

Between the Ghost’s visitations, Horatio provides context to two very curious soldiers. This disquieted spirit walking about in the night air, allegedly the dead King, is fueling rumors and uncertainty in the leadership. Marcellus questions Horatio about the relationship between the Ghost’s appearance and the heightened security and rigorous war preparations. Through Horatio we learn the story behind the Ghost’s “warlike form”⁷ with references to battles with both Poland and Norway. King Hamlet’s battle/wager with Fortinbras of Norway was won when he slew him in single combat. The significant land lost by Norway in this battle has given the young Fortinbras a score to settle and he has chosen this moment, while Denmark is weakened by transition, to make his move. The ultra-heroic portrait of a warrior King fighting alone for his

² 1.1.1

³ 1.1.2

⁴ 1.1.8-9

⁵ 1.1.57

⁶ 1.1.69

⁷ 1.1.47

country provides context for Hamlet's later comparison between his father and his uncle: "Hyperion to a satyr".⁸ Hamlet wraps himself up in another comparison: "[Claudius is] no more like my father / Than I to Hercules".⁹ These two passages suggest a specific relationship between Hamlet and his father. The connotations of "Hyperion" are highly reverential, suggesting a person set up as an ideal, untouchable, and distantly admired. Certainly, the extremity of word choice provides the maximum contrast with Claudius as the base, lustful, drunken creature, but it may be a window into Hamlet's own perceived status between these two extremes. When Horatio remarks, "He was a goodly king," Hamlet qualifies, "He was a man. Take him for all in all. / I shall not look upon his like again."¹⁰ Hamlet's qualification can be played either as an addition to or diminishing of Horatio's compliment, but either way, the words and action feel cold and distant for a son's eulogy for his father. We should not forget that Hamlet's right as successor to the throne was stolen by Claudius. Therefore, Hamlet is a son who has literally failed to succeed his father. Perhaps Hamlet's sense of failing to measure up to his father is not strictly a recent phenomenon. If King Hamlet's occupation with war kept him from home, then the young Hamlet may be more familiar with the legend than the actual man. In Act V, there is some implication that Hamlet may have been nurtured in his formative years by Yorick: "He hath borne me on his back a thousand times...Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft."¹¹ Hamlet reveals an intimacy with Yorick that was completely lacking in the eulogy for his father. A jester's influence accounts for Hamlet's dark humor and penchant for wit and performance. Yorick could be the model for Hamlet's "antic disposition".¹²

Although Hamlet proves to be skilled and well practiced with weapons, it is impossible to ignore that his inclinations tend to be more academic in nature. *The scholarly son with a venerated, warrior father who is scarcely home* is the beginning of a story that provides fertile

⁸ 1.2.140

⁹ 1.2.152-153

¹⁰ 1.2.86-87

¹¹ 5.1.176-179

¹² 1.5.179

ground for the imagination. The imagination engages for the actor if they touch on a familiarly human phenomenon. Perhaps Hamlet respects his father for “all in all,” but fundamentally, he sees the world another way. Then Hamlet’s prolonged studies are not a retreat from responsibility and action, but a preparation for his future time as king. If he had an opposing vision of peace and internal growth for his kingdom, then Claudius is threatening it with his massive war preparations and his arrogant form of diplomacy. The stakes increase for Hamlet in this scenario, because it implies that Claudius has not only stolen the throne, but he is steering the country in the wrong direction – simultaneously destroying what King Hamlet built and preventing what the young Hamlet feels he could change for the better. But the most compelling reason for exploring an estranged relationship between father and son is that it presents the choice of playing the Ghost-Hamlet scenes, the only scenes between them that the audience gets to see, as the most meaningful moments in their whole relationship. They are brought together by a great mutual need. The Ghost charges, “If thou didst ever thy dear father love –” and Hamlet bursts with the interjection, “O God!”¹³ The emotional stakes are apparent in Hamlet’s zealous assurance, “Haste, haste me to know it, that I, with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love, / May sweep to my revenge.”¹⁴ And the most compelling choice for the father’s words of approval, “I find thee apt”¹⁵, is to treat them as the first of their kind.

Imagining a King frequently occupied with foreign wars also provides a believable context for the romance between Gertrude and Claudius. The King’s return would have been torture for them if their love affair blossomed in his absence (and the absence of Hamlet at university). In this scenario, Claudius’ motive becomes stronger and more urgent. The truth of their love reveals the humanity in their sins. If Gertrude has found the true love of her life in Claudius and is experiencing a reawakening as a woman and a lover, then it is more believable for her to accept without question the happy accident of a serpent stinging her husband.

¹³ 1.5.23-24

¹⁴ 1.5.29-31

¹⁵ 1.5.32

Claudius need only appeal to Gertrude's maternal instincts to convince her of the need to protect her son from the responsibility of leading a country under the threat of war. This point of view allows her to enjoy her new life with Claudius and to keep her position as Queen while still feeling she is doing her son a favor (i.e. Hamlet has time to "grow up" before becoming king). If Gertrude loves her new life and is willing to fight for this newfound happiness, then her confrontation with Hamlet in the third act is stocked with an emotional powder keg.

The highly charged, politically unstable world established by the opening scene is an illuminating context from which to interpret Claudius' actions before the court. Claudius has usurped a position that clearly belongs to Hamlet. The text suggests that Hamlet may have been away at school at the University of Wittenberg when his father died. While Hamlet traveled from Germany to Denmark, Claudius had enough time to secure the throne and some supporters, presumably with the help of Polonius. The timely threat from the young Fortinbras is the perfect selling point for securing the homeland immediately. Without diminishing the love and desire between Claudius and Gertrude, it is important to recognize that their marriage is, on a basic level, a political move that lends legitimacy to Claudius' role as king. So, Hamlet returns to a very different Denmark. Although Claudius clearly has the upper hand, Hamlet's right to the throne is undeniable. Scene two is the first public battle between Claudius and Hamlet, but both must tread softly. Claudius' aggressive political maneuvers suggest that this court is as uneasy as the soldiers on watch. Claudius must do damage control because although Hamlet assures us that his "inky cloak"¹⁶ is a legitimate expression of grief, the eyesore of Hamlet wearing mourning clothes to the wedding serves as a political maneuver against Claudius and his legitimacy. Hamlet's clothing and his very presence are the conscience in the room that Claudius wants everyone to ignore.

Claudius acknowledges the grief and doubt by beginning with, "Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death / The memory be green....," but he corrects it or redirects it with, "...we

¹⁶ 1.2.78

with wisest sorrow think on him / Together with remembrance of ourselves.”¹⁷ He is not shy about spelling out the legitimacy found with his queen: “Th’ imperial jointress of this warlike state”.¹⁸ The reference to war implies the urgent need for stability and strength. So, like any good ad campaign, he has created the need in order to offer the services – specifically, his services as King. Claudius masterfully converts the two extremes of funeral and marriage into an argument for balance. The antithetical structure of his rhetoric (pitting auspicious against dropping, mirth against dirge, delight against dole) sells their wedding day celebration as nature’s way of restoring balance after the grief of losing King Hamlet – as opposed to being completely inappropriate. He reminds the members of the court who may be feeling a bit uneasy in Hamlet’s presence that they “...have freely gone / With this affair along.”¹⁹ He then launches into the grim details of the Fortinbras invasion while showing his strength in the face of this new enemy: “So much for him.”²⁰ After the theatrics, he continues with more theatrics. By dispatching Cornelius and Voltmand to old Norway, he has his first public performance of an official duty as King and he defines himself as the man in charge of sensitive diplomatic matters – all of which sends the strong message that this train is moving, and everyone should be way passed the question of legitimacy. Claudius then diverts the attention to Laertes, which serves two functions. Laertes is the model of a dutiful son, full of all the qualities Hamlet is lacking in Claudius’ world picture. Claudius can only hope that Laertes’ show of respect for the crown will expose a deficiency in Hamlet. Laertes’ business is also a convenient excuse for some powerful name-dropping. If we accept Polonius as a shrewd and aggressive politician (possibly modeled after Lord Burghley in Queen Elizabeth’s court²¹) instead of a doddering old man, then it makes sense that Claudius would want to flaunt their alliance: “The head is not more native to the

¹⁷ 1.2.1-7

¹⁸ 1.2.9

¹⁹ 1.2.15-16

²⁰ 1.2.25

²¹ I first heard of this idea in an interview with Edward Jewesbury (Polonius) on a documentary entitled, *Discovering Hamlet*, which followed a production of *Hamlet* by the Renaissance Theatre Company under the direction of Derek Jacobi.

heart, / The hand more instrumental to the mouth, / Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father.”²² The message to the court is: *Polonius is with me, you should be too.*

The first exchange between Claudius and Hamlet sets the tone for the rest of the court scene. Claudius makes a public appeal to their kinship with, “my cousin Hamlet,” but in the next moment Claudius strips Hamlet of his manhood and his immediate right to the throne by continuing with, “and my son”.²³ Hamlet counters with, “A little more than kin, and less than kind,”²⁴ to distance himself from the subservient role implied for him. Claudius continues with an artfully executed smear campaign which spins Hamlet’s defiant show of grief into the actions of a wimpy, ignorant, obstinate child. Claudius’ actions are cleverly masked in paternal concern, but the message to the court is clear: *do you really want this sissy boy running the country at a time of war?* The biggest punch in the gut for Hamlet is his mother’s betrayal. If a mother’s love is supposed to be an unshakeable rule of nature, then a mother’s betrayal has the power to engender an unfathomable pain on the most primal level. As described earlier, Gertrude can reasonably side with Claudius’ concerns for Hamlet’s well-being without acknowledging her vested interest in the situation (i.e. – she will never be completely happy in her new life with Claudius until Hamlet accepts things as they are). The concerned mother swooping into to coddle her son is the greatest blow to Hamlet’s manhood and his promise as a ruler. Claudius publicly dismisses Hamlet’s current claim to the throne by disguising the political move as a generous expression of love: “...think of us / As of a father; for let the world take note / You are the most immediate to our throne”.²⁵ Following the principle of *keep your enemies close*, Claudius takes advantage of his new parental authority: “...we beseech you bend you to remain / Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye”.²⁶ Gertrude chimes in and Hamlet is left with only

²² 1.2.46-48

²³ 1.2.64

²⁴ 1.2.65

²⁵ 1.2.107-109

²⁶ 1.2.115-116

enough power to make the defiant distinction, “I shall in all my best obey *you*, madam.”²⁷ This weak protest is immediately absorbed into the spin machine. Claudius does not wait for the presses, but immediately interprets the event: “This gentle and unforced accord of Hamlet / Sits smiling to my heart”.²⁸ Claudius has won the court with his formidable show of power and charm. Any lingering doubts shall be calmed or distracted with a forced celebration aided by lots of drinking and a display of might (shooting off big cannons).

The stakes are very high for Hamlet as he is left alone on stage for the first time. Hamlet is trapped under the watchful eye of Claudius and his powerful supporters with no allies of his own, not even his mother. Any move he makes against the new king’s substantial power would be perceived as treason. The first thought of the soliloquy is akin to our modern phrase: *I just want to crawl in a hole and die*. The mounting pressure of the complete defeat he experienced throughout the preceding scene is released here. But as the final lines confirm, no good can come of telling anyone. Even if his heart breaks, the circumstances leave him no choice: “...I must hold my tongue.”²⁹ Hamlet’s action and the actor’s action are then the same. They both must push through emotion and clarify their current situation.³⁰ The actor’s fight illuminates the problem for the audience.

The second thought³¹, “Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / his canon ‘gainst self-slaughter”³², can be viewed (along with the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy) as evidence of Hamlet’s preoccupation with suicide. I believe that by examining this line in context it will lead

²⁷ 1.2.120

²⁸ 1.2.123-124

²⁹ 1.2.159

³⁰ An actor achieves “present tense” with the text by being filled with the complex emotions of the dramatic situation and then using the argument contained within the structure of the speech to push toward an answer – the answer in this case is not encouraging. Because the actor knows the conclusion of the speech and the character does not, it is very easy for the actor to race ahead mentally and fall out of present tense into a mere reporting of emotions. The moment to moment reality is maintained by interpreting the structure of the speech and aligning the actor’s breath with the beginning of each new thought. The mechanical and technical application of breathing before the thought mimics the reality of a person breathing in inspiration and speaking a thought, which keeps the mind from racing ahead, and helps it focus on one thing at a time. This phenomenon is a clarifying force for both the actor and audience.

³¹ Or continuation of the first thought, depending on how you interpret the punctuation.

³² 1.2.131-132

instead to evidence of Hamlet's ambition. Hamlet's action in the preceding scene – *to shame someone into doing the right thing* – was no match for Claudius' preparations. But why didn't Hamlet go further? Hamlet's "prophetic soul"³³ already suspects "some foul play"³⁴, especially after witnessing Claudius aggressively secure the life and position lost by his father. The problem is, of course, he has no evidence, or even leads until Horatio arrives; and his clear right to inherit the throne has been obscured by political theatrics and personal blows from damaging sources. The reality of the situation, as he acknowledges with the last lines of the soliloquy, is that every action to fight these injustices would lead to certain death. Suicide is not so nearly extreme a consideration amidst this overwhelming predicament – it signifies the action of one who has hit a wall and is throwing their hands up in the face of it all. But Hamlet's next action is corrective: "O God, O God!"³⁵ Praying is a summoning of strength from a greater power, and it is the beginning of Hamlet's struggle out from underneath the crushing, emotional boulder. But why doesn't he stay under that rock if the situation is so hopeless? Why didn't he go with that feeling in his gut and challenge Claudius' power and motives, or take a desperate stab at the usurper's life? Hesitation or indecisiveness are not compelling answers. The actor knows that a character's behavior points to what they truly want. A Hamlet that wants to be king plays with subversive tactics and when he realizes it is a losing battle, he saves something for his next attack. Someone so distressed and enraged choosing to hold their peace is indicative of someone who wants to live to fight another day.

Further evidence of Hamlet's ambition can be found by formulating the character's overall objective from clues in the text following the Ghost's exit. Hamlet briefs Horatio and Marcellus on his plan to put on a show of madness. In *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare*, Asimov reminds us that Shakespeare's idea of madness was inherited from pagan times when "madmen were thought to be touched with the divine and [were] respected and even feared a little." (106)

³³ 1.5.40

³⁴ 1.2.258

³⁵ 1.2.132

This pervasive attitude in Western Europe during the Middle Ages is the explanation behind the protected position of the court jester. Hamlet seeks this same form of cover. If he cannot return to Wittenberg to build an army of supporters, then feigning madness excuses all his subversive maneuvers from being labeled as treason. Asimov goes on to argue, “Furthermore, Claudius would find it difficult to take any action against a mad Hamlet...for the gods would then be displeased” (106). Claudius is smart enough to be suspicious of Hamlet’s madness (he quickly solicits Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to sift this issue out), but public opinion could turn against him with any move on Hamlet. Claudius publicly exaggerated the severity of Hamlet’s grief for his own purposes in the first court scene. Hamlet turns this to his advantage by playing an extreme version of the role Claudius assigned him. Hamlet is not specific about his plans beyond this tactic yet, but he does distill his purpose: “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!”³⁶ Borrowing from the last line, we can phrase his overall objective: *to set the world right*. The phrase is somewhat open and ambiguous, so it needs some defining. The Ghost would clearly wish the objective to mean, “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder”³⁷, but this is insufficient for Hamlet’s primary intention. If we interpret *to set the world right* to mean *to secure my right to the throne*, then there are points where revenge aligns with his goal and points where it departs. This choice becomes a governing principle for understanding Hamlet’s actions. Hamlet surely has many opportunities to wreak revenge on Claudius, but instead he schemes behind a mask of madness. Without evidence more substantial than hearsay from a ghost, a swift attempt at killing Claudius would be clearly seen as treason. In other words, a Hamlet that first works on exposing Claudius’ guilt (to shift public opinion) is a Hamlet who wants to be king.

The tension between the father’s wish and the son’s objective clarifies the presence of Hamlet’s guilt in his third soliloquy (“O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!”) without

³⁶ 1.5.196-197

³⁷ 1.5.25

assigning it as proof that Hamlet is indecisive or inactive. Hamlet's passion and sense of filial duty is ignited in the Ghost scene, but his complicated past relationship with the dead king makes those feelings unsustainable. Hamlet's vows are emotionally real in the moment, but quickly he sets about bending the shape of his father's charge to his own design. This sets a foundation for a conflict which surfaces in the third soliloquy. On the surface, the speech may appear to be just a man beating himself up for inaction, which is itself a rather ineffective action. My interpretation of *to set the world right* corrects this superficial reading. The term *inaction* does not apply if those actions which are being delayed are in conflict with what Hamlet truly wants. For Hamlet, guilt and shame reside in the gap between what he wants, and what he believes (or has been temporarily made to believe) he *should* want. The distinction I am making is in the source of his guilt. The player shames Hamlet with his great feeling, not with a story of a swift revenge. Hamlet's comparative lack of emotion is the catalyst for his thoughts. The argument of the first twenty-two lines traces the absurdity of his own coolness, but the action is not *to beat myself up*, but rather, *to conjure my emotions*. This action is most apparent in the building list, "Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!"³⁸ But Hamlet catches himself in the act of unpacking his heart with words and quickly regroups with, "About my brain."³⁹ The object lesson of his experience is suddenly understood: "...guilty creatures sitting at play / Have by the very cunning of the scene / Been struck so to the soul..."⁴⁰ Hamlet learns from his darkest moments and applies it to the next step of his goal, to "catch the conscience of the King."⁴¹

The formula for Hamlet's guilt described above is also useful for understanding why Hamlet passes his greatest opportunity to revenge. With *The Mousetrap*, Hamlet has won a significant battle toward his own objective. He has exposed something of Claudius before the court and the guilt-ridden king has been so shaken that he makes the futile attempt at prayer. As

³⁸ 2.2.568-569

³⁹ 2.2.577

⁴⁰ 2.2.578-580

⁴¹ 2.2.594

the third soliloquy demonstrates, Hamlet's heart is not entirely into revenge – it takes about thirty lines to finally stir himself to “O vengeance!”⁴² When this opportunity presents itself, Hamlet is riding high off his little victory over both Claudius and his henchmen (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), and one and a half lines are not enough words to stir his rage: “Now might I do it pat, now he is praying. / And now I'll do't.”⁴³ At this end stop is the most logical place for him to draw his sword, but also the place where he comes up dry. At this point in the story Hamlet is winning; Claudius' world is coming crashing down around him. What more does Hamlet have to gain by killing him in this moment? Of course, he made a vow to his father, but this does not stir his blood enough to kill him in the moment. Perhaps then the half line, “And so he goes to heaven”⁴⁴, is really Hamlet saying to himself: *It's okay. It's no big deal. Just think of it as sending him off to heaven.* There is no alternative because there is no walking away from this opportunity without clearly breaking his vow to his father. But any guilt is well compensated for when he rationalizes that killing Claudius' mortal body now would be “hire and salary, not revenge.”⁴⁵ And then his guilt is overcompensated for by crafting an argument for extending the definition of revenge to the damning of Claudius' soul. Hamlet leaves, justified by this premise, but the reality may be that he just was not enraged enough in the moment to do the deed. A deep well of rage and pain is quickly tapped into as Hamlet confronts his mother's betrayal in the next scene. In the height of emotion Hamlet proves that he is capable of killing, but the blind rage he could not conjure before has now landed on Polonius. In this moment, Hamlet's newly gained political advantage is destroyed.

Hamlet's participation in the revenge tragedy's cycle of destruction began with Polonius. By the time Hamlet returns to Denmark, the blood on his hands includes the double-cross of the double-crossing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and, vicariously, the suicide of Ophelia. In the last Act, something has clearly changed in Hamlet. In his book, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*,

⁴² 2.2.570

⁴³ 3.3.73-74

⁴⁴ 3.3.74

⁴⁵ 3.3.79

Harold Bloom describes the new Hamlet of Act V as “preternaturally matured” (6). Destruction ensued despite all Hamlet’s careful planning and flexing of his will, which is a lesson that seems to have made an impression on him. As he explains to Horatio, he has learned that “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will.”⁴⁶ His approach and energy have transformed with this new understanding. This new understanding accounts for what can be seen as a passive approach. There is a part of him that understands now that *setting the world right* may not include his preferred interpretation of that goal, but he knows the moment of truth is coming soon – “The readiness is all.”⁴⁷

I have saved the most famous, complicated, and troubling purple passage for last. There is something about the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy that sticks out like a sore thumb. The action of Polonius setting a trap (with Ophelia as live bait) is suddenly interrupted by an introspective, philosophical, and metaphysical debate. How does the actor justify what appears to be a lengthy pause from the action of the play? And where does Ophelia go? Polonius just said, “Ophelia, walk you here.”⁴⁸ Claudius and Polonius duck behind the arras. They have “sent for Hamlet hither, / That he, as ‘twere by accident, may here / Affront Ophelia.”⁴⁹ Presumably, the message was anonymous to keep Hamlet from supposing Ophelia’s presence as a coincidence. An effective message for this trap would lack any form of urgency that might keep Hamlet from lingering with Ophelia. But even without an urgent task to see to, why does Hamlet stop to contemplate life and death? And where the heck did Ophelia go? Well, the answer is Ophelia didn’t go anywhere. She is walking, maybe pacing, as instructed when Hamlet enters. Therefore, the fourth soliloquy is not a soliloquy at all, but a dramatic speech spoken to Ophelia. This idea is stolen from one of Derek Jacobi’s productions. Mary Z. Maher interviewed Jacobi and provides commentary on his choices in her book, *Modern Hamlets and Their Soliloquies*. I credit Maher and Jacobi’s collective reasoning almost entirely for the argument and support

⁴⁶ 5.2.10-11

⁴⁷ 5.2.169

⁴⁸ 3.1.44

⁴⁹ 3.1.30-32

herein. The choice is based on a belief that Hamlet and Ophelia have a consummated love and that they are both still emotionally involved despite their forced separation. Polonius, for obvious reasons, wished to prevent an alliance between his daughter and the rival of his new boss. But now, Ophelia could “cure” Hamlet’s madness (or maybe just make him accept the delay as ruler), and also give Polonius a valuable alliance with the next regime. Ophelia was barred from Hamlet’s life at his time of most need. Until Horatio arrived, Hamlet was completely trapped and isolated. Horatio is clearly a valued friend and confidante, but Hamlet’s true intimacy with Ophelia makes her the more complete confidante. Investing their relationship with a deep emotional trust makes their one scene together more compelling. Ophelia’s stakes are pushed to the extreme as she is pulled by the command of her father and the king on one side and her great love for Hamlet on the other. The impact of Ophelia’s betrayal is obviously heightened under this premise. When Hamlet discovers the choice she has made, after having just bared his soul to her, his rage ignites against that particular brand of frailty named “woman”.

Choosing to speak the speech to Ophelia can clearly raise the emotional stakes and provide more stage time for the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia, but the most important question pertaining to my thesis is still unanswered. What is Hamlet *doing* with these famous words? Asimov’s commentary lends some insight:

[Hamlet] has two choices as far as action is concerned. He can act directly, kill the King, and take the consequences, which would surely be death for himself. He would in this way ‘take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them.’ On the other hand, he can dissemble, feign madness, lay his plots, and meanwhile take no action against those who have wronged him. Here he ‘suffers [submits to, without retaliation] the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.’ (118)

Asimov poses a reading of the text that transforms the argument. The “virtual suicide” of direct action replaces “suicide in the abstract”, which lends a specificity to the rhetoric. (118) Given the topic, Hamlet is in a vulnerable place. Only moments before, he was wrestling with his guilt and

with some very scary questions, such as “Am I a coward?”⁵⁰ Hamlet enters the scene in a deep moment of doubt and stumbles upon the one person with whom he can possibly share these dark thoughts. Their eyes meet...silence, awkwardness...and then he opens up. Jacobi describes this moment: “[Hamlet’s] saying it *to* her, but he’s also saying it *at* her, *through* her, *around* her. He doesn’t need a response.” (107) Hamlet needs her help, not necessarily verbal, to work it all out. In this context, the abstract nature of the text can be explained as a kind of coded language. Hamlet shares the turmoil of his predicament without revealing any specific details to the daughter of Polonius. Hamlet knows she would be interrogated or feel compelled within her dire circumstances to play the dutiful daughter. Hamlet did not even speak the last time they were in each other’s presence. He only stared intensely into her eyes. But today he must speak: *Life or death; that is the level I’m playing at here. / My head is spinning over which is the nobler effort: / hiding under the cloak of madness, waiting for a chance, while the whole place rots and justice goes unserved, / or losing your life to swiftly serve that justice?* As the speech unfolds, the essential realization that he shares with Ophelia is that he is frightened of death, and in some very immediate ways, that makes him a coward. Jacobi points out that near the end of the speech, “it’s legitimate to say that [Ophelia’s] about to say something and so the lines at the end, the ‘Soft you now, / The fair Ophelia’ – just remember me in your prayers – is how he quiets her...And ‘the fair Ophelia’ is just one of those little titles we all have for one another.” (107)

Jacobi suggests that Hamlet realizes the trap with Ophelia’s first response (“How does your honor for this many a day?”⁵¹), but I disagree. Jacobi’s choice robs them of the intimacy that they have achieved during the speech. They are reconnecting, physically and spiritually. But their relationship has been very bumpy of late and there is much to renegotiate (rather awkwardly within the context of the trap). I believe the intentions of the first nunnery speech are

⁵⁰ 2.2.559

⁵¹ 3.1.92

quite loving and considerate. Hamlet is acknowledging the difficulty of her powerless situation. His own situation is only going to get worse and he doesn't want her caught in the middle. He is performing a kind of half-hearted and ironical 'cruel to be kind' scene, telling her to distance herself from him and this court: "We are arrant knaves all. Believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery."⁵² Then something happens and Hamlet knows it is a trap. I prefer a scenario where Hamlet discovers the trap from Ophelia's behavior as opposed to a noise behind the arras. If the intentions of the first nunnery speech are intimate and playful, then kissing could ensue. Ophelia could get lost in a kiss with Hamlet and then go completely cold and stiff at the remembrance of her father and the king behind the arras. Hamlet sees the awkward embarrassment in her eyes and he gravely asks the damning question, "Where's your father?"⁵³

Ambition is by no means the dominant issue of the play, but minding its significance as one of Hamlet's characteristics can shake away some useless paradigms. On some level, all ambition is self-serving, but there is a peculiar absence of the conquering spirit in Hamlet's ambition. In many ways, Hamlet's ambition is not about him but about his country. Laertes distills this idea in his warning to Ophelia:

His greatness weighed, his will is not his own,
 For he himself is subject to his birth.
 He may not, as unvalued persons do,
 Carve for himself, for on his choice depends
 The sanity and health of the whole state;
 And therefore must his choice be circumscribed
 Unto the voice and yielding of that body
 Whereof he is head.⁵⁴

Hamlet's ambition reveals his sense of duty to Denmark. It reveals his belief in a better world. Most importantly, understanding Hamlet's ambition allowed me, as an actor, to find the hero and the human amidst the guilt, cowardice, and frequent philosophizing.

⁵² 3.1.129-130

⁵³ 3.1.131

⁵⁴ 1.3.17-24

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