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INTRODUCTION

Hamlet within *Hamlet*

ANTHONY ASHLEY COOPER, third Earl of Shaftesbury, was no fan of Shakespeare. Surveying the development of English drama from the vantage of the early 1700s, he lamented Shakespeare's "natural Rudeness, his unpolish'd Stile, his antiquated Phrase and Wit, his want of Method and Coherence, and his Deficiency in almost all the Graces and Ornaments of this kind of Writing". And yet Shakespeare was not to be dismissed out of hand: "the Justness of his MORAL, the Aptness of many of his *Descriptions*, and the plain and natural Turn of several of his *Characters*" meant that he could help to nurture the self-examination and self-discourse on which Shaftesbury believed moral knowledge must be based. *Hamlet* was particularly noteworthy in this respect, and was to be viewed as "almost one continu'd *Moral*: a Series of deep Reflections, drawn from *one* Mouth, upon the Subject of *one* single Accident and Calamity, naturally fitted to move Horrour and Compassion. It may properly be said of this Play, if I mistake not, that it has only ONE *Character* or *principal Part*".¹ Faced with such comments, one might respond that Shaftesbury was a woefully bad reader of vernacular literature, and that his over-fastidious tastes are precisely the sort of thing that Shakespeare enjoyed turning on its head. But a disconcerting fact remains: Shaftesbury was the first, or one of the first, to delineate an approach to *Hamlet* that has held the field since the second half of the eighteenth century. Within this, the emphasis is placed squarely on Hamlet the morally and philosophically significant character at the expense of *Hamlet* the ambiguous and frequently bewildering work of drama. Just as directors have felt compelled to cut—and sometimes to rearrange—in order to stage *Hamlet* successfully, so scholars and critics have neglected those aspects of the play that have threatened to hinder their interpretations of its central character.

1. Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, "Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author" (2.3), in Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 2 vols., ed. Michael Ayres (Oxford, 1999), 1:144.

William Kerrigan identifies a slightly later starting point for modern *Hamlet* criticism: “it all begins with the Romantic Germans”.² Which is to say that as an object of critical attention, *Hamlet* only comes to life with the tragedy of thought, thwarted self-realisation, and philosophical yearning imagined by Goethe, A.W. Schlegel, and their English epigone, Coleridge. To any student of the play, Kerrigan’s view is familiar and widely confirmed. Shaftesbury may have laid the egg, but it took the Romantic sensibility for it to hatch. Hamlet emerged as an epoch-making figure, an enigma through whom Shakespeare dramatized the struggle of the modern subject to find a path through the suffocating thickets of moral, personal, and political existence. At the same time, there has been little or no consensus as to how this enigma should be decoded. *Hamlet* has played host to an unusually diverse, though only seldom antipodal, range of interpretations. As Harry Levin put it in the late 1950s, Polonius’s response to “Hamlet’s ink-blot test—his agreement that the cloud resembles now a weasel, then a camel, now again a whale—succinctly foreshadows the process of interpreting the play” evinced by its modern students.³ On this reckoning, *Hamlet* criticism is a literary Rorschach test in which pretty much anything goes—one in which critics project their own theories, preoccupations, or neuroses, or in which they vie to offer perceptions of the play that are calculated to display their creative virtuosity, or in which they seek to confirm their methodological or ideological fraternity. Analogously, David Bevington estimates that “the staging, criticism and editing of *Hamlet* . . . from 1599–1600 to the present day . . . can be seen as a kind of paradigm for the cultural history of the English-speaking world”.⁴ One might regret the narrowness of Bevington’s focus (not least because *Murder Most Foul* ranges some way beyond the confines of the Anglosphere), but it would be hard to dissent from the tenor of his judgement. The only sticking point is the suspicion that if the history of *Hamlet* criticism sheds so much light on those who wrote it, then those who wrote it might not always have put themselves in a position from which to offer revealing criticism of the play.

By contrast, Margreta de Grazia insists that we start again. For her, the Romantic and post-Romantic emphasis on the inexpressible mysteries of the Prince’s *mal du siècle* have led to the unwarranted and misleading abstraction of Hamlet from the play of which he is a part; even the most historically

2. William Kerrigan, *Hamlet’s Perfection* (Baltimore, 1994), 1. There is a large literature on the history of *Hamlet* criticism: see, e.g., Morris Weitz, *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Chicago, 1964); Paul Gottschalk, *The Meanings of Hamlet: Modes of Literary Interpretation since Bradley* (Albuquerque, NM, 1972); *Critical Responses to Hamlet, 1600–1900*, 4 vols., ed. David Farley-Hills, John Manning, and Johanna Proctor (New York, 1995–2006); Marvin W. Hunt, *Looking for Hamlet* (New York, 2007); David Bevington, *Murder Most Foul: Hamlet through the Ages* (Oxford, 2011).

3. Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (London, 1959), 3.

4. Bevington, *Murder Most Foul*, vii.

mind of *Hamlet's* critics have expended their reserves of learning and ingenuity in attending to questions whose origins lie nearly two centuries after the play itself, and that are largely besides the point. After demonstrating beyond reasonable doubt that the problem of Hamlet's character only became a critical concern in the course of the eighteenth century, de Grazia sets herself the task of illustrating "what happens when what has been overlooked [in the last two centuries of *Hamlet* studies] is brought back into view".⁵ This is not, and could not be, an exercise in simple historical retrieval. Other than that *Hamlet* is the palimpsest of an earlier revenge play on the same subject (the lost work known as the *Ur-Hamlet*), that something in it appealed to what Gabriel Harvey called the "wiser sort", and that the Prince's performed mania left a vivid impression on early audiences, next to nothing is known of the ways in which *Hamlet* was initially regarded. Likewise, the later seventeenth century has little of note, and almost nothing positive, to say about the play. Even the striking depiction of the First or Second Folio—open at the beginning of *Hamlet*—that appears in Anthony van Dyck's ca. 1638 portrait of the courtier poet, Sir John Suckling (see figure 1), owes its existence to Shakespeare's uncertain reputation. Suckling, in line with the motto from the Roman satirist Persius superimposed on the rock in the lower right (*ne te quaesiveris extra*, "do not look beyond yourself" or "do not look to any opinion but your own"), seeks to advertise his freely independent cast of mind. Neither Shakespeare in general nor *Hamlet* in particular may meet with the approval of those in thrall to neoclassical decorum, but they are caviar to the well-bred connoisseur. The first sustained critical engagement with *Hamlet* would have to wait until 1736.⁶

In the face of this silence, de Grazia reconstructs a play about the unhappy plight of an early modern prince who believes himself to have been dispossessed of his birthright.⁷ This malcontent has been wronged by his dead father (who did not nominate his son as heir to his kingdom), by his uncle (who guilefully assumed the kingship after the death of his brother the king), by his mother (whose public re-marriage to her first husband's brother elevated the claims of her former brother-in-law above those of her son), and by the court of which he is a prominent part (whose other members were responsible for settling on his uncle as the best candidate for the kingship). Furthermore, as

5. Margreta de Grazia, *"Hamlet" without Hamlet* (Cambridge, 2007), 5.

6. On the play's early reception, see de Grazia, *"Hamlet" without Hamlet*, 7–22; Bevington, *Murder Most Foul*, chaps. 3–4; Paul S. Conklin, *A History of Hamlet Criticism, 1601–1821* (London, 1947), 7–26; Sayre N. Greenfield, "Quoting *Hamlet* in the Early Seventeenth Century", *Modern Philology* 105 (2008), 510–34. On the Suckling portrait, see Persius, *Satires*, 1.7; Malcolm Rogers, "The Meaning of Van Dyck's Portrait of Sir John Suckling", *Burlington Magazine* 120 (1978), 739–45; Stijn Alsteens and Adam Eaker, *Van Dyck: The Anatomy of Portraiture* (New Haven, 2016), 234–36.

7. For the following paragraph, see de Grazia, *"Hamlet" without Hamlet*, esp. 1–7, 81–128, 158–204. On generational conflict and the anxieties of dispossession, see also Barbara Everett, *Young Hamlet: Essays on Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Oxford, 1989), 11–35.



FIGURE 1. Anthony van Dyck, portrait of Sir John Suckling (1638).
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Claudius is the legitimately elected king of Denmark, this Hamlet cannot voice his grievances without committing high treason; these grievances, not the existential commonplaces of critical tradition, are “that within which passes show” (1.2.85). For Shakespeare, the revenge plot thus becomes a medium through which Hamlet can act out what would otherwise have remained unspoken, and is secondary to the personal-political dynamics animating the play. Hamlet’s much discussed “delay” in effecting the revenge demanded of him by his father’s ghost is not the result of epistemological, philosophical, or religious scruples any more than it is an expression of cowardice or melancholy or the unbearable lightness of being. Rather, Shakespeare had to work with the grain of the materials he had chosen: his sources—Saxo Grammaticus, Belleforest, and the *Ur-Hamlet*—had Hamlet stay the hand of vengeance, and so therefore did he.⁸ Shakespeare made the best of the dramaturgical situation by having Hamlet riff the stock theatrical roles of the Clown, madman, Vice, and devil—all of which figure his feelings of disenfranchisement. What might look like the revenger’s madness (*qua* insanity rather than rage) is, in fact, literally antic: ludic, grotesque, and self-consciously metadramatic. When the time comes to take appropriate vengeance on Claudius, Hamlet is ready and willing to strike.

There is much that is manifestly and importantly right in de Grazia’s account. Yet in circling her wagons in so determined a fashion—in seeking to defend *Hamlet* by uprooting the critical traditions that have grown up around its title character—de Grazia sequesters the relationships between personal and political existence that animate so much of the play. Finally, something about the way in which Hamlet speaks and acts (whether on his own, in company, or under the guise of his antic disposition) is surely meant to be unusual and arresting. To neglect this is significantly to diminish *Hamlet’s* capacity to challenge us. Generations of the play’s students may have distorted the Prince in their own likenesses, but the difficulties their work identifies and seeks to address cannot easily be defined away or written off to the curiosities of Elizabethan theatrical convention.



My contention is that there is no need for us to do anything of the sort, and that *Hamlet* can be read as a profound meditation on the nature of human

8. On the sources and analogues of *Hamlet*, the indispensable reference point remains Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols. (London, 1957–75), 7:3–189. See also Israel Gollancz, *The Sources of Hamlet: With an Essay on the Legend* (London, 1926), which reproduces the original Latin and French of Saxo and Belleforest with facing-page English translations. The writings of Olaus and Johannes Magnus can be added to the list of possible sources: see Julie Maxwell, “Counter-Reformation Versions of Saxo: A New Source for *Hamlet*?” *Renaissance Quarterly* 57 (2004), 518–60.

individuality without relying on conceptual frameworks drawn from the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Just as historical discourses beyond those of *Hamlet* itself provide a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the political and dynastic forces shaping life in Shakespeare's Denmark, so what might be called Hamlet's "character" appears in unfamiliar and revealing relief when read against the textual contours of the psychological, rhetorical, and moral-political theorizing that lay at the heart of sixteenth-century humanism.⁹ Stephen Greenblatt gets it right: "Shakespeare's characters have a rich and compelling moral life, but that moral life is not autonomous. Instead, it is in each case intimately bound up with the particular and distinct community in which the character participates".¹⁰ For Shakespeare and the culture of which he was a part, the personal or moral could no more remain private than the political could remain the province of public life alone.

These broadly contextualizing reflections gesture towards something at the core of this book's interpretative strategies: the conviction that only to read *Hamlet* isn't even to read *Hamlet*. My belief is that anyone proposing to read the play closely needs to do so alongside fine-grained analyses of the numerous discursive traditions in which it has such a considerable share, and that these traditions include but extend far beyond the territories of dramatic and theatrical history. To speak in such terms is to get an inkling of just how exhilaratingly difficult a play *Hamlet* can be: apprehending it in even an approximation of its full complexity demands stereoscopic vision, and comprehending it demands the patience to explore it in the formal, cultural, intellectual, and historical round. To cast this thought a little differently, the reason *Hamlet* has been able so successfully to transcend the historical moment of its production is that William Shakespeare was responsible for writing it, not the spirit of the late Elizabethan age. The hard task is that we cannot hope to be conversant with how and why Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* as he did without seeking to

9. I use "character" as a shorthand term with which to denote a set of distinctive attributes derivable from the dramatic language in which the individual parts of a play have been scripted. On *Hamlet* and "character", see Edward Burns, *Character: Acting and Being on the Pre-Modern Stage* (Basingstoke, 1990), esp. 6–17, 28–34, 120–173; Bert O. States, *Hamlet and the Concept of Character* (Baltimore, 1992); John Lee, *Shakespeare's Hamlet and the Controversies of Self* (Oxford, 2000); Michael Davies, *Hamlet: Character Studies* (London, 2008). On Hamlet and the growth of character criticism, see Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character* (Chicago, 1998), 133–41. On humanism, see chapter 1, n. 12.

10. Stephen Greenblatt, "Shakespeare and the Ethics of Authority", in *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought*, ed. David Armitage, Conal Condren, and Andrew Fitzmaurice (Cambridge, 2009), 64–79, here 71. See also Robert Weimann, "Society and the Individual in Shakespeare's Conception of Character", *Shakespeare Survey* 34 (1982), 23–32; Joshua Scodel, "Finding Freedom in *Hamlet*", *Modern Language Quarterly* 72 (2011), 163–200.

reconstruct aspects of sixteenth-century life as he is likely to have encountered them. That is to say, the materials, language, ideas, beliefs, assumptions, orthodoxies, and constraints with which he worked, and which he transforms through the demands of his dramatic art. Sometimes, such reconstructions can be straightforwardly historicist. More often than not, they require the exercise of the historical, scholarly, moral, aesthetic, or theoretical imagination. Further, and as this emphasis on imagination is intended to suggest, they should never be understood as singular or fixed: *Hamlet* is anything but a unicursive text, and there are many paths both through and around it. At all times, my guiding principle has been that in selecting the languages through which to interpret her objects of study, the literary critic must be able to exploit the disciplines of the scholar without being limited by them. No matter how hard-won or historically sensitive a contextual reconstruction might be, its literary critical value depends on its ability to furnish the reader with some form or other of expository or interpretative payoff. It has to pass the “so what?” test.

As will become apparent over the course of the next several hundred pages, I take it that my approach not only better locates Hamlet within *Hamlet*, but that it offers to rehabilitate a coherent and intensely challenging work of tragedy—albeit one in which Shakespeare steadfastly disregards the rules of Aristotelian and humanist poetics. (Many of the troubles in reading *Hamlet* come from the determination to align it with a tragic paradigm by which Shakespeare set only the slightest store; in fact, as I argue in my concluding chapter, Shakespeare’s tragic model resembles the more flexible notion of tragic “sublimity” expounded by the Pseudo-Longinus.) In Stephen Booth’s aptly irreverent phraseology, critics have too often been prepared “to indulge a not wholly explicable fancy that in *Hamlet* we behold the frustrated and inarticulate Shakespeare furiously wagging his tail in an effort to tell us something”.¹¹ Throughout, my working assumption is that Shakespeare was neither frustrated nor inarticulate, and that he carefully crafted *Hamlet* with particular effects and purposes in mind.

Here as elsewhere, Joel Altman’s *Tudor Play of Mind* offers much of value. For Altman, humanist drama “functioned as a medium of intellectual and emotional exploration” for sixteenth-century minds that had been taught to think in the rhetorical tradition, and that “were accustomed to examine many sides of a given theme”. Meaning of one sort or another “could be discerned only through the total action of the drama. Thus the *experience* of the play was the thing”.¹² Altman goes on to place *Hamlet* and Hamlet “on the edge of Elizabethan humanism”, marking the point at which many of its governing

11. Stephen Booth, “On the Value of *Hamlet*”, in *Reinterpretations of Elizabethan Drama*, ed. Norman Rabkin (New York, 1969), 137–76, here 138.

12. Joel B. Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1978), 6.

assumptions can be said to have died.¹³ Justifiably so. But to anyone seeking to understand *Hamlet*, his emphasis on attending to the “total action of the drama” remains exemplary. It’s just that doing so is tough, the more so if we are to “experience” the play in anything like the manner of those who encountered it in and around the year 1600. Furthermore, and as Lorna Hutson has outlined with astute clarity, Shakespeare’s dramaturgy is unusually “inferential”. Rather than spelling out how, where, when, or why the action is unfolding, Shakespeare presents his audience with the circumstantial data required for them to infer or deduce its causes for themselves; and, on many occasions, to question the processes through which their inferences or deductions have been reached.¹⁴ No matter how creative or well-read or assiduous a twenty-first-century Shakespearean one might be, this manner of proceeding can result in bafflement. What is more, although this perplexity frequently does the work of Aristotle’s primal wonder, it just as often leaves one feeling adrift. All the more reason that we should neither baulk at nor fetishize the interpretative challenges posed by *Hamlet*, much less attempt to negate them by seizing upon one aspect or other of the play in order to refashion its entirety in the image of our own interests. The need to take pains, like the need to respect indeterminacy or irreconcilability, might just be the point. We frequently hear versions of the claim, most prominently voiced by Laurence Olivier, that *Hamlet* is the tragedy of a young man who cannot make up his mind. I would prefer to describe it as a tragedy in which Shakespeare confronts his audiences with the realization that they have no fixed points of reference with which to help them make up theirs.¹⁵ It begins with Barnardo, on watch but deprived of the light with which to see. Hearing a noise and sensing that others are around, he calls out: “Who’s there?” (1.1.1). He never receives an answer. Throughout the play, Shakespeare compels us to grapple with his question for ourselves—unaided, and alone.

When thinking about *Hamlet* as an architectonic whole, it can thus be useful to recall that Hamlet belongs to a larger dramatic entity: though he dominates the play that shares his royal patronym, he only exists in relation to those on stage around him. Yes, Hamlet speaks more and more powerfully than any other character. Yes, his soliloquies allow us to witness him thinking out loud in a way that is unprecedented, and that continues to provide those playing him with a form of cadenza through which to exhibit their actorly skill.¹⁶ But as Frank Kermode rightly emphasizes, Hamlet’s dramatic presence is framed by his interactions with his fellow characters—interactions that are typified by

13. *Ibid.*, 10–11.

14. Lorna Hutson, *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford, 2007), esp. 306–12. See further *idem*, *Circumstantial Shakespeare* (Oxford, 2015), chap. 1.

15. Cf. Booth, “Value of *Hamlet*”, 152.

16. Cf. Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford, 2007), 7.

deliberate pairing, or doubling.¹⁷ If we accept Shakespeare's numerous direct and indirect invitations to compare him with Horatio, Laertes, Fortinbras, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Ophelia, or his father's ghost, he appears just as problematically flawed as they do; further, it becomes clear that his flaws, weaknesses, and blind spots stand in continuous rather than contiguous relation to theirs. Hamlet is emphatic but unconvincing, given to philosophizing but philosophically incoherent, conscience-stricken but capable of the utmost cruelty without a second thought, and self-interested without being able to determine where that interest, or that self, might lie. Despite Hamlet's professions to the contrary, these pairings do not consist of opposites, whether mighty or mismatched. Instead, their component parts exist in contrapuntal relation to one another, and draw attention to discomfiting similarity where none would seem to exist. Their effect is that of a moral and dramatic fugue. To be sure, Shakespeare has a certain amount of fun with the indistinguishability of courtiers like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (as, e.g., at 2.2.33–34), and gestures back to works like *The Comedy of Errors* in so doing. But Elsinore is no Ephesus: there is a sense in which all those constrained to exist within the moral economy of *Hamlet* are interchangeable. All are bluffing their way through the dark.

What sets Hamlet apart from the remainder of the *dramatis personae* is the degree to which Shakespeare explores through him the insight that the insufficiency of received ethical and political wisdom does not just have public consequences. Transposed onto the person of Hamlet, it calls into question the fundamentals of who and what a human individual might be said to be. By revealing that even Hamlet, discontent as he is with the prevailing moral order, is bound by cultural circumstance to use his intelligence as his accomplice rather than his guide, Shakespeare discloses something of the plight faced by every inhabitant of his Danish playworld. In a sort of double synecdoche, the part speaks for the whole just as the whole represents the part; all are cut off from the resources through which they might understand themselves or make their existences meaningful. As I explore in my discussion of hunting language in chapter 2, this dynamic is one of the things that separates *Hamlet* from the revenge tragedy tradition of, for example, Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*. Here, the revenger is bound to find a way in which to act virtuously when the civic space has been corrupted by the actions of those at the top of the social and political hierarchy. Generally speaking, this proves to be impossible. In seeking the wild justice that his heart demands, the revenger is moved to disregard morality and legality, and must therefore die. Even so, as circumstance rather than an inherently defective moral orthodoxy is to blame for the predicaments in which these revenge protagonists find themselves, a version of

17. Frank Kermode, *Forms of Attention: Botticelli and Hamlet* (Chicago, 1985), 33–64. See also idem, *Shakespeare's Language* (London, 2000), 96–125.

order is reasserted at the end of the play—after, that is, the villains and their revengers have been removed from the scene. But in *Hamlet*, the actions of those at the top of the social and political hierarchy (including Claudius, Old Hamlet, and Hamlet himself) are a symptom of whatever it is that's wrong, not its cause. There is no discernible framework of right and wrong; no epilogue affirming that all will be well if only princes conduct themselves virtuously. Humanist orthodoxy as dramatized in *Hamlet* is instead a set of doctrines that distorts reality and constrains all human beings to obscure their true natures—from themselves as much as from others. In being preoccupied with obtaining and asserting power of various kinds, this orthodoxy only pretends to be concerned with either virtue or veracity. Just as it forces us to play at being ourselves, it prevents us from assuming truly meaningful roles in the public, private, intellectual, or artistic spheres.

Hamlet thus offers a representation of the cultural dynamics shaping human existence that is rich, sustained, compelling, and completely at odds with early modern convention. Its moral universe is an unyielding night. One that self-exploration, inwardness, honour, loyalty, love, poetry, philosophy, politics, moral scruple, military force, and religious belief are powerless to illuminate. The owl of Minerva has been and gone.



This book has five substantive chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 lay the foundations on which chapters 3 to 5 build. Chapter 1 establishes the place of *Hamlet* in relation to the humanist moral philosophy of the long sixteenth century. This was principally developed around the writings of the Roman rhetorician, lawyer, politician, and moral theorist Cicero, for whom one of the governing metaphors of civic existence was derived from the stage. Chapter 2 explores Shakespeare's repudiation of this Ciceronian-humanist model through *Hamlet's* pervasive (and hitherto all but ignored) discourse of hunting, fowling, falconry, and fishing. Within the world of the hunt, the notion of acting—of performing a particular role—is just as important as it is within a stage production. But here the roles one plays are not measured by reason, virtue, propriety, verisimilitude, or even the pleasure they might give to an audience. Instead, one acts to mislead one's predators or one's prey and, just as frequently, to mislead oneself about the appetitive nature of one's existence.

The remaining three chapters consider how Hamlet the character should be read as part of a work of drama shaped by the assumption of roles that claim the authority of nature, morality, tradition, or religious belief, but that turn out to be corrosively inadequate. In framing these chapters, I have used as something between a heuristic and a structural principle the three "partes" of the human "understanding" categorized by Francis Bacon in the second book of his *Advancement of Learning*. These consist of memory, imagination,

and reason. In their turn, they correspond to the three chief products of human “learning”: history, poetry, and philosophy.¹⁸ Following Bacon’s lead, chapter 3 examines Hamlet’s memory and accomplishments as a historian; chapter 4 examines Hamlet’s imagination and his accomplishments as a poet; chapter 5 examines Hamlet’s reason and his accomplishments as a philosopher. Each chapter consists of a series of commentaries on the passages in which Hamlet evinces the *persona* in question, often reading Hamlet’s performances alongside those of others in the play. Of course, these commentaries can be read simply as commentaries. Taken together, however, they in each case cohere into an argument about Shakespeare’s dissatisfaction with various forms of late-sixteenth-century humanist convention.

Each of these three chapters is concerned more with what Hamlet *says* than with what he *does*. I defer to nobody in my attachment to Wittgenstein’s doctrine that words are in and of themselves deeds, but talking about revenge is not an act of the same sort as vindictively cutting off someone’s head.¹⁹ Hamlet’s foremost domain is that of linguistic action, and it is my contention that Shakespeare makes him speak as he does in order to suggest certain things about (i) the qualities of his mind and disposition and (ii) the nature of the parts he seeks to play. At risk of repeating myself, I should stress that my goal here is in no sense to indict Hamlet’s character or intelligence: although generations of critics have claimed otherwise, I do not take him to be any worthier of praise or blame than the remainder of those in Shakespeare’s Denmark.²⁰ It is just that by giving us more access to Hamlet than to the play’s other characters, Shakespeare allows us to observe the intermingling of humanist doctrine not only with political life, but with the emotional, ethical, and intellectual imperatives of an individual existence. In other words, through the *personae* that Hamlet tries and fails to make his own, Shakespeare casts Hamlet’s discursive life as the emblem of a cultural order that has definitively fallen off. Conscious though Hamlet seems to be that something fundamental is out of joint, he must think and speak through that which he would disregard: the saws and observations of his Wittenberg education. Thus constrained, he finds it impossible even to acknowledge the nature of the problems with which he is confronted, let alone to diagnose them or to set them right.

Another of my central arguments is that Hamlet’s attachment to the parts of the historian, poet, and philosopher arises from his inability to inhabit the one role that should, he feels, be his after his interview with the Ghost—namely, that of the revenger. Precisely because Hamlet’s feelings are never as

18. Francis Bacon, *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, 15 vols., ed. Michael Kiernan, Graham Rees, Alan Stewart, Maria Wakely, et al. (Oxford, 1996–), 4:62.

19. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. and trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1958), §546.

20. On what “intelligence” might mean in Hamlet’s case, see Paula Blank, *Shakespeare and the Mismeasure of Renaissance Man* (Ithaca, NY, 2006), 191–97.

intensely vindictive as he pretends they are to the Ghost and to himself, his feints at self-exploration—like his philosophizing as a whole—form part of an elaborately self-deceiving ruse, a means of evading the situation in which he has become embroiled and the realities that underpin it. Rather than a loving son compelled by circumstance to kill against his better judgement, the providentially appointed executioner of a body politic that is irremediably debauched, or one of two mighty opposites whose mission to take down the other could not avoid incurring collateral damage, Hamlet emerges as confused, self-indulgent, and frequently heedless. As one who fails to take responsibility for his actions or his station in life, who fails to confront his own emotional disposition—and who, by cleaving to the humanistic roles of the historian, poet, and philosopher, does not have to. His death closes a chapter in which he causes his family, along with Denmark's political autonomy, to be obliterated. The rest, as Fortinbras's bombast, drums (5.2.366), and peal of ordnance (5.2.409) immediately confirm, is by no means silence. Indubitably, something is and will remain rotten in the state of Denmark. Hamlet is a victim, a symptom, and an agent of this decay.

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